



The Putnam Tradition

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About Dorman:

Sonya Dorman (1924 - February 14, 2005) is the working name of Sonya Dorman Hess. She was born in New York City in 1924 and died in Taos, New Mexico on February 14, 2005, aged 80.

She is perhaps best known as a poet. This might be her most noted ability outside of the world of science fiction. However one of her poems Corruption of Metals received honors within SF circles by winning the Rhysling Award of the Science Fiction Poetry Association. Her best well-known work of science fiction is the story "When I was Miss Dow", which has been reprinted numerous times and received a James Tiptree, Jr. retrospective award nomination.

She also appeared in Harlan Ellison's anthology Dangerous Visions, with the story "Go, Go, Go, Said the Bird"

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It was an old house not far from the coast, and had descended generation by generation to the women of the Putnam family. Progress literally went by it: a new four-lane highway had been built two hundred yards from the ancient lilacs at the doorstep. Long before that, in the time of Cecily Putnam's husband, power lines had been run in, and now on cold nights the telephone wires sounded like a concert of cellos, while inside with a sound like the breaking of beetles, the grandmother Cecily moved through the walls in the grooves of tradition.

Simone Putnam, her granddaughter; Nina Putnam, her great-granddaughter; the unbroken succession of matriarchs continued, but times the old woman thought that in Simone it was weakened, and she looked at the four-year-old Nina askance, waiting, waiting, for some good sign.

Sometimes one of the Putnam women had given birth to a son, who grew sickly and died, or less often, grew healthy and fled. The husbands were usually strangers to the land, the house, and the women, and spent a lifetime with the long-lived Putnam wives, and died, leaving their strange signs: telephone wires, electric lights, water pumps, brass plumbing.

Sam Harris came and married Simone, bringing with him an invasion of washer, dryer, toaster, mixer, coffeemaker, until the current poured through the walls of the house with more vigor than the blood in the old woman's veins.

"You don't approve of him," Simone said to her grandmother.

"It's his trade," Cecily Putnam answered. "Our men have been carpenters, or farmers, or even schoolmasters. But an engineer. Phui!"

Simone was washing the dishes, gazing out across the windowsill where two pink and white Murex shells stood, to the tidy garden beyond where Nina was engaged in her private games.

She dried the dishes by passing her hand once above each plate or glass, bringing it to a dry sparkle. It saved wear on the dishtowels, and it amused her.

"Sam's not home very much," she said in a placating voice. She herself had grown terrified, since her marriage, that she wouldn't be able to bear the weight of her past. She felt its power on her and couldn't carry it. Cecily had brought her up, after her father had disappeared and her mother had died in an unexplained accident. Daily she saw the reflection of her failure in the face of her grandmother, who seemed built of the same

seasoned and secure wood as the old Putnam house. Simone looked at her grandmother, whom she loved, and became a mere vapor.

"He's not home so much," Simone said.

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Her face was small, with a pointed chin, and she had golden-red hair which she wore loose on her shoulders. Nina, too, had a small face, but it was neither so pale nor so delicate as her mother's, as if Sam's tougher substance had filled her out and strengthened her bone structure. If it was true that she, Simone, was a weak link, then Sam's strength might have poured into the child, and there would be no more Putnam family and tradition.

"People don't change that easily," the old woman said.

"But things—" Simone began. The china which had a history of five generations slipped out of her hands and smashed; Sam's toaster wouldn't toast or pop up; Simone couldn't even use the telephone for fear of getting a wrong number, or no number at all.

"Things, things!" her grandmother cried. "It's blood that counts. If the blood is strong enough, things dissolve. They're just garbage, all those things, floating on the surface of our history. It's our history that's deep. That's what counts."

"You're afraid of Sam," the young woman accused.

"Not afraid of any man!" Cecily said, straightening her back. "But I'm afraid for the child. Sam has no family tradition, no depth, no talent handed down and perfected. A man with his head full of wheels and wires."

Simone loved him. She leaned on him and grew about him, and he supported her tenderly. She wasn't going to give him up for the sake of some abstract tradition—

"—it's not abstract," her grandmother said with spirit. "It's in your blood. Or why don't you sweep the floors the way other women do? The way Sam's mother must?"

Simone had begun to clean the house while she was thinking, moving her hand horizontally across the floor, at the height of her hip, and the dust was following the motion of her hand and moving in a small, sun-brightened river toward the trash basket in the kitchen corner. Now Simone raised her hand to her face to look at it, and the river of dust rose like a serpent and hung a foot below her hand.

"Yes," she agreed, "at least I can clean the house. If I don't touch the good china, and look where I'm going."

"Phui," the old woman said again, angrily. "Don't feel so sorry for yourself."

"Not for myself," Simone mumbled, and looked again toward the garden where her daughter was doing something with three stones and a pie plate full of spring water.

"I do despair of Nina," Cecily said, as she had said before. "She's four, and has no appearance. Not even balance. She fell out of the applerose tree, and couldn't even help herself." Suddenly the old woman thrust her face close to her granddaughter. It was smooth, round, and sweet as a young kernel of corn. The eyes, sunk down under the bushy grey brows, were cold and clear grey.

"Simone," the old woman said. "You didn't lie to me? You did know she was falling, and couldn't get back in time to catch her?"

A shudder passed through Simone's body. There was no blood in her veins, only water; no marrow in her bones, they were empty, and porous as a bird's. Even the roots of her hair were weak, and now the sweat was starting out on her scalp as she faced her grandmother and saw the bristling shapes of seven generations of Putnam women behind her.

"You lied," the old woman said. "You didn't know she was falling."

Simone was a vapor, a mere froth blowing away on the first breeze.

"My poor dear," the old woman said in a gentle voice. "But how could you marry someone like Sam? Don't you know what will happen? He'll dissolve us, our history, our talents, our pride. Nina is nothing but an ordinary little child."

"She's a good child," Simone said, trying not to be angry. She wanted her child to be loved, to be strong. "Nina isn't a common child," she said, with her head bent. "She's very bright."

"A man with his head full of wheels, who's at home with electricity and wires," the old woman went on. "We've had them before, but never allowed them to dominate us. My own husband was such a man, but he was only allowed to make token gestures, such as having the power lines put in. He never understood how they worked." She lowered her voice to a whisper, "Your Sam understands. I've heard him talk to the water pump."

"That's why you're afraid of him," Simone said. "Not because I'm weak, and he might take something away from me, but because he's

strong, and he might give us something. Then everything would change, and you're afraid of that. Nina might be our change." She pointed toward the garden.

* * * * *

Following the white line of her granddaughter's finger, Cecily looked out into the garden and saw Nina turn toward them as though she knew they were angry. The child pointed with one finger directly at them in the house. There was a sharp crackle, and something of a brilliant and vibrating blue leaped between the out-stretched fingers of mother and daughter, and flew up like a bird to the power lines above.

"Mommy," Nina called.

Simone's heart nearly broke with wonder and fright. Her grandmother contemptuously passed through the kitchen door and emerged on the step outside, but Simone opened the door and left it open behind her. "What was that?" she asked Nina. "Was it a bluebird?"

"Don't be silly," Nina said. She picked up the pie plate and brought it toward them. Cecily's face was white and translucent, one hand went to her throat as the child approached.

Brimfull of crackling blue fire with a fluctuating heart of yellow, the pie plate came toward them, held between Nina's small, dusty hands. Nina grinned at them. "I stole it out of the wires," she said.

Simone thought she would faint with a mixture of joy and fear. "Put it back," she whispered. "Please put it back."

"Oh Mommy," Nina said, beginning to whine. "Not now. Not right away. I just got it. I've done it lots of times." The pie plate crackled and hissed in the steady, small hands.

Simone could feel the old woman's shocked silence behind her. "You mustn't carry it in a pie plate, it's dangerous," Simone said to her child, but she could see Nina was in no danger. "How often have you done this?" She could feel her skirt and her hair billow with electricity.

"Lots of times. You don't like it, do you?" She became teasing and roguish, when she looked most like Sam. Suddenly she threw back her head and opened her mouth, and tilting up the pie plate she drank it empty. Her reddish gold hair sprang out in crackling rays around her face, her eyes flashed and sparks flew out between her teeth before she closed her mouth.

"Nina!" the old woman cried, and began to crumple, falling slowly against Simone in a complete faint. Simone caught her in trembling

hands and lowered her gently. She said to her daughter, "You mustn't do that in front of Grandy. You're a bad girl, you knew it would scare her," and to herself she said: I must stop babbling, the child knows I'm being silly. O isn't it wonderful, isn't it awful, O Sam, how I love you.

"Daddy said it would scare you," Nina admitted. "That's why I never showed you before." Her hair was softly falling into place again, and she was gazing curiously at her great-grandmother lying on the doorstep.

"It did scare me," Simone said. "I'm not used to it, darling. But don't keep it secret any more."

"Is Grandy asleep?"

Simone said hastily, "Oh yes, she's taking a nap. She is old, you know, and likes to take naps."

"That's not a nap," Nina said, leaning over and patting the old woman's cheek, "I think she's having a bad dream."

Simone carried her grandmother into the house. If that old, tired heart had jumped and floundered like her own, there must be some damage done to it. If anything happened to her grandmother, the world would end, Simone thought, and was furious with Nina, and at the same time, full of joy for her.

Cecily Putnam opened her eyes widely, and Simone said, "It does change, you see. But it's in the family, after all."

The old woman sat upright quickly. "That wicked child!" she exclaimed. "To come and frighten us like that. She ought to be spanked." She got up with great strength and rushed out to the garden.

"Nina!" she called imperiously. The child picked up one of the small stones from the pie plate now full of spring water, and came to her great-grandmother.

"I'll make something for you, Grandy," she said seriously. She put the stone in the palm of her hand, and breathed on it, and then held out her hand and offered the diamond.

"It's lovely. Thank you," the old woman said with dignity, and put her hand on the child's head. "Let's go for a walk and I'll show you how to grow rose-apples. That's more becoming to a young lady."

"You slept on the step."

"Ah! I'm old and I like to take little naps," Cecily answered.

Simone saw them disappear among the applerose trees side by side. She was still trembling, but gradually, as she passed her hand back and

forth, and the dust followed, moving in a sparkling river toward the trash basket, Simone stopped trembling and began to smile with the natural pride of a Putnam woman.

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