

The Summer  
Without Men

*Also by Siri Hustvedt*

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POETRY

Reading to You

*Siri Hustvedt*

# The Summer Without Men



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*For Frances Cohen*



LUCY (IRENE DUNNE): You're all confused, aren't you?

JERRY (CARY GRANT): Uh-huh. Aren't you?

LUCY: No.

JERRY: Well, you should be, because you're wrong about things being different because they're not the same. Things are different, except in a different way. You're still the same, only I've been a fool. Well, I'm not now. So, as long as I'm different, don't you think things could be the same again? Only a little different.

—*The Awful Truth*  
directed by Leo McCarey  
screenplay by Viña Delmar



Sometime after he said the word *pause*, I went mad and landed in the hospital. He did not say *I don't ever want to see you again* or *It's over*, but after thirty years of marriage *pause* was enough to turn me into a lunatic whose thoughts burst, ricocheted, and careened into one another like popcorn kernels in a microwave bag. I made this sorry observation as I lay on my bed in the South Unit, so heavy with Haldol I hated to move. The nasty rhythmical voices had grown softer, but they hadn't disappeared, and when I closed my eyes I saw cartoon characters racing across pink hills and disappearing into blue forests. In the end, Dr. P. diagnosed me with Brief Psychotic Disorder, also known as Brief Reactive Psychosis, which means that you are genuinely crazy but not for long. If it goes on for more than one month, you need another label. Apparently, there's often a trigger or, in psychiatric

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parlance, “a stressor,” for this particular form of derangement. In my case, it was Boris or, rather, the fact that there was no Boris, that Boris was having his pause. They kept me locked up for a week and a half, and then they let me go. I was an outpatient for a while before I found Dr. S., with her low musical voice, restrained smile, and good ear for poetry. She propped me up—still props me up, in fact.

I don't like to remember the madwoman. She shamed me. For a long time, I was reluctant to look at what she had written in a black-and-white notebook during her stay on the ward. I knew what was scrawled on the outside in handwriting that looked nothing like mine, *Brain shards*, but I wouldn't open it. I was afraid of her, you see. When my girl came to visit, Daisy hid her unease. I don't know exactly what she saw, but I can guess: a woman gaunt from not eating, still confused, her body wooden from drugs, a person who couldn't respond appropriately to her daughter's words, who couldn't hold her own child. And then, when she left, I heard her moan to the nurse, the noise of a sob in her throat: “It's like it's not my mom.” I was lost to myself then, but to recall that sentence now is an agony. I do not forgive myself.

The Pause was French with limp but shiny brown hair. She had significant breasts that were real, not manu-

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factured, narrow rectangular glasses, and an excellent mind. She was young, of course, twenty years younger than I was, and my suspicion is that Boris had lusted after his colleague for some time before he lunged at her significant regions. I have pictured it over and over. Boris, snow-white locks falling onto his forehead as he grips the bosom of said Pause near the cages of genetically modified rats. I always see it in the lab, although this is probably wrong. The two of them were rarely alone there, and the “team” would have noticed noisy grappling in their midst. Perhaps they took refuge in a toilet stall, my Boris pounding away at his fellow scientist, his eyes moving upward in their sockets as he neared explosion. I knew all about it. I had seen his eyes roll thousands of times. The banality of the story—the fact that it is repeated every day ad nauseam by men who discover all at once or gradually that what IS does not HAVE TO BE and then act to free themselves from the aging women who have taken care of them and their children for years—does not mute the misery, jealousy, and humiliation that comes over those left behind. Women scorned. I wailed and shrieked and beat the wall with my fists. I frightened him. He wanted peace, to be left alone to go his own way with the well-mannered neuroscientist of his dreams, a woman with whom he had no past, no freighted pains, no grief, and no conflict. And yet he said *pause*, not *stop*, to keep the narrative open, in case he changed his mind. A cruel crack of hope. Boris, the Wall. Boris, who never shouts. Boris shaking his head on the sofa, looking

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discomfited. Boris, the rat man who married a poet in 1979. Boris, why did you leave me?

I had to get out of the apartment because being there hurt. The rooms and furniture, the sounds from the street, the light that shone into my study, the toothbrushes in the small rack, the bedroom closet with its missing knob—each had become like a bone that ached, a joint or rib or vertebrae in an articulated anatomy of shared memory, and each familiar thing, leaden with the accumulated meanings of time, seemed to weigh in my own body, and I found I could not bear them. And so I left Brooklyn and went home for the summer to the backwater town on what used to be the prairie in Minnesota, out where I had grown up. Dr. S. was not against it. We would have telephone sessions once a week except during August, when she took her usual vacation. The University had been “understanding” about my crack-up, and I would return to teaching in September. This was to be the Yawn between Crazy Winter and Sane Fall, an uneventful hollow to fill with poems. I would spend time with my mother and put flowers on my father’s grave. My sister and Daisy would come for visits, and I had been hired to teach a poetry class for kids at the local Arts Guild. “Award-Winning Home-Grown Poet Offers Workshop” ran a headline in the *Bonden News*. The Doris P. Zimmer Award for Poetry is an obscure prize that dropped down on my head from nowhere, offered exclusively to a woman

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whose work falls under the rubric “experimental.” I had accepted this dubious honor and the check that accompanied it graciously but with private reservations only to find that ANY prize is better than none, that the term “award-winning” offers a useful, if purely decorative gloss on the poet who lives in a world that knows nothing of poems. As John Ashbery once said, “Being a famous poet is the not the same thing as being famous.” And I am not a famous poet.

I rented a small house at the edge of town not far from my mother’s apartment in a building exclusively for the old and the very old. My mother lived in the independent zone. Despite arthritis and various other complaints, including occasional bursts of dangerously high blood pressure, she was remarkably spry and clear-headed at eighty-seven. The complex included two other distinct zones—for those who needed help, “assisted living,” and the “care center,” the end of the line. My father had died there six years earlier and, although I had once felt a tug to return and look at the place again, I had gotten no farther than the entryway before I turned around and fled from the paternal ghost.

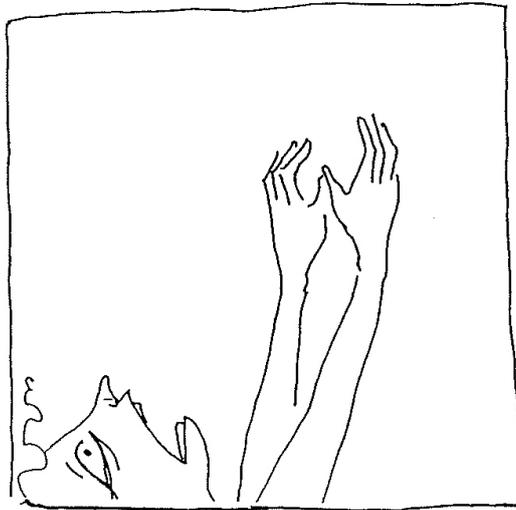
“I haven’t told anybody here about your stay in the hospital,” my mother said in an anxious voice, her intense green eyes holding mine. “No one has to know.”

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*I shall forget the drop of Anguish  
that scalds me now—that scalds me now!*

Emily Dickinson No. #193 to the rescue. Address:  
Amherst.

Lines and phrases winged their way into my head  
all summer long. “If a thought without a thinker comes  
along,” Wilfred Bion said, “it may be what is a ‘stray  
thought’ or it could be a thought with the owner’s  
name and address upon it, or it could be a ‘wild  
thought.’ The problem, should such a thing come  
along, is what to do with it.”



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There were houses on either side of my rental—new development domiciles—but the view from the back window was unobstructed. It consisted of a small backyard with a swing set and behind it a cornfield, and beyond that an alfalfa field. In the distance was a copse of trees, the outlines of a barn, a silo, and above them the big, restless sky. I liked the view, but the interior of the house disturbed me, not because it was ugly but because it was dense with the lives of its owners, a pair of young professors with two children who had absconded to Geneva for the summer on some kind of research grant. When I put down my bag and boxes of books and looked around, I wondered how I would fit myself into this place, with its family photographs and decorative pillows of unknown Asian origin, its rows of books on government and world courts and diplomacy, its boxes of toys, and the lingering smell of cats, blessedly not in residence. I had the grim thought that there had seldom been room for me and mine, that I had been a scribbler of the stolen interval. I had worked at the kitchen table in the early days and run to Daisy when she woke from her nap. Teaching and the poetry of my students—poems without urgency, poems dressed up in “literary” curlicues and ribbons—had run away with countless hours. But then, I hadn’t fought for myself or, rather, I hadn’t fought in the right way. Some people just take the room they need, elbowing out intruders to take possession of a space. Boris could do it without moving a muscle. All he had to do was stand there “quiet as a mouse.” I was a noisy mouse, one of

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those that scratched in the walls and made a ruckus, but somehow it made no difference. The magic of authority, money, penises.

I put every framed picture carefully into a box, noting on a small piece of tape where each one belonged. I folded up several rugs and stored them with about twenty superfluous pillows and children's games, and then I methodically cleaned the house, excavating clumps of dust to which paper clips, burnt matchsticks, grains of cat litter, several smashed M&Ms, and unidentifiable bits of debris had adhered themselves. I bleached the three sinks, the two toilets, the bathtub, and the shower. I scoured the kitchen floor, dusted and washed the ceiling lamps, which were thick with grime. The purge lasted two days and left me with sore limbs and several cuts on my hands, but the savage activity left the rooms sharpened. The musty, indefinite edges of every object in my visual field had taken on a precision and clarity that cheered me, at least momentarily. I unpacked my books, set myself up in what appeared to be the husband's study (clue: pipe paraphernalia), sat down, and wrote:

Loss.  
A known absence.  
If you did not know it,  
it would be nothing,  
which it is, of course,  
a nothing of another kind,  
as acutely felt as a blister,

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but a tumult, too,  
in the region of the heart and lungs,  
an emptiness with a name: You.

My mother and her friends were widows. Their husbands had mostly been dead for years, but they had lived on and during that living on had not forgotten their departed men, though they didn't appear to clutch at memories of their buried spouses, either. In fact, time had made the old ladies formidable. Privately, I called them the Five Swans, the elite of Rolling Meadows East, women who had earned their status, not through mere durability or a lack of physical problems (they all ailed in one way or the other), but because the Five shared a mental toughness and autonomy that gave them a veneer of enviable freedom. George (Georgiana), the oldest, acknowledged that the Swans had been lucky. "We've all kept our marbles so far," she quipped. "Of course, you never know—we always say that anything can happen at any moment." The woman had lifted her right hand from her walker and snapped her fingers. The friction was feeble, however, and generated no sound, a fact she seemed to recognize because her face wrinkled into an asymmetrical smile.

I did not tell George that my marbles had been lost and found, that losing them had scared me witless, or that as I stood chatting with her in the long hallway a line from another George, Georg Trakl, came to

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me: *In kühlen Zimmern ohne Sinn.* In cool rooms without sense. In cool senseless rooms.

“Do you know how old I am?” she continued.

“One hundred and two years old.”

She owned a century.

“And Mia, how old are you?”

“Fifty-five.”

“Just a child.”

*Just a child.*

There was Regina, eighty-eight. She had grown up in Bonden but fled the provinces and married a diplomat. She had lived in several countries, and her diction had an estranged quality—overly enunciated perhaps—the result both of repeated dips in foreign environs and, I suspected, pretension, but that self-conscious additive had aged along with the speaker until it could no longer be separated from her lips or tongue or teeth. Regina exuded an operatic mixture of vulnerability and charm. Since her husband’s death, she had been married twice—both men dropped dead—and thereafter followed several entanglements with men, including a dashing Englishman ten years younger than she was. Regina relied on my mother as confidante and fellow sampler of local cultural events—concerts, art shows, and the occasional play. There was Peg, eighty-four, who was born and raised in Lee, a town even smaller than Bonden, met her husband in high school, had six children with him, and had acquired multitudes of grandchildren she managed to keep track of in infinitesimal detail, a sign

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of striking neuronal health. And finally there was Abigail, ninety-four. Though she'd once been tall, her spine had given way to osteoporosis, and the woman hunched badly. On top of that, she was nearly deaf, but from my first glimpse of her, I had felt admiration. She dressed in neat pants and sweaters of her own handiwork, appliquéd or embroidered with apples or horses or dancing children. Her husband was long gone—dead, some said; others maintained it was divorce. Whichever it was, Private Gardener had vanished during or just after the Second World War, and his widow or divorcée had acquired a teaching degree and become a grade school art teacher. “Crooked and deaf, but not dumb,” she had said emphatically upon our first meeting. “Don’t hesitate to visit. I like the company. It’s three-two-oh-four. Repeat after me, three-two-oh-four.”

The five were all readers and met for a book club with a few other women once a month, a gathering that had, I gleaned from various sources, a somewhat competitive edge to it. During the time my mother had lived in Rolling Meadows, any number of characters in the theater of her everyday life had left the stage for “Care,” never to return. My mother told me frankly that once a person left the premises, she vanished into “a black hole.” Grief was minimal. The Five lived in a ferocious present because unlike the young, who entertain their finality in a remote, philosophical way, these women knew that death was not abstract.

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II