

## **Lament for Stella Gibson**

Maj Ragain

The seventies in southeastern Illinois  
were recession times. The oil fields had dried up.

The Road master bicycle factory had broken  
the union, gone bottom dollar.

The Wal-Mart cathedral of tomorrow was on the drawing board,  
its gridded parking acres still soybeans.

Lots of folks in Olney, my hometown, signed up down  
on Boone street, the unemployment office.

The only work I could find was at the local  
radio station, two dollars an hour,  
newsman, music man, trashman, third class  
radio engineer, on the air from six til eleven every night.

Just me and the three blinking red lights on the tower.

The music play list was soft contemporary  
middle of the road bonehead oatmeal for the ear.

Sundown come and the phone would begin to ring.

Requests, complaints, questions, rants, offers of love.

Calls from pissed off, hormone humped  
teenagers who demanded Black Sabbath heavy metal or else,  
from warehouse fork lift truck drivers craving Elvis,  
from Joe Smith, the coin collecting barber who

never told me the same gorilla joke twice,  
from a waitress at the Red Rooster truck stop  
who couldn't make it through the night  
without a Kenny Rogers love song.  
I'd hear from half-in-the-bag housewives  
who wanted their hearts jumpstarted by Barry Manilow.  
Every night I'd get a phone call or two  
from Stella, Stella Gibson.

*Hello, this is WVLN WSEI fm.*

*Hello, honey, I couldn't live without you  
playing this music, keeping me company,  
talking to me in the dark.*

Stella was in her late seventies,  
long time blind, living alone  
in a poor neighborhood dubbed Goosenibble,  
down by the Baltimore and Ohio tracks.

One night after the sign off news,  
and I'd shut down the transmitter,  
the phone rang. It was stella again.

*Honey, I am lonesome tonight.*

*I sure wish I had me a cold beer  
and some company.*

*What kind of beer you like, Stella?*

*I like them tall boys, nice and cold.*

An hour later, I knocked on her screen door.

Stella appeared, flowered housecoat,  
hair tied back with a scarf, small shoulder.

*I want to see what you look like*, she said

and took my face in her hands,  
thumbs along cheekbones and brow,  
down the nose, lips, chin, dimple.

When she had me in her head,  
she led me to her kitchen table.

We split the six pack  
as she told me stories about her cats,  
her dead husbands, her no good hillbilly neighbors,  
her rag rug business.

She made jumble colored rag rugs  
and sold them on the radio station's call in  
morning show *Quiz n' Tell*.

After her third beer, she loaded me down  
with five rugs and kissed me a midnight goodbye,  
a quick, squeegee smack at the side of the mouth.

*Honey*, she said, *Don't you be expecting  
to come around here every night.*

One foot out the door, an armful of rugs,  
I turned back to her.

*Your name, Stella, means star.*

I never saw her again,  
though a couple of times, I did leave  
a six pack of Pabst blue ribbon on her doorstep.

I quit the ghost voice business  
that November, packed my Impala  
oil burner and wandered east,  
following rivers, sleeping in truck stop lots.

A few years later, a hometown fella  
told me Stella Gibson had passed on.

*You know she didn't make those rugs.*

*They come from Guatemala.*

*She had them shipped down from Chicago.*

I know that guy. He doesn't believe in much.

She is in her dark kitchen tonight,  
sipping the foam of a tall boy,  
singing along with the radio.

Her sure finger weave the thin rag strips,  
pulling the colors through.

I was the nightman

She was a star.