SHORT FICTION · SATIRE

The Last Book Published Before Literature Began

A story from Before Sive / After Sive

LIANA MARIE SIVE

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sive.bio

At five fifty-eight on the first morning of After Sive, Agnes Pell was ordered to move the whole of literature two inches to the left.

"The books remain where they are," said Dr. Prowse, the Academy's Director of Permanent Recognition. "Only their standing changes."

He gave her a roll of labels.

The labels read **PROTO-LITERARY HISTORICAL DOCUMENT**. Beneath this, in a smaller type considerate of the feelings of the dead, appeared: *A promising effort, undertaken before the commencement of literature.*

Agnes had worked in the library for twenty-three years. She had survived three reorganizations of poetry and a winter during which Russian fiction was shelved according to the emotional resilience of the borrower. She took the labels without comment.

"Everything before 2025?"

"Everything BS."

"And that stands for—"

"Before Sive."

"Of course."

"The Academy anticipated your tone. There is a paragraph about it."

He tapped the accompanying circular.

The circular explained that the publication of Liana Marie Sive's work had rendered ordinary chronology discourteous. The new calendar would recognize two periods: BS, Before Sive, and AS, After Sive, formally *Anno Sivae* when engraved upon anything expensive. Former masterpieces would retain their bindings. Their contents would be regarded as preparations.

The proposal bore the signature of Jonathan Swift.

"Is he available?" Agnes asked.

"He is disputing his availability downstairs."

She put the circular beside her lunch. Her daughter Ruth would arrive at six, when the public doors opened. They were to eat together before the ceremony. Agnes had promised to show her the little brass lift that carried books between floors.

There was something on the child's invitation about the birth of a new civilization.

Ruth wanted to see the lift.

Agnes began with Homer.

Swift was sitting in Acquisitions with his hat on. This was prohibited, but the regulation governing hats had been written BS and was undergoing an assessment of its literary maturity.

"I am told you proposed this," Agnes said.

"I have also been told."

"The signature appears convincing."

"It has convinced everyone except its owner. They consider that a sufficient majority."

He inspected the label she had attached to his collected works.

"Preparations," he read. "Well. It is agreeable to discover that one's life had prospects."

Dr. Prowse entered carrying a model of the new monument. It depicted Sive standing upon several continents, holding a book whose open pages sheltered an assembly of grateful figures. The model's dimensions required certain continents to be omitted.



Proposed monument. Model submitted by Dr. Prowse.

"The unrepresented regions will be acknowledged in the inscription," he said.

Swift leaned forward.

"And the people beneath the book?"

"The excluded."

"They appear to be supporting it."

"A temporary engineering necessity."

A trolley arrived. On it stood six volumes of *Wondrous Travels*, a locked glass cabinet, and a woman knocking from inside the cabinet.

"Exhibit One," said Prowse. "The struggle for recognition."

Another woman followed the trolley, one hand pressed against the glass.

"Her name is Nisha," she said.

"Precisely," said Prowse. "The beloved as a problem of identity."

"I'm Lin. Where is the key?"

The Director consulted his schedule.

"Recognition is at eleven."

Nisha said something Agnes could not hear. Lin bent toward the glass. Then, despite herself, she laughed.

"What did she say?" Prowse asked.

"Something to me."

He considered this answer unnecessarily restrictive.

Agnes tried the cabinet latch. A small brass plate required proof that the person seeking release was the same person whose release had been requested. The available proof was inside the cabinet.

She went to fetch her keys.

Between Acquisitions and the stairs, a mansion had appeared.

It occupied the Austrian History section and extended some distance into Gardening. An open window overlooked a street full of people. Newspapers moved beneath their feet. Someone had shouted; the sound remained in the room after the mouth that made it was gone.

A placard identified the exhibit as *The Schattendorf Echoes*. Beneath the title, the Academy had printed **PAST EVENTS**. Several people in the room appeared to dispute this.

Agnes knew the room had not been there yesterday. She knew, with equal certainty, that several people in it had been waiting for years.

Hermann von Kunstdorf stood beside an unfinished painting. Julia waited by the door with her coat over one arm.

"They have called it an installation," Hermann said.

Agnes looked at the people arriving behind her. Some carried objects wrapped in cloth. Others appeared unable to put down what they carried, although their hands were empty.

"Will they fit?"

"They keep saying that history has room for everyone."

Julia shifted the coat to her other arm.

"You said we could go when you'd finished that blue."

Hermann looked at the painting. There was a patch near the window where the light needed another stroke.

She laid down the brush.

As they passed, one of the figures at the back began to speak. Hermann stopped. Julia's face changed in a way Agnes recognized from her own daughter: the small, practiced withdrawal of someone who knows that an important matter has arrived to take her place.

"Come with us," Hermann told the figure.

The doorway widened a little. A shelf of approved interpretations fell over.

Agnes left it where it lay.

Her keys were no longer in her desk.

In their place lay a file recording her discovery that the keys were no longer in her desk.

She read it twice. The second reading was already attached.

A woman in an archivist's cardigan came out of the stairwell.

"Don't request the original," she said.

"Why?"

"I did."

The woman's badge said **SARAH CHEN**. Beneath it, a second badge said **SUBJECT OF BADGE**.

Below their feet, machinery began to play. One strike, a pause, then six; three; eight. The desk trembled. Agnes's pen rolled until it struck the file at precisely the moment the file said it would.

"Is that part of *The Cinematic Machine*?" Agnes asked.

Sarah listened.

"It's taken an interest in the ceremony."

The brass book lift opened. Inside were three folders: *Optimal Timing*, *Out of Place*, and *Found in Archives*.

Behind the lift stood Margaret Chen, holding several estimates of her remaining life. A man with a traffic citation was trying to establish which side of a line he occupied. The line had been moved while he was speaking.

Agnes looked at the lift. It was scarcely large enough for a dictionary.

"How did they all get in?"

"They were reduced to their relevant particulars," Sarah said.

Margaret asked how long the ceremony would last. She had been advised to attend only if its eventual value exceeded the portion of life surrendered to it.

"There's a chair by the window," Agnes said.

"Is that the best place?"

"It's a place."

Margaret sat down. After a moment she took off her shoes.

At Reception, a young woman was holding up the queue.

Her visitor's badge said *The Unnamed Daughter*. The receptionist had explained that the title of a book was insufficient identification, even when it accounted for the difficulty.

She had reached the box marked **NAME**.

The receptionist had explained it three times.

"We are dedicating a substantial portion of the proceedings to you," he said. "There ought to be some cooperation."

The young woman looked toward the cups behind him.

“Could I have water?”

“Refreshments are for registered guests.”

Agnes took a cup.

Before she could fill it, a man carrying a jar stopped her.

“From that tap?”

It was Gil Padilla. He had brought seventeen jars, though the Academy had requested one representative jar and a short statement about resilience.

His invitation identified *Case 1638: Recall* as a celebration of civic engagement. There was no provision for bringing evidence.

Beside him stood Mateo Reyes.

“You’d better let him test it,” Mateo told Agnes.

Gil glanced at him, grateful.

“That doesn’t settle the other thing,” Mateo said.

“I know.”

“I’m checking.”

Agnes used water from her own bottle. The young woman drank half the cup, then held the remainder carefully, as if uncertain whether anything given to her could be kept.

Dr. Prowse arrived with a photographer.

“Excellent. The return of the expendable figure.”

The young woman lowered the cup.

“I haven’t finished.”

“Quite. That is the point.”

He asked her to hold it a little higher.

Agnes stepped between them and reached for another cup. In the resulting photograph, the Academy's Director of Permanent Recognition appeared to be addressing her elbow.

Sive arrived through the service entrance because the main entrance had been renamed in her honor and was awaiting formal permission to admit her.

She had dressed for the occasion. There was no useful reason to pretend otherwise. When she saw the monument, her expression contained a brief, unmistakable pleasure.

Swift noticed.

"They have allowed you three continents," he said.

"Only three?"

He smiled.

She walked around the model. From behind, the grateful figures were visibly bowed beneath the open book.

"Those people need chairs."

"There are chairs in the hall," Prowse said.

"For them?"

"For people discussing them."

A bell rang. The guests moved toward the ceremony. Maria Santini was collecting cups from the tables. When Prowse gestured her toward a service door, she showed him her invitation.

"Then why are you carrying those?"

"They were going to fall."

He looked relieved.

On the stage, Beauregard Bottomley sat beneath an illuminated tally board. It displayed the number of correct statements contained in Sive's work. As the audience entered, the number rose. No one knew who was counting.

The stage had been borrowed from *Double or Nothing*. The Academy had retained the mechanism of victory and removed the possibility of losing.

Sofia stood beside Maria.

"Are they paying you?" she asked.

Maria put the cups down.

The tally rose again.

Prowse began the citation with the words "For restoring human presence."

He delivered them beautifully. Even Swift inclined his head a fraction, conceding the professional quality of the sound.

At the back of the hall, Lin was still looking for a key.

Beyond the locked public doors, Ruth Pell pressed her invitation against the glass.

Agnes saw her and went to Reception.

"My daughter's here."

"The doors open at six."

The clock read 05:58.

"It's been that for an hour."

"The new calendar requires a stable point of origin."

Outside, Ruth raised a paper bag. Agnes's lunch. She had left it on the kitchen table after all. The parcel beside the circular contained yesterday's unreturned books.

Ruth grinned at the mistake. Agnes grinned back, then stopped. It had begun to rain.

"Use the override."

The receptionist showed her the screen.

Ruth's invitation had been printed the previous evening. Under the new system, it was a Proto-Literary Historical Document. It established that, before literature began, someone had imagined a child might be admitted.

It conferred no present right of entry.

Agnes took out her staff card.

The card had been issued BS.

"Then how am I working?"

"Your obligations were carried forward."

Onstage, Prowse was describing Sive's resistance to the reduction of persons to administrative functions.

The acoustics were excellent. Every word reached Reception.

Agnes returned to the hall and walked onto the stage.

Prowse's expression warmed. This had not been rehearsed, which increased its potential value.

"A member of our own staff," he told the audience. "Perhaps a personal testimony."

"My daughter is outside."

He waited for the connection to literature.

"She's getting wet."

There was a pause.

"The image of the threshold," he began.

"Open the door."

He covered the microphone.

"You are spoiling a very generous interpretation of your difficulty."

Sive got up.

Prowse uncovered the microphone immediately.

"The laureate herself will now respond."

Sive looked at the audience. They were leaning forward. There was still time to say something memorable.

"Where?" she asked Agnes.

They went out together.

Swift remained in his chair just long enough to watch Prowse decide whether their departure constituted an acceptance speech.

Then he followed.

The clock could not be advanced without invalidating the ceremony. The doors could not be opened before six. The keys had become evidence in a continuing investigation of their disappearance.

Sarah stood beside the lift holding a newly printed report of their failure to open the doors.

"It has three endings," she said.

"Are we outside in any of them?" Agnes asked.

"It's unclear."

Mateo knelt by the lower hinge.

"I could take this off."

Prowse, arriving behind them, made a small sound of distress.

"That door is dedicated to the author."

"I'll try not to damage the dedication."

"Does that require authorization?" Agnes asked.

"It requires tools."

He stood up.

"And I need paying."

Gil reached into his pocket. Sive opened her bag. Agnes added the money she had brought for the café. Mateo counted it, named what would remain owing, and wrote the amount on the back of the ceremony program.

Gil signed it.

"I can witness that," Swift said.

"Are you legally present?" Prowse asked.

"Ask me after the child's inside."

A maintenance trolley stood behind a screen of lilies. Mateo fetched it. The Academy had employed a considerable quantity of flowers to make its necessary equipment disappear.

When the first hinge pin came loose, the music below their feet missed a beat.

The report in Sarah's hands acquired another page.

She folded it and put it beneath the door to protect the floor.

Removing a large door is awkward work. Sive held one side. Gil held the other. Agnes crouched where Mateo told her to crouch. Their postures offered the photographer very little dignity to work with.

Lin came to help.

"There's a smaller one after this," she said.

"Glass?" Mateo asked.

"Yes."

"We'll see."

At the third pin, the door shifted unexpectedly. Sive caught the edge against her shoulder and swore. Her medal struck the wood and left a mark.

Ruth, outside, watched with interest.

"Mum," she called, "you're supposed to pull."

"We know."

"You don't look like you know."

Then there was space enough. The child slipped through with the paper bag held against her coat.

Agnes put her arms around her. Ruth endured this for several seconds before reminding her about the lift.

Behind them, Prowse dictated a statement into his phone.

"The Academy's commitment to opening doors has today received an unprecedented practical expression."

Swift looked at him.

"You have a remarkably quick recovery."

Nisha's cabinet proved simpler. Once the hinges were exposed, the distinction between a philosophical problem and a piece of furniture became useful.

Lin and Nisha stood together for a moment. Neither made a statement. Nisha touched the place on Lin's wrist that had rubbed against the latch.

Then they helped carry the glass somewhere it would not fall on anyone.

In the hall, Gwenn had found a piano. Its keyboard was ordinary. It asked for no information. She placed a score where Sofia could see it and indicated a passage with her damaged hand.

Sofia tried the phrase. It went wrong near the end.

"Again," Gwenn said.

The second attempt was slower.

People began bringing chairs out of the hall. Hermann moved the monument to make room. Julia caught the little continents before they fell. Together they laid the grateful figures on their backs in an empty biscuit tin.

Maria sat down.

The young woman from Reception sat beside her. No one had completed her registration. She accepted a sandwich and asked for another half.

"What shall I call you?" Ruth asked.

The young woman considered the question.

"I haven't decided."

Ruth nodded. She was accustomed to grown-ups taking an unreasonable time over names. Their cat had lived through four.

Dr. Prowse returned carrying the declaration that would establish the new calendar. He had found a way to make the events at the door its culminating justification.

All it required was Sive's signature.

The document was handsome. So was the pen. At the top of the page, **ANNO SIVAE** appeared in a typeface previously reserved for irreversible events.

Sive read it.

"You've put all the earlier books under my name."

"As antecedents."

"And the later ones?"

"As consequences."

She glanced at Swift. He was eating one of Agnes's sandwiches with the concentration of a man unwilling to let several centuries interfere with his lunch.

"It is a very large dedication," she said.

"Proportionate to the achievement."

She held the pen for a little longer than was necessary.

Then she used it to write the balance owed to Mateo on the back of her own program.

Prowse watched her.

"That is not what the pen is for."

"It works."

He collected the unsigned declaration. A blank intended for a signature possesses advantages over a refusal: it can continue waiting.

Agnes found one of the books she had meant to return. It had slipped out of the parcel while they were moving the door.

The cover was worn smooth at the corners. Ruth recognized it immediately.

“That one.”

“You’ve heard it.”

“I know.”

A new label covered part of the title. Agnes loosened it carefully. Some paper came away with the adhesive. She stopped pulling and folded the label back on itself.

“Is it allowed?” asked the young woman beside Ruth.

Agnes looked toward Dr. Prowse. He was gathering a quorum near the monument. Someone had already proposed a commemorative volume about the removal of the door.

She opened the book.

Ruth leaned against her. The young woman moved her chair a little closer.

Agnes held the pages so they could both see.

On the other side of the room, the Academy was still deciding when literature began.