

1998

## Stop at the Soldier

Hillary Campbell  
*Denison University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/exile>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Campbell, Hillary (1998) "Stop at the Soldier," *Exile*: Vol. 45 : No. 2 , Article 25.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/exile/vol45/iss2/25>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at Denison Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Exile by an authorized editor of Denison Digital Commons.

## Stop at the Soldier

Once she started the day, she could not stop smiling. This was one of the stipulations for Elementary School Tour-Guides, and Ellen went through the day at the art museum with her smile-muscles clenched, her eyes soft and friendly and forgiving. She was allowed to be stern only when the works were threatened—when a sticky hand reached for something it shouldn't—and this always happened at least once a tour. But even when stern, the smile must remain.

Ellen relished the days in between her work at the museum. She looked forward to class when she could sit, mute, carved in stone and taking in words instead of expelling them. Her cinema professor was one of those who had forgotten what it was like to be a student, and therefore talked without end. But Ellen was thankful for this. It gave her a chance to relax.

Today, however, was not one of those days. The hub of a gaggle of fourth-graders, she moved with the expert motion of a person whose every sense is intent on keeping fingers away from canvases, hands away from mobiles, arms away from sculptures.

"Now in this room do you see the paintings with lots of colors, lots of blotches? They're like fingerpaintings, aren't they, and don't add your fingers to them, dear. Remember, keep your hands to yourself and stay with me over here, alright? Pretty soon we'll get to the statues, and those are really delicate so you've gotta be really good in there and not touch *anything*, OK?"

*Through the portrait hall, mention the eyes. "They watch you, isn't that cool?"*

*Pass quickly into the pottery, and out—never keeps their interest for long.*

"Now we're gonna go over to this room—watch the carpet here, don't trip on it—where all the jewels are. And they're all real, all old. Kings and queens wore some of them. This one's—oh, be careful over there. Remember, stay by me. Be my shadow..."

*Boredom starts to set in—sum up the still-lives, the watercolors. Point and gesture, be enthusiastic.*

"And this is my favorite room. These sculptures are marble—can you believe someone carved them? Have any of you ever tried to carve something? Your pumpkins—yes. I love Halloween." *Wave them away, smile hard, keep them back. They glance quickly before they duck under the ropes. Stern, but smile. Handle gently. Sweep the arms, talk cheerfully, stop at the soldier. Talk of things about him they don't listen to. Breath sigh of relief. Point at doorway. Teacher is waiting.*

\*\*\*\*\*

In class before excusing them, Ellen's cinema professor gave them their final exam assignment. "Film something." They had a little over two months. Ellen wrote the due-date in her planner, chewed on the cherry-flavored antacid, and waited for her stomach to quiet before she got up. Walking home, another pang hit her and she stopped, put a carefully-clenched hand to her stomach and tried to look like she was window-shopping. At home she climbed the stairs gingerly, put her key in the lock and dropped her bag

on the floor. She fell to the couch and heard footsteps.

"Hurting you again?"

Ellen nodded. Her roommate made a face. "You had coffee this morning, didn't you?"

Ellen nodded again and grimaced. Melissa opened the curtains, shaking her head. She had graduated the year before, and was a social-worker by day, coffee-shop waitress by night. Melissa smiled all the time, and because she wanted to.

After Melissa left, Ellen remained on the couch, careful not to move, careful to ride through each pain breathing, focusing her eyes out over the world, at the apartment building across from hers. The windows were large in her apartment—floor to ceiling—and she loved having the curtains open. It was late afternoon when she returned from either the museum or school, and by then the sun was low, no longer a piercing spotlight for their living room. Melissa opened the curtains before she left for work just as Ellen came home. It was a routine.

A trip to the bathroom convinced Ellen she would never eat again and subject her intestines to such raw, twisting fire. But a half hour's peace and quiet soon brought hunger pangs and she made soup, hot tea. Again, it was a routine.

She ate standing up, at the window, looking out and watching the woman in her bed. She was very old, very small, starved body poking up through light blue quilt, dry rag of stiff white bristles for hair. The old woman's apartment was directly across from Ellen's, but slightly down a floor. Far away, and yet just barely close enough for Ellen to see her unbrushed hair, her legs like broomsticks underneath the bedding, the wheelchair at her feet, the framed photo on the left side of the bed next to the gray telephone, and the small rounded chair in the corner—its back to the window. It was like a hospital room, but there must have been more to it, farther back, a kitchen, sitting room, bathroom maybe. Ellen couldn't see back that far.

Today was the same. The woman lay, still, on her back, right hand holding a Kleenex, her head propped slightly up, sterile light coming from some source in the room Ellen could never see. Far below, traffic beeped pathetically; the stone of the building grew grayer with the setting sun. Ellen finished her soup and went to get her books. She sat on the couch and lay her hand on her stomach. She read.

\*\*\*\*\*

This little boy had a stubborn cowlick and a right shoe that never stayed on. He liked to lose his shoe and then stay behind with it. Ellen kept her smile and made it extra-big for him. She tried to become his favorite human, but something insincere leaked through. To make things worse, her stomach chose to hurt at the same time.

"They're like fingerpaintings, aren't they?" She watched her words float through the air, enter his head, register, and then catapult his entire body in a one-shoed frenzy towards the nearest painting. She caught him just in time. "Don't add your fingers to them, dear. Remember, keep your hands to yourself and stay with me over here, alright?"

*Don't forget about the rest of them, swing around the drinking fountain, raise eyebrows emphatically. "And thiiiis is the portrait hall!"*

*Tell them to watch the eyes follow. Walk backwards. Don't bump.*

---

*Portrait room, move quick. Jewel room.*

"Kings and queens wore some of these. Wouldn't you like to wear a diamond like that? Watch the case, be careful! Walk around here—why doesn't everyone pretend you're my shadow? This is the still-life room. Lotsa fruit, huh?"

She felt the rumble of pain familiarly distant in her body, felt it creep deliberately closer, felt it tie her stomach muscles into slow perfect knots. If she could just get through this tour, she could sit down for a while. Skip lunch. Just sit. It would go away by the end of the day.

*Watercolors. Take his hand, lead him to the sculptures. Watch the rest of them—they're OK. Hold him still. Smile down. Stop at the soldier.* "He's the oldest. Do you think you could carve him out of marble? Yes, like a pumpkin. I love Halloween."

\*\*\*\*\*

The old woman was getting fed. Ellen sat on the couch and watched the nurse spoon-feed her, bite by bite, chew by chew. The nurse was the only company the old woman ever got—three times a day to be fed, countless other times to be checked on, to change the bed, to sit her in the wheelchair, to help her into another long, beautiful white nightgown. She never wore anything else, just this same nightgown, or two of the same, to switch-off between.

It was very early morning, before the sun was up, and Melissa was in the bathroom. Ellen waited her turn, eyes wrinkled with sleep, feet cold and resting off the couch on the linoleum. She sat with her hands in her lap, back straight, trying to stretch the tired out of her muscles. She thought of her cinema final and pushed it again to the back of her brain.

The bathroom door creaked open and Melissa emerged, rounding the corner and disappearing into her room. She yelled out to Ellen in a voice always too chipper for before dawn.

"I dreamt there was jelly in Joe's hair last night!"

Ellen went into the bathroom. Squeezed a long line of turquoise gel on her toothbrush and stuck it in her mouth. She made a noise to let Melissa know she'd heard her.

"So I looked it up in my dream dictionary and do you know what it means?"

Ellen spit. She stuck her head out of the bathroom and raised her eyebrows in Melissa's direction.

"A dream featuring jelly, Jell-O, or gelatin signifies a period of gloom (or depression) due either to loss of a friend or to the exposition of something you'd have preferred stayed hidden—unless you ate it, in which case the augury is reversed," she read. "What's an augury? Can you believe it? They have *jelly* in here!"

Melissa's boyfriend Joe was her fourth love. He foresaw marriage, she did not. Ellen again pointed this out to her and joked that jelly actually sounded good right now. Strawberry. On a bagel.

"But if you eat it, you'll hurt," Melissa said. "I think you have an ulcer. I don't care what your doctor says."

Ellen only shook her head and went into her room. Some people just had sensi-



tive stomachs—hers had always, always hurt. There was nothing she could do. She always joked that least she was building a high pain-threshold—childbirth would be easy, a piece of cake. Childbirth would be nothing.

\*\*\*\*\*

The sculpture room underwent a cleaning one week—something that did not at all go well with the sudden great influx of kindergarten classes into the art museum the same week. Without being able to go through the sculpture room and complete the circle, Ellen had to lead them all the way back through every room to get to the lobby. By the end of the week, she and the other Elementary guide held their breath that the cleaning would indeed be done on time. It was.

On Monday morning Ellen walked through the room on her own, without a flock, gazing smile-less at the way the marble shone, the bronze gleamed. The soldier's eyes were still darker than the rest of his body, but a little of the age had been somewhat erased, a little of the filth somewhat removed. She lingered on him for a while, her hands on the velvet-red ropes. Even as children's high-pitched voices entered the building, his expression did not change.

\*\*\*\*\*

Time was running close to the edge. The empty page of notebook-white blinked at her like a stop-light, held her tight like a hand to her wrist. In less than a month she had to "film something" worthy of a final, worthy of a grade good enough to convince herself and everyone else that she could quit the museum and find a job that made her *move*, made her eyes dance wild, made her love the life she'd sensed and hunted and captured.

But the ideas did not come. Ellen's eyes danced wild, but with worry, not excitement. Worry that she had yet to think of something, worry that her current stomach hunger would only lead her to pain, worry that the old woman across the street had no visitors, no TV, no strength even to lift her own spoon.

In the bed, the woman lay with her arms crossed, still clutching the Kleenex, still propped on a pillow. Ellen looked down at her pen and put its point on the page, tried to find an idea, looked up out the window at the old woman's misshapen hair and blue blanket. She squinted hard trying to discern something in the photo beside the bed, but of course couldn't make it out. Film, film, film.

Melissa came home. Ellen looked at her, half-surprised. It must be late. She should just forget it all and go to sleep.

Grabbing a box of Crunch 'n Munch off the shelf in the kitchen, she paced the floor. The old woman's window moved back and forth, always moving, never changing. Ellen gritted her teeth and growled loud enough for Melissa to hear.

"You should come to the coffee shop for ideas. Or even walk around with me at the Center tomorrow. Talk to some people. They'll give you ideas."

Out the window, the old woman uncrossed her arms and turned her face from the night. She was awake, too.

\*\*\*\*\*

*Swirl around the room, point and look back to check for scatterers. "See the paintings with lots of colors, lots of blotches?"*

*"That's Modernism!" Rarely did a kid know what she was talking about.*

*"You're right! Where did you learn that?" Too late. Attention gone. Arms reaching, fingers clawing. Portraits—eyes. Pottery—next...*

*"Now we're gonna go over to this room—watch the carpet here, don't trip on it—where all the jewels are."*

The cowlick-shoe-gone boy had today taken the form of a girl in overalls. Her friend Goldilocks seemed to share the same zest for life. *Pain in the stomach, pain in the stomach. Smile, don't show.*

It took everything Ellen had to pull her arms from her stomach and sweep them up and around her, imaginary octopus tentacles pulling third-graders to her center. Her elastic waist-band was confining, her high-heels like stilts. Only two more rooms, and then rest for her—antacid. She had to fight this, breath out, wait as the wave passed, and then walk...

*"When I was little I loved to paint with watercolors. Do you guys like these?" Sculpture room, wind around the ropes. Restlessness eats away—look at the soldier but no don't touch! What was the rule? Come back under the rope—come back under the rope, dear. Dear. Smile. Teacher. Escape.*

\*\*\*\*\*

After class, Ellen took the long way home, walking slowly, lazily, searching the crowd for genius. It was ridiculous. Last semester she'd filmed her toy-inflatable green alien walking down the street, picking up a \$20 bill, and putting it down for a shiny penny. Certainly nothing could be any worse than that.

She took the stairs two-by-two, her hands clutching the straps of her back-pack, her eyes cast down at the ground. In the apartment, Melissa was putting her coat on over her waitress uniform. Ellen sat on the couch and opened her bag, producing her notebook and pen. Again. Melissa pulled the curtain back and said goodbye. Ellen lay back and began to write, lazily glancing up and out the window. The old woman's bed was empty. The strange thing about this, she immediately realized, was that the bed was naked, empty of sheets. The even stranger thing was the wheelchair. It stood right there by the bed, as usual...but no old woman sat in it.

Without knowing or caring, Ellen opened her hands and dropped everything to the floor. She found herself with glass pressed cold against her palms, glass standing centimeters from her nose. Looking past the faint line of her own reflection, she searched the room. The bed was indeed stripped of absolutely everything, light was still pouring cold from somewhere further back in the apartment, the telephone was still sitting by the bed, and the photo was still there but had been knocked forward on its face. Ellen heard the traffic below her, and was uncomfortably confused because everything seemed as it had been before. Yet wrong...

The phone rang behind her and she turned her head absentmindedly toward it, but sudden motion in the old woman's room caught her eye. A figure in a black dress-suit

walked very slowly to the photo, picked it up and moved past the foot of the bed. The figure turned and sat in the rounded chair in the corner, her back to Ellen. She bowed her head. Ellen had never seen her before.

She let the phone ring, let the machine pick it up, let herself stand and so quietly take in what was happening. And yet even with the mystery of this seated-person's identity looming in her mind, Ellen's eyes kept going back to the bed, back to the chalky white square of the mattress. Her fingers squeaked loudly against the glass. Strangely, she could not tell if her stomach hurt.

\*\*\*\*\*

*Modern painters. Fingerpaintings. Hold hands back.*

*Through portrait hall, remember the eyes.*

*Skip pottery. Say nothing. Swim through.*

*Jewelry. And they're all real, all old.*

*Point and gesture, be enthusiastic. Tell them the still-lives are watercolors, the watercolors are still-lives.*

*And this is my favorite room. I love Halloween.*

In front of the soldier, she rattled off the information. She smiled and watched the kids hit the ropes, swing them back and forth. One of the boys tried to dart under but she was too quick for him. She pulled him back, sent him off with the others. "Bye, dear."

At the end of the day, Ellen helped usher people out of the rooms to the exit, her hands clasped in front of her stomach, her step slow and measured. She watched the last man leave the sculpture room, his hand on his wife's lower back, guiding her in front of him. Her stomach burned. She closed her eyes.

When she opened them, she was standing still, in front of the soldier, her legs pressing against the rope. The warmth of her hands on her stomach made her shiver for a moment; she was cold everywhere else. She thought of her film class, her deadlines, her paycheck, her window. She thought of the old woman and her nightgown—she thought of the room empty, the bed cold. And she thought of how the room seemed just as dead before as after.

Lifting up the rope, Ellen glanced quickly before she ducked. Holding out her hands, she wrapped her arms around his body, pulled herself close, anchored herself to him. Her fingers traced his arms, up the back of his uniform, pressed hard into his neck, felt the stone. Felt the unforgiving rock she clung to. Held them together, there, granite. And slowly leaning closer to his dark eyes, she pressed her lips very hard against his, and kissed.

—Hillary Campbell '00