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touchstone

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contents

UNIV
PS
508
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TL6
v.27
1995
Spr.

- 3 *Naked Pilgrim, Forgotten Nomad* (prose) Dominic Lanning Smith
- 22 *Father--Going to Work & Going into Town* (poems) Wes Beal
- 24 *Great-Grandfather Morrissey* (poem) Tarisa Matsumoto
- 25 *At My Mother's House* (poem) Victoria Schlesinger
- 26 *Francis* (prose) Annette McPeters
- 37 *Dead Wood* (poem) J. Catherine Freise
- 38 *Chiaroscuro* (poem) Daniel Locke
- 39 *Pietro's Intermezzo* (poem) Jonathan Small
- 40 *Scranton X-mas Blues* (poem) Chris McCreary
- 42 *Diner Talk* (prose) Paul Busenitz
- 63 *The Lady and the Dog* (poem) Robert Cooperman
- 64 *The Sting of Barbed Wire* (drawing) C.R. Wilson

Naked Pilgrim, Forgotten Nomad

Dominic Lanning-Smith

At seventy-three, Clarissa joined her local bird watchers chapter in search of something new. She borrowed a pair of binoculars and signed up for the chapter's first trip, a day trip to the Upper Peninsular of Michigan. During the six-hour sojourn she struck up a conversation with a Mr. Hastafa, a self-proclaimed nomad, adventurer and skinny dipper. He was exactly the kind of stranger she hoped to meet, someone with stories to tell about places Clarissa had never seen. He sat in his elegantly-styled European suit, looking somehow out of place among the other elderly men who wore domestic cuts of mustard brown or gray flannel. Clarissa was impressed by the way the suit captured the day's light. Sun rays flickered through the tall hemlocks and pines by the highway, glistening in the threads of his jacket. The shifting light gave a vigor to his expressions and gestures, and Clarissa deepened her interest in his tales of worldly affairs as though he were recounting the myths of some forgotten tribe.

"When I was a schoolboy," he said, "my father used to hang maps on the living room walls. Every year we had a different country's map. After dinner we would plot journeys we knew we would never take. Only I did complete some of the routes I plotted as a boy because I joined the navy and traveled from one continent to the next."

Clarissa brushed her skirt and remembered her youth.

"I never went further than Ohio to the east and Nebraska to the west. I always wanted to travel but one thing after another stopped me. My late husband hated traveling; it made him nervous. Years after he died I took a scenic flight over Lake Michigan into Canada for my sixtieth birthday. It was my first time to fly in a small plane and I sat next to a lady from Halifax, Nova Scotia, who told me she discovered

religion somewhere between take off and landing. It was an eventful trip, to say the least." Clarissa exhaled with a slight laugh, then peered out the window, remembering that invigorating flight. She remembered that the lake had first seemed like an expanse of blue desert, lifeless and still, then, the higher they flew the more it became like an enormous eye holding the sky's reflection. She knew this was a memory she would always have.

"Where is your favorite place?" she asked.

"I'd have to say the middle of the Pacific Ocean."

"What ever do you mean? Isn't it awfully lonely out there?"

"It has its appeal. Once, when we were sailing off the coast of New Guinea, we anchored and jumped in for a swim. A hundred and fifty naked sailors causing a hell of a noise!"

This image caught Clarissa off-guard. Her hand shot up to cover her mouth. She smiled and regained composure as the players in the card game across the aisle looked over. They were playing poker and betting with pretzels.

"How did you ever end up in Michigan?" she asked.

"My wife's family is here, and after she died I decided to stay. For years I continued to sail my little skiff in the Great Lakes. I fooled myself it was the ocean. How long have you been here?"

"My family has lived here for four generations. My grandfather was a copper miner and started a family business in the Upper Peninsular."

"My folk have wandered around with a blight of travel-madness ever since they left the Middle East. We probably come from mountain nomads, you know, sheep herders. It's in my blood."

"Is that a fact?"

"I think I'm finally settled."

"Don't you miss all that travel? Bird watching in upper Michigan is hardly an adventure by your standards."

"I come up here every year to see the migration of the terns. So many don't make it and they lie along the shores of Lake Michigan either dead or dying from exhaustion and

hunger. I come along to pay my respects, you might say. I'll show you them when we stop for lunch."

When the tour stopped for a picnic lunch in a park by Lake Michigan, Clarissa and Mr. Hastafa separated from the group and walked barefoot along the Lake. A heavy mist concealed much of the horizon. Clarissa could smell what she had always thought of as Canada--an arctic smell of crystal ice from the north, metallic and crisp. After a hundred feet or so they came to their first tern which lay lifeless against the drenched sand. The bird had been washed in by the tide and now lay with its gray and white feathers ruffling in the breeze. The bird's eyes stared piercingly from behind its bright orange bill, back towards the lake. They found other terns further on, and finally a live one, with its head tossing from side to side, its orange beak opening again and again in a yawn-like gesture. It appeared to be injured, and held a wing outstretched.

"Goodness, the sweet thing," Clarissa said. She bent down and placed a tentative hand on the bird, which seemed to make it more agitated. Later, Clarissa would look up the bird in her field guide. This particular one was a *common tern*, a term unsuited for its graceful build and courageous flight.

"I'll catch up in a moment, you go on Clarissa," Mr. Hastafa said, his face almost grimacing at the bird. Clarissa began to walk back toward the rest of the group who were now eating lunch. From a distance of fifty-feet she turned and saw her new acquaintance bend down to the bird and perform a surprisingly swift hand movement around its neck. He stood and walked toward her. They remained silent until they were back in the park.

Retrieving their packed lunches from the bus, they then settled in a patch of sunlight which had emerged now that the mist was clearing. Clarissa did not want to sound awkward about the bird and thought the simpler approach the better.

"I think killing that bird was the right thing to do, Mr. Hastafa. It was surely going to die on its own," she said.

"I thought you might have seen me. Every year it's the

same, but there are too many of them to keep track of. It's funny how killing something for a good reason doesn't change the bitter aftertaste. As boys, we used to hunt ducks and routinely break their necks, but a tern looks at you in complete knowledge. I'm sorry I'm being morbid. Shall we change the subject?"

Clarissa picked at her cheese sandwich, trying to will her appetite back. She imagined Mr. Hastafa commuting to the Lake every year to kill his quota of terns. They both looked toward the lake where the shroud of mist was evaporating, exposing a clear, ether-like sky.

"Tell me more about the navy," she suggested.

"My most vivid memory is sleeping in the belly of the boat, listening to the ocean and the sounds of the boiler room at the same time. I used to imagine that I was inside Moby Dick, trapped," he said.

"You know, Greg, I envy your travel. From the earliest I can remember I collected postage stamps and postcards. I belonged to a local club, and had a book jammed with all kinds of cathedrals and museums on them."

Clarissa picked some more at her sandwich and stared at the lake. Mr. Hastafa placed an object in her lap. She faced him, startled, then looked down at a rather beaten compass.

"Have you ever used a compass?" he asked.

"Of course, It's easy, you just find north and go where you need to."

"I've had one for a long time. I always have it with me, even when I go shopping, even though I know my bearings in the dark. North, for example, is in line with that clump of bushes over there."

Clarissa checked the compass, and confirmed he was right.

"You are a show-off, aren't you?"

"That I am," he said, taking the compass from her hand.

At the end of the day, Clarissa arrived at her son's family home where she had been living for the last three years, ever since she sold the house where William died. The late fall afternoon was still warm and reminded Clarissa of Indian

summers as a girl. The children were playing in a canvas tent in the yard, and Jay and his wife were reading the comics on the front porch. The first thing that Jay noticed was that Clarissa was flushed, her cheeks burnt by wind and sun.

“What a day! I sat in the sun when we stopped for lunch listening to some ex-sailor tell me his life story and getting wind and sunburn all the while. My ancestors weren’t known for their swarthy complexions.”

“I wondered what happened. You’re beet red, Mother,” Jay said.

“Cucumber’s the trick, they say,” Clarissa pronounced. She went inside to the kitchen in search of her remedy. She tried to remember the last time she’d been sunburned. It must have been ages, maybe not since her teens. Her childhood was filled with her mother’s paranoia about exposure to the elements. Every winter tempest could mean staying home from school, every blazing afternoon of summer was to be avoided at all costs. Clarissa and her siblings stayed inside most of the summer and read books or magazines, or occasionally listened to radio plays. Sometimes, during storms, Clarissa watched at the window, one hand pressed against the chilling pane, fearing yet somehow hoping the rage of thunder and lightening could enter their pristine house, if only for a second. Her mother’s paranoia took shape in Clarissa’s dreams as a single bolt of blue lightning which flashed through the kitchen as they ate supper. Yet, despite the fear and worry of those outer elements, she imagined being whisked away by the storm, her arms spinning, her head filled with a kind of sweet fear as it bound her up towards Canada. It was true, she thought. She had always wanted to travel.

Clarissa took the plate of cucumber and laid it next to the bath tub. A cool bath was what she needed, then some ice tea before settling in the living room. She couldn’t help smiling to herself at the thought of a hundred and fifty naked sailors leaping from the bow of a ship in the Pacific Ocean.

Toward the end of autumn, Clarissa and Mr. Hastafa were becoming friends. His name was actually Gansoma, but he preferred to be called Greg, a name he adopted when Americans continually grappled with his Middle Eastern name. They saw each other several times a week. Sundays, after their bird meeting, while the membership gathered around the coffee urns and donuts exchanging bird tales, they sat off to the side, discussing their families and relatives, or talking more about his days of wandering. He met his wife at eighteen thousand feet above sea level in the Himalayas.

At that height the air was thin enough to make the stirrings of romance seem strange, he told her. They married in a village in Nepal. Clarissa had met her husband on the grassy quadrangle at Kalamazoo College in Michigan, and married in the United Methodist Church on Main Street.

One Sunday, the president of the bird watchers' chapter, a tall, wiry man named Bernie, gave a presentation on his ornithological specialty--the loon. The members sat in a circle around Bernie and his slide projector as he answered some of the most urgent loon questions. He told them more facts than Clarissa could keep track of, like that their ancestry was fifty to eighty million years old; they lived between fifteen and thirty years; their name derived from the Old English word *Lumme*, meaning lame--in reference to their awkward gait on land; they migrated South every year and could easily live in salt water because of a special salt-excreting nasal gland. It all sounded very scientific until he finally showed pictures of them preening, swimming, calling and diving for fish. She could never have guessed that these birds she had grown up seeing on the lake were so intricate.

After his slide show, Bernie made an announcement about their annual bird-watching raffle. They were selling tickets for a five-day trip for two to the Florida Keys in the late fall to see various birds arrive after their distant migration. Of particular interest, said Bernie, were the loons, who, upon arriving, gave up their ghostly Northwoods call and arrived freshly molted, their black coats giving way to a grayish fluff. Clarissa was taken by the idea of not only

seeing loons taking their summers in Florida, but also of seeing the ocean for the first time.

Over the next several weeks she bought more than fifty tickets, and became slightly obsessed by the idea of winning the raffle. She placed the tickets with small, colorful magnets on the fridge. Both the lower fridge door and the freezer door became covered--eliciting the concern of her son that she was spending all of her widow's pension checks on something that amounted to gambling. She told him that it was not gambling, that she had never cared for that brand of sport, and that buying these raffle tickets was more like donating money for the furtherment of bird watching. Greg found this justification amusing when she told him, but he didn't find her 'panic' buying strange. He encouraged her to buy as many tickets as she thought she needed to secure her chances. He also began buying tickets himself.

While they waited for the raffle to be drawn over the next few weeks, Clarissa couldn't sleep well, so she began watching television into the early dawn. Decade-old sitcoms and Westerns flickered in the living room where she sat under an old tweed blanket eating Saltines and drinking hot cider. Her mind couldn't seem to focus or relax. It would not be lulled to sleep by the continuum of images on the screen. Sometimes she turned the overhead light off, shut her eyes and lay in the flickering half-light trying to remember the names of people long dead or places she knew as a child. Other times, half out of frustration and half from sheer boredom, she assaulted the remote control, flicking through stations with such speed that the images meshed into one narrative, telling of some bizarre plot complete with Indians and a talk show host--and occasionally it seemed to make sense to her. When she found a program with animals in it she rested the remote on the arm of her chair and watched a while. From Africa to Australia she watched as numerous prey were engulfed by their partners in the food chain. She grew especially interested in the birds, noting such facts as penguins mating for life and crows living in colonies.

When it rained at night and it wasn't too cold she sat on

the porch swing, being careful not to squeak it. One evening a storm came and she sat watching the lightning trace across the northern sky, catching the landscape in a photographer's glimpse. That was how Greg captured his life, she thought: in moments of complete clarity. He could remember a meal he'd eaten in Morocco, or a clear day in Asia in 1952 for no other reason than its peculiar beauty. Her own memories were meshing together. This was made worse by the fact that the town looked the same as it did thirty years ago, minus the K-Mart and the slew of factory buildings on the east side. She could not help but feel an inkling of envy for Greg's life.

Following the storm, Clarissa went inside and called Greg. It was twelve thirty and she hoped that he wasn't asleep.

He answered in a soft, raspy voice.

"It's Clarissa," she said, "I'm calling to tell you that there's been a storm. You might like to shut your windows."

"I know. It woke me up. How are you? I haven't seen you since Sunday."

"Oh, I'm just fine. We went on a picnic today and Peter, the youngest, fell off a swing. There was quite a drama."

"You're up late," he said.

"I don't sleep anymore. That darn raffle is all I can think about. Anyway, they say you sleep less when you get to be our age, don't they? I feel bored at the thought of sleeping."

"I've felt like that before," he said, "when I was at sea I sometimes volunteered to take the night watch. I'd sit out on deck and watch my favorite constellations all night, then take a nap the next afternoon. That way I wouldn't have to listen to scores of sailors snore and moan for old girlfriends in their sleep, either. Don't worry about it. You'll sleep when you need to."

"I think Jay's starting to worry about it. I fell asleep in front of the television the other night and he woke me on his way to work the next morning. He looked at me as though he'd caught me red-handed at something, like I'd stolen for the first time."

"Do you like it there?"

"Oh, yes. I love them all dearly. It's just that sometimes I

miss having my own garden and my own furniture. I still feel like a guest here sometimes. Anyway, I didn't really call for any reason. I just picked up the phone. Silly, wasn't it?"

"An old black and white is playing at the cinema tomorrow; it might liven your dull, sleepless life," Greg said.

"If that is an invitation, then I would be glad to."

"I'll pick you up at seven."

They said good night as Clarissa turned on the television in time to see a documentary about sea tortoises.

Clarissa sat on the porch swing when Greg arrived, having been ready for half an hour. Jay and his family had gone out for dinner, leaving her in peace to putter about the house getting ready. She'd spent a good hour in the tub thumbing through a magazine, then emptied her wardrobe in search of the perfect outfit. Her clothes seemed horribly out of date compared to Greg's handsome suits, and she made a mental note to buy a new dress. She had settled for an amber floral dress and a beige cardigan, and now sat with her hands folded in her lap watching Greg's old blue Chevy pull into her driveway. As he climbed out of the car, she noticed his suit, a fine outfit with tiny specks of thread and nicely cut trousers. It was the type of suit younger men wore these days, she thought.

They arrived at the cinema and bought their tickets for which they received special over-sixty discounts. This both pleased and annoyed Clarissa. It made the excursion even cheaper, even though Greg insisted on paying for both, but it also confirmed that she did indeed look in her seventies to the casual observer. She had never once asked for a discount and suddenly, when she was about sixty-five, a pimply-faced teenager, whose father owned the hardware store, asked her if she needed the special deal. For years she could not help but avoid the boy's family and their business.

Greg bought them popcorn and they entered the small, dim theater where dozens of couples sat watching previews for other films. They sat toward the front, taking a whole row to themselves. Clarissa reached into her handbag and produced a noisy shopping sack of assorted fruit and

crackers. A chorus of clucking tongues sounded behind them in astonishment of the noise. Clarissa turned and gave one last tug on the knot on her sack of food. She sensed Greg was surprised by her collection of food items, but when she produced a potato peeler and began to peel an apple, she noticed him giggling quietly.

“What in Lord’s name are you doing?” he whispered.

“I’ve never cared much for the peel. Now, you hush and let me eat my fruit.”

An apple and half an orange later, the film started. As she watched, Clarissa remembered movies as a girl in this same theater, where she’d held the sweaty hands of farm boys, cried through hopeless love stories or secretly desired to be a cow girl with a reckless life and leather boots. How secretive movies had seemed as she changed identity in the blackness, no longer belonging to anyone or any place. Now, as she watched a film from 1942 called “When Angels Fly,” about a nun who falls in love with a priest in a Mexican orphanage they run, she found herself wondering what it was she might escape at seventy-three. The last weeks had dragged by while she recalled a life spent within the same town, passing the same faces on the street and exchanging greeting cards with the same couples and families. She knew she would not live terribly much longer. This fact was a kind of subtext from day to day; she imagined it in the eyes of young men who held doors open for her, in the tone of the bank teller’s voice as she cashed her pension checks. The whole subject moved, shadow-like, just beneath the surface of her everyday life.

Perhaps Greg noticed she was not paying attention to the film, when he nudged her and whispered in her ear.

“You didn’t win the raffle. They announced it today.”

She stared at Greg, almost in disbelief. Then she said quietly, “Well, I suppose I had it coming. I just thought I would win.”

“I did win,” he said.

She turned back toward the screen.

“Well, I’m very happy for you, Greg. You’ll have a very

nice time.”

“Stop it, you proud old thing. I want you to come with me. Would you please accompany me to see the loons in Florida, Miss?”

A wide grin came over her. She felt as though she had won herself. Their panic buying of tickets hadn't been in vain. If they had won by the law of sheer probability, she thought, then they had also won by the law of sheer desire.

On the screen a tall, stern-looking priest was praying by his bedside while a violin played from some unknowable distance.

“Shall we leave?” Greg asked.

“Would you mind?”

They stood and made their way to the back of the theater, while some audience members shook their heads with disapproval.

“You've got terrible film etiquette,” Greg said as they entered the street where dusk was settling in, “plastic bags full of noisy foods--I don't think they liked us in there.”

“I'm sorry,” Clarissa said.

“Don't think of it. Besides, who wants to see another nun story?” he said.

“When shall we leave? The sooner the better. I've spent the last month watching exotic animals eat each other on television, and feeling myself wanting to just go away for a while. I know Florida isn't New Guinea, but it's someplace else. I just want to go swimming in the ocean. Maybe we could eat some seafood and go for long walks.”

For the next three nights Clarissa and Greg planned their trip. They booked their plane tickets and received their itinerary from the travel agent who was, as it turned out, Bernie's daughter. They pored over Florida maps in Greg's kitchen, marking thin lines of possible visitation sites and discussing the places that sounded most interesting. They made separate lists of what to take, and checked each other's for any omissions. Clarissa could tell that Greg was getting annoyed with her impulse to plan everything down to the last detail: the size of kleenex to bring, snack food, one

camera or two . . .

"Am I driving you crazy?" she asked him.

"Of course not. But I think we can handle anything unexpected. I just want to get out there if we're going."

"I like to fuss. It's silly, but I just want things to go smoothly. I've never been one for sloppiness."

"Things never go as planned. We'll probably end up in California."

"There's the ocean there, too, I suppose."

The day of departure, Clarissa rose at five and unpacked her suitcase one last time, laying her neatly folded clothes across her bed in groups. She found comfort in seeing piles of socks, dresses and underwear arranged on her bed. It was affirming that the trip was going to happen, and hadn't just been a whim. Having checked her travel inventory, she repacked her suitcase and fastened its small padlock. She dressed in the bright sundress she had bought for the first day of travel and took her suitcase to the front porch.

At the kitchen table, she sat eating corn flakes. As she ate she could hear Jay's rhythmic snoring and see Peter's night light illuminating the hallway. She was wondering if they were going to get up and see her off when a loud alarm clock rang out and Jay's snoring halted abruptly. A few minutes later he appeared in the kitchen doorway, rubbing sleep from his eyes and yawning simultaneously.

"I didn't know if you were getting up to see me off," Clarissa said.

"I couldn't let you vanish without saying good-bye, Mother."

"Well, that's nice to hear. But I'm not vanishing. I'll be back in less than a week."

A short, precise horn blast came from the front of the house. Clarissa stood and took her cereal bowl to the sink.

"I suppose that's Greg," Jay said.

"Right on time. We need to arrive an hour before the flight leaves." She looked over at her suitcase.

"Can I carry it to the car for you?" Jay asked.

“That would be a help.”

Jay picked up the suitcase, mumbled something about its weight, and headed outside, Clarissa behind him. Jay and Greg exchanged a handshake. Greg took the suitcase from him and placed it in the trunk.

“Well, you best be off. Have a fun trip,” Jay said.

Greg started the engine and Clarissa fastened her seat belt in the passenger seat. The car pulled away from the curb just as Jay banged on the roof of the car. Greg stopped the car and Clarissa opened her window. Jay stuck his head inside the window frame.

“Don’t get sunburn, Mother. The sun is a lot stronger down there. Wear a hat.”

Clarissa looked at Jay, then at Greg, who was smiling slightly.

“Thank you, Jay. I’ll be sure to do that.”

“Just a bit of advice. Now, take care.” He walked back to the curb.

As the car made its way down the street, Clarissa watched Jay’s standing figure diminish in the side mirror. She had not left Michigan for thirteen years.

Clarissa and Greg were now aboard their flight. The flight would take over four hours, the captain announced, with a change of planes in Chicago. They both watched dutifully as a bright blond stewardess, labeled Mona by her name tag, mimed the instructions for emergency exits and loss of cabin air pressure. It was amazing to Clarissa that the woman could perform gestures of life-saving activity with such calm cheeriness, with her hair style remaining intact. Mona’s smile was endless and confident.

Clarissa braced herself as they took off on the first leg of the trip. The ground dropped beneath them while she watched out the window. Later, she decided that this flight was not nearly as straining on one’s body as her previous one in a small aircraft. One’s internal organs did not swoosh with sudden movements of flight. In fact, outside of take-off and landing, there were no sudden movements of flight at all. The traveling was smooth, and apart from the occasional

turn, Clarissa could barely tell she was thousands of feet above the earth.

Lunch was served somewhere above Kentucky, where Clarissa noticed that the plots of farm land suddenly gave way to woods and hills of a deep Appalachian green. The meal, chicken in cream sauce, was served proudly by the bright Mona and her fellow attendants. Greg read a copy of the flight magazine, which he dropped on the floor when the food arrived. For much of the trip, he dozed. Clarissa completed the trip by staring out the window almost without pause, trying to guess when they were flying over the invisible lines which separated one state from the next.

In Miami they took a taxi to their medium-priced hotel which was located within walking distance from a beach. The following day they would take a rental car to the Florida Keys, then take a charter boat to a chain of tiny rock-like islands where they would hopefully encounter recently migrated birds, as well as the native and perennial species. Clarissa pondered the next five days as she leaned toward the open window of the taxi, amazed at the bustle of the city. The air, she thought, was not only salty but somehow thick and an effort to breathe. Certainly Michigan had its humid summers with their stifling heat, but this was more than just humidity. It was a different kind of air altogether, wafting in from the tropics as opposed to the Canadian ranges, mingling with the fumes of Miami's countless vehicles and factories.

Despite their off-season timing, Clarissa and Greg were confronted with more people than they expected. The brochure on the hotel that Bernie's daughter had given them had pictured poolside lunches, unhurried looking lobbies and leisurely swims in the pool. Now they found the place was filled with vacationing families and screeching infants. Noises of excited ping-pong matches, swim races, and squabbling, tired vacationers seemed to fill every corner of the building. Despite this Clarissa and Greg resolved to be relaxed and content, avoiding the hotel whenever possible.

Their suite was clean and spacious. In Clarissa's room, one wall held a wallpaper-mural which was an aerial

photograph of the Florida Keys. Over the years it had faded and worn so that the ocean was a pale blue. There were small tears in the wallpaper which appeared like white capped waves amidst the islands. Greg's room had no such wallpaper, just a painting entitled *storm at sea*. The both had matching mauve bedspreads. Despite the ordinariness of the suite and the hotel they agreed it was delightful to be by the ocean, with its salt and vigor filling their lungs.

After a late meal in the hotel restaurant, Clarissa and Greg took a stroll along the promenade of the nearby beach. They bought ice-cream and ate it on the way back to the hotel. When they returned it was almost nine and the darkening sky held the merest suggestion of light below the horizon.

In their suite they watched a news update before preparing for bed. Scientists at an observatory in California had discovered a new black hole in the galaxy, but a law suit followed when they couldn't decide which scientist had actually detected it first. A woman in Albuquerque, New Mexico had escaped a mental institution by hiding on a medicine cart, and was said to be wandering the desert aimlessly. They watched the news stories as though they had never heard such oddities before, commenting in disbelief. The everyday madness of America seemed magnified in their new, foreign surroundings. After switching off the television, Clarissa retired to her own room, climbed into bed and began to read her mystery novel she had purchased especially for the trip. Greg got into his bed and began to read a Miami newspaper. Clarissa found herself unable to get back into the mystery plot, every time she moved her eyes across the page she saw flocks of migrating birds. Besides she'd already figured out that the murderer was a man named Jacques, an archeologist in Belize. Her thoughts remained on the subject of migrating birds as she marveled that in the space of a few hours she had completed the same migratory route it took birds many weeks to fly. Finally, she turned off her bedside lamp and stared at the photographic mural of the Florida Keys on the opposite wall, which caught glimpses of

moonlight through the curtains.

"It must have been very nice to be at sea. You must miss it," she called softly to the other room, hoping Greg could hear her through the connecting bathroom.

"I enjoyed it greatly, and I have many fond memories. All my best friends were at sea in one way or another. People are different at sea. It opens them up. Sailors always find themselves confiding in each other for no reason."

"Perhaps it is for a reason. Because they get lonely or think about never going back to their homes," Clarissa replied.

"They also think about death all the time. It comes from too much stargazing and loneliness I suppose. But the loneliness grows on you."

"I can't imagine loneliness growing on anyone," Clarissa said. They were silent for several minutes. Clarissa had the urge to ask more about his loneliness, to compare it to her own, to ask about what he'd thought of death while lying in the belly of a boat listening to the boiler room all those years ago. But as she was framing her questions, she heard him fold his newspaper, switch off his lamp, and settle beneath the covers. In the darkness her questions no longer seemed urgent.

They arrived the next morning at the dock where their charter boat waited. The captain introduced himself as Merle, and the boat as Princess. He showed them around the small vessel and assigned them seats. They would be the only passengers, he said, as he climbed the ladder to the platform above. Moments later the engine started and they headed out toward the rising sun. The ocean was calm and blue. It was not different from the Lake, Clarissa thought, except for the strong smell of salt and fish. Clarissa could see various fishing vessels in the distance with clouds of sea gulls flying above them.

"So this is the ocean. What a massive thing it is."

Greg was standing by his seat, his eyes darting over the waves and onto the horizon.

"It's been so long since I've stood on a boat," he said,

smiling into the breeze.

"I imagine it becomes part of you," she said.

"I still hear the tide in Michigan, you know."

"It does seem like it would be lonely, but beautiful, too.

Really, quite beautiful."

After forty minutes or so, the engine ground to a halt and they saw that they were about fifty feet from a small rock island with a tiny sandy beach no longer than eight feet.

"Look," Clarissa cried, pointing to the swarm of birds above the island, "there must be some Michigan birds among that lot, surely."

The Captain appeared and asked them if they knew how to use a dinghy with an outboard motor. Greg told him that he'd been a sailor, and that he certainly could handle a small, rubber vessel. With that the Captain gave Greg a knowing nod and went to prepare the dinghy. Clarissa changed into her brand new swimsuit beneath deck and put on a sweat suit over the top. Greg had changed into a pair of gabardine shorts and a t-shirt when she came above.

They drove the dinghy quietly, so as not to alarm the birds. They idled in the shallows and were apparently not threatening to the indifferent birds flocking about among the rocks and trees of the small island. Perhaps many were fearless now that they had migrated, thought Clarissa. They pulled the dinghy onto the small beach landing. A group of birds landed in the waters behind them, and Clarissa thought that she saw a transformed loon, its gray fluff appearing just like Bernie had described it. Her excitement was visible.

"I'm going in the water to get a better look at that gray one. Does it seem like a loon to you, Greg?"

"I can't see and we forgot the damn binoculars. I'll run back and get them from the boat," he said.

"All right, but hurry."

Greg took the dinghy back into the water and idled through the carefree birds. Clarissa took off her sweat suit and waded slowly into the waters, staring at the suspected loon and then back at the swarming birds behind her. There was a din of calls and shrieks coming from the trees.

By the time she was up to her neck, the group of birds was fifteen feet away. The water was slightly cool and clear enough to see the yellow, sand bottom. Clarissa held her breath and dunked herself beneath the water, stirring up the sand with her fingertips. She could hear what she thought was the stirring of waves, or the motion of the tide--a quiet, whirring sound. She became aware of the breath being held inside herself, and of the fact that she was beneath the ocean and its undulating mass. Despite the sting, she opened her eyes and peered ahead. A shape of something darted before her, a grayish mass and somewhere in that gray shadow lay a red speck. It was, of course, a loon diving for fish, she confirmed to herself. The loon popped up from the deeper water and rejoined its group a few seconds later. She instantly wanted to tell Greg, who, she saw, was still on the boat looking for binoculars. The sand she stirred up at the bottom, she noticed, had somehow made its way into her swim suit. She dunked herself again, looked in the gray distance for a movement or a shadow, and began peeling off her swimsuit. It took some maneuvering--raising one leg at a time, balancing against the occasional shift of current or loose footing in the sand. At last she held her swim suit in her hand. She rinsed it clean when she returned above for air. Her body felt completely surrounded by the ocean as it cooled her bare skin, which was now free of sand and fabric. She crouched up to the tip of her chin in the water and called to Greg, hoping that the steady breeze would allow her words to reach him.

"We've found one," she called. He heard something, she could tell, but he threw up his arms in confusion. He came to the rails of the boat, looking in her direction.

"I'M SKINNY DIPPING," she hollered.

Raising one arm and remaining carefully crouched down to her chin, she waved the swimsuit in the air, from side to side, so that Greg could see. She laughed at herself wondering if he knew what she was trying to say or if she even knew what she meant by that elaborate gesture. Did Greg merely see her as an elderly,

naked swimmer waving in distress? Greg looked back at her then started hurriedly toward the back of the boat where the dinghy was tied. He stopped untying the small craft and came back to where he'd been standing. Placing both his arms at shoulder height, he began to move them, outstretched, slowly up and down, again and again. The Captain of the boat appeared behind him with his hands on his hips, seemingly curious, if not suspicious from Clarissa's vantage point. To Clarissa, Greg seemed as though he were mimicking a bird or an early aviation experimenter waiting to take off--willing himself into flight. Doubtless, she decided, this was some kind of navy signal, probably to tell her that he'd received her message that she was naked in the ocean.

*Father--
Going to Work*

Wes Beal

Waking,
your dreams fall scattered
like sleeping bodies
to be stepped over in whispers.
You step off the porch
tripping over autumn.
Leaves that tried to cling
to trees forever lie settled
in coppered heaps on the ground.
Behind you, against a back
drop of stars, thin gray smoke
rises from a chimney looking for heaven.
Over your head, a moth, in from the fields and covered
in dust, bangs against a light
and gets nowhere.

Going into Town

Wes Beal

Driving,
you turn on to a road
that seems
to be forgotten
by the maps,
except on Friday nights
when teenage sons
and daughters, crammed
inside a truck, make it fly over
the road half-paved
half-patched now left
to fade with the farms
and their fathers,
who working in the fields,
have felt their flesh
pinned beneath the sun
that burns against the skin
and the dirt into the dust
until at night
they can no longer
hold their children
home, who race across
those roads and trade
their stars
for fabricated lights.

Great-Grandfather Morrissey

Tarisa Matsumoto

John Patrick immigrated from Ireland--
Trudged through Boston in a cop's uniform,
Leo John forever at his side
Waiting to inherit his stubborn swagger.
The Depression hissed at empty pockets,
Crumbless tables, and the striking cops.
He crawled home on a cursed afternoon,
And Leo John came searching for him
In their rotting barn in the overgrown lea.
"Daddy?" He shuffled through the crackling hay
And saw the gun in the smooth, white hand,
The polished pistol he so admired,
The thick, velvet blood on the dusty ground.
John Patrick crumpled on the mangled hay;
Where Grandfather Leo John had found him.

At My Mother's House

Victoria Schlesinger

rats were my best friends,
lived in cages in our garage.
I dug them nests
under the ferns, or let them nap
on my shoulder
in the dark of my hair. That summer,

mine had babies.
Five sacs of spun pink. Silken larvae, smaller
than my thumb, claws the size of tiny seeds,
all wrapped in strips
of newspaper, oily shirts.
I lifted her up
to count, to be sure
of each new body, probe
her empty belly. That afternoon,

she ate them. All five.
Nothing was left,
but the matted blood around her mouth
and a stomach
swollen
for the second time. My brother
said she could smell me on her babies,
knew something had gone
terribly wrong,
turned sour,
a threat to the whole breed.

Smart mothers
know the scent
of rotten babies.

Francis

Annette McPeters

The town was ugly and dull beyond belief. By November the wind blew the fog in for good and the cold dug its winter trenches. Drafts squeezed in the edges of the window, whistled sordidly around Liska's oblong room. No accident. They were aimed precisely. They were mockery. Lewd reproach. What was she doing in the town anyway, taking courses, at her age?

She had no explanation for herself. If the accusation of failure she heard in the shrill wind was false, surely she would have succeeded at something by now. Somewhere in the world, with someone. The long rectangle of glass reached almost to the floor, opened inside like a door. Each room in the five-floor residence had one of these windows to nowhere, each blocked outside by waist-high iron railings. Perhaps the building plans had called for small balconies, but money ran short. Maybe glass was cheaper than concrete. The whole thing, in any case, was badly put together, with cracks and gaps along the casings. The only way to stop the whistling was to open the window wide and brave the icy flow. At night, Liska did, staring out at dark monotony until the cold numbed her to all sound and she could sleep.

Wars had flattened the town repeatedly over the last century. What stood now seemed designed by someone betting the new version wouldn't last long either, so why bother with beauty or for that matter, durability? Everything beyond the plaza holding the old cathedral was laid out geometrically. No curves or bends, no nooks, no variety or charm. Shopping complexes, schools, apartment blocks, gymnasiums, all were similarly shaped deposits of dirtied concrete. The buildings looked like cereal boxes stripped of color and gimmick, their roofs flat as the surrounding

countryside. Wind ricocheted like a bullet causing multiple entry wounds and the sky with its eternal cloud cover pressed low and ponderous. It made Liska feel hunched over.

The windows of the town's bars and cafes were sealed with the opaque kind of glass ordinarily used on shower doors. Right after arriving, Liska had ventured into a couple. Ignorant daring. The patrons were exclusively male and she suffered the same flush of shame as the time she'd gone into a men's bathroom by mistake, age eleven. No refuge or warmth for her there.

After classes, she took the bus back to her fourth floor room at the women's residence. She was in b-10. Always these snide ironies. Bombs and bombers. She'd dropped into town from above, an agent of destruction. Her own destruction, most likely. Still she was determined to finish the course of study. She bore loneliness with a certain stoicism. Dropping out would be too hard to explain to family and the few friends left behind. They'd see it as another failure, one more manifestation of irresolution. Do something productive, they said. Just do it, they said. Stop moaning, they said.

She did have a sort of friend, the woman two doors down in b-14. They'd met in the so-called kitchen at the end of the hall, a room with a two-burner hot plate and a sink. The woman was from Ecuador. She packed withered tea leaves into a perforated, silver ball and said she'd learned to read faces from her grandmother. She scrutinized Liska's face. It was divided, she said, the left and right sides distinct.

"Isn't everyone's that way?" Liska asked.

Somewhat, the face reader said, but Liska's face was extreme. A divided face like hers meant an event would come to split the bearer's life in irremediable halves. Perhaps something like that had already happened?

Liska said no. She hoped not. She thought it was a bunch of mumbo-jumbo, but she liked having something to look forward to. If her life split in halves, perhaps the next half would be more satisfactory.

Before leaving the kitchen, the face reader offered a

further clue. "Maybe you're going to fall in love," she said.

"Not in this town," Liska said. The face reader laughed. She seemed to understand. Now when Liska and the face reader passed in the hall the face reader always said, "Anything?"

Liska was living off a small inheritance which had to last her through the year. So little else to do besides study, she amused herself with budget games. There were days of feast when she allowed herself treats. Goose liver spread, a jar of mussels in spiced brine, a bottle of local wine. Something exotic from the pharmacy. Seaweed wrinkle cream. She smirked at her reflection as she rubbed the ointment around her eyes. As if anyone would notice whether she had wrinkles or not.

Days of moderation meant bread, cheese, instant coffee or, worse still, the institute cafeteria with its throngs of younger students pressed in line, chattering. But Liska's budget calculations were sloppy at best, and the currency exchange had worsened. Days of famine lay ahead. She would have to find new games. There were so few options, given the town, the weather, her temperament. You could only pluck your eyebrows and write letters home so often. If you wrote too often people grew suspicious and stopped writing back.

Her eyebrows were all but gone one night when she met the face reader in the stairwell. She invited Liska back to her room for tea and Liska accepted, feeling churlish. A professor had ridiculed her accent in class that day. Learning a language at her age was like having unanesthetized plastic surgery done on a worn but acceptable face to render it newly peculiar.

Liska sat on the face reader's bed. "I despise this town," she said, speaking loudly to be heard above the thin shrieks of wind circulating in the room. "It's funny how much I hate it, and yet I can't leave. I feel I'm meant to be here."

The face reader agreed. "Very little seems real here, so prefabricated. Tricky, too. Full of nasty little surprises. The cathedral, for example." Sighing and stepping close, the face

reader put her hand over first the left then the right side of Liska's face. She looked puzzled and amused, then laughed abruptly. "Anyway, I'm only here because my father wanted to keep me out of trouble. Away from someone, you know."

Liska nodded. "Why did you say that about the cathedral?"

The face reader went to her window to nowhere, opened it and beat her arms in the filtering fog. She leaned so far over the railing that Liska gasped. "Sometimes," the face reader called, "I can see the spires from here." She pulled herself back inside and told Liska the story of the cathedral, how it was one of the only things in town spared total destruction during the series of wars. Some bombs had fallen on it in the most recent war, crumbling much of its facade. A facelift was applied. Only experts could tell the difference now, the work was so nearly perfect. Attention had been given to making the restored portions look as old and weathered as the original ones. It was no jewel, but amongst such makeshift and squalid surroundings, it stood out.

"If you take the tour of the cathedral," said the face reader, "hang back from the group and go up to the triforium. It's closed to the public because supposedly it can't support the weight of humans anymore. But I've been up there. It's full of fragments loosed by the bombs, including gargoyles with hard jets of mortar spewing out of the holes where their mouths opened."

"Sounds horrible," Liska said.

"It is." The face reader slammed shut her window and the whistling began again. "If you lived here long enough," she said, "you'd begin to wish the bombers would come back and level the whole place."

"That would be one solution," Liska conceded. She finished her tea and retreated to her room to study. Was it friendship, this perverse amusement she found in the face reader's company? If so, it was not the kind Liska was used to with the girls from her home, the women from her old office. The Ecuadorian seemed to be making some unspoken, risky demand, which because they were both lonely, Liska was

supposed to intuit. She didn't, however. The woman was beginning to scare her.

On waking the next morning Liska pulled back her curtains and saw the fog had partially cleared to reveal a distant white dime of winter sun. Towards town, she could just make out a cathedral spire. As she made her way to classes and shops, she sensed the cathedral's lurking presence. At odd moments, it thrust itself into view. She had found her new game. Despite the town's flatness, or more likely because of it, the cathedral was visible from very few places at random. If the ailing sun shuddered off the fog for a moment and she glimpsed a turret or columns or a bas relief of saints and kings, it was a good day and she felt consoled, part of a conspiracy. She knew it was weird. Only children and fools get away clean with extravagant games about sublime flukes. But no one ever need know. Besides, it was better than drinking too much or picking up a man just to pass the time.

Terrible weather besieged the town later that month. Walking to class through cutting fog, Liska missed the cathedral like a lover. The residence emptied for semester break, the animated young women, the dour maids, even the maintenance men gone home, and it took all the stubbornness of her nature to keep from simply opening the window to nowhere and jumping. The door to b-14 was sometimes cracked open, but she was avoiding the face reader, who had become slovenly and smelled bad. At night Liska heard her muttering in the hall on the way to fix her eternal tea. One afternoon Liska escaped the residence and walked to town through mist-like razored lace. She might take the cathedral tour now, if it didn't cost too much.

She stopped first in the cafe across the square for coffee. Tourist buses unloaded a crowd which hurried to contemplate the faces of saints carved deep in portals and gape up the cathedral's central vault. Then the tourists converged on the cafe, speaking the language of a neighboring country, one of the countries that had bombed the town and damaged the cathedral during the series of wars. Perhaps they were on a pilgrimage of expiation. Perhaps they were all

very sorry. No. From what Liska could understand of their conversations they were not much impressed by the cathedral. Yesterday's cathedral had been much nicer. Why, the cathedral in their own home town had more to offer than this one. This cathedral couldn't hold a candle to one someone had visited in a province to the east. This cathedral wasn't even real, was it? A man quoted from a tourist brochure: reconstructed, restored, a replica, he sneered. Liska supposed it was admirable to be scornful of fake things, but what if they were the only beautiful things available?

Another fleet of buses pulled into the square and when the tourists disembarked, Liska joined them to enter the cathedral. She hung back, as the face reader had suggested, slipped through a side door and tread up stone steps to the triforium, a blind arcade above the cathedral's nave. It was pitch black, and Liska put out her hands for orientation. She followed the back wall until her legs bumped rough objects. Her eyes adjusted to the triforium's dimness, and she saw the ruined gargoyles and other dusty pieces of the cathedral's original facade piled in the corners. Perhaps the broken pieces were considered too inflammatory, too painful to see or consider, but hiding the evidence of past damage made little sense when the brochure plainly stated the cathedral had been restored. Who would be fooled or edified?

Liska left the triforium and rejoined the throng below for the rest of the tour. In the end, the triforium's cache was more interesting than the other sections of the cathedral, original or restored. The gargoyles weren't romantically attractive like statues ruined by time, but there was a troubling beauty in them nonetheless. Liska wasn't sure what such a phenomenon implied or why the face reader had recommended the hidden evidence to her. The tourist bunch seemed pleased enough with their tour, oohing when the guide paused in his recitation. Most people, Liska decided, don't care if a thing is fake, so long as it is beautiful. Their hunger for beauty is greater than their desire for truth.

Evening was closing in as the tourists exited the cathedral and trotted for the rumbling buses. Liska returned

to the cafe, recklessly depressed and wanting a drink. Two men in black clothes played guitars and sang for a few dinner patrons in a back room. Liska had read about the gypsy families in the local paper. They arrived every year in camper caravans and set up shop on the outskirts of town. Though they claimed to be doers of odd jobs, in reality they ran gambling scams, sold contraband liquor and engaged in petty thievery, the paper said. The two singers seemed harmless enough, strumming on banged-up guitars and stamping booted feet as they wailed about love in dialect stewed from Romance tongues thickened with Hindi.

Liska decided to splurge on supper out, a last day of feast, knowing she was asking for annoyance. The younger gypsy tried to sing to her in the international language of Frank Sinatra as she ate, though he improvised lyrics, singing "Strangers in the night, exchanging glances, strangers in the night, my name is Francis."

Liska closed her eyes and held onto her face as if it might fly off. Birds or balloons or confetti--bright things whirled inside her head. She had not forgotten how to laugh after all. When she opened her eyes Francis was sitting across the table from her. "You should laugh more often," he said. He lit a stubby cigarette and ordered himself coffee. He was short, with a baby face under dense sprigs of black hair. He looked moist and agitated.

"I've been sleeping in my car," the gypsy said. "The others have thrown me out because I don't bring in enough money. It's not my fault. No one goes to the cafes in this town. In the summer when we're in the south, I'm covered in money every night."

The second gypsy had disappeared and the cafe waiters were turning chairs upside down on the tables. Liska paid for her food. "Goodbye," she said to the gypsy, "I don't have any money to tip you."

"Can't you see I don't care about that," he replied, following her out. "Let me sleep on your floor. My car is missing a window. I'm nearly freezing to death each night."

The gypsy led Liska to a low vehicle under the

streetlight by the curb. The license plate on the car's tail looked funny, and as she approached Liska saw it was made of cardboard with crudely-painted letters and numbers. A policeman would see through the deception in a 20th century second. Liska shivered.

She got into the gypsy's car and said, "You can sleep on my floor tonight, but that's all."

The woman's residence had no rules forbidding visitors. Liska walked past the holiday replacement desk clerk with Francis, who said his name was actually Diego. In her room, Diego asked for a drink, and Liska brought from the closet the bottle of brandy usually reserved for days of menstrual cramps. She poured liquor in her coffee cup and the rinsing glass that held her toothbrush. Diego took the coffee cup and hopped on the radiator in the corner opposite the window to nowhere. Nervous now, Liska slugged down her brandy and talked about the strange windows, moving into complaints about the perpetual fog, the town in general. She opened the closet door to refill the tooth glass and when she turned back Diego was undressing.

"I'm soft as a mutton," he said, grinning as he held a small fold of fat out from his sides. Liska busied herself putting blankets and pillows on the floor, though she knew Diego wasn't preparing to sleep. He was naked when she next looked and uncircumcised.

She had known this would happen, of course, that he'd want to have sex. Known she'd probably go along. She couldn't help but stare at his penis as she undressed, a novelty item in its soft authenticity. It behaved, however, along the same lines as the recrafted versions she'd encountered in the past. When she made it clear there would be no intercourse, since there were no condoms, Diego didn't object. They lay side by side and pleased each other with their hands. It was good to be touched after so long. It was quick, and the loud clamor of the wind pressing in around the window helped cover the embarrassing little noises of desire.

Afterwards, Liska reached to rub something from her

eye, but Diego cautioned her not to touch them until she'd washed her hands. Microbes, he said. Apparently there were risks in human contact even Liska hadn't heard about. She washed, dressed, and lay on the bed wrapped in her winter coat, for she'd given Diego all the blankets. He relieved himself in her sink, put on his underwear and went back to his post on the radiator. He lit a cigarette and Liska asked him to open the window.

"Don't like smoke?" Diego asked.

"I just hate the sound of wind coming through those damn cracks. I hate it even worse than the cold."

"I can stand anything but the dark," Diego said, and he proceeded to tell Liska a story about fear. His family was living in an abandoned house when he was little, and late at night he'd woken in the complete dark, terrified. He'd sprung from the floor in a sort of trance and smashed his hand through a pane of glass. The moon was the only light for miles, and he was trying to grab it. "Look," Diego said, "I still have the marks." He came to the bed and showed Liska a ladder of scars down one forearm.

"There's no moon in this town," Liska said. "The fog has dissolved it."

"I have to sleep with the light on," Diego said. "Do you mind?"

Liska said no. When Diego finished smoking, he closed the window to nowhere and lay down on the blankets. Liska closed her eyes and studied the imprint of the bare bulb penetrating her eyelids. Drifting into sleep, Liska heard shuffling and whispering in the hall, the snide references of the infernal wind. Diego began to snore.

The next morning when Liska awoke the room was frigid, the window to nowhere was open, as were her desk drawers, and Diego was gone. She knew her passport would be missing before she searched. The bottle of brandy had also disappeared. As she closed the window she saw flashing lights below. Three police cars and an ambulance formed a flashing diamond in the residence parking lot. Liska sprinted down to the lobby on the adrenaline of dread, thinking Diego had

been apprehended. "What's happened?" she asked the temporary clerk who stood by the front door of the building.

"Someone's fallen," he said.

"Who?"

"A girl from Ecuador. Level b."

Liska pushed through the door and advanced as far as the police would let her. Paramedics were lifting the blanketed stretcher into the ambulance. The ambulance left, no siren necessary, and a small crowd of residents from nearby buildings dispersed, bathrobes wafting off in the morning gloom.

The residence caretaker waited in a garden space and Liska saw him raise his fist to the building's glass and concrete wall, curse the stupid whim of whomever had designed the windows to nowhere and ineffectual railings. There was a mess to clean up. This holiday was spoiled.

Later two policemen came to Liska's room to question her. Had she heard anything unusual on level b the night before? Liska said she'd slept very soundly, relieved at not having to lie. What about the woman in b-14? Did she know of a reason the woman might commit suicide?

"She wasn't very happy here," Liska replied. "The noise of the wind drove her nuts, but I never thought she would kill herself."

Liska called the police back as they left. They turned with sly, optimistic faces as if expecting a confession.

"What should I do about a lost passport?"

Annoyed, the police ordered her to address herself to her embassy in the capital as soon as possible or risk deportation.

Liska closed her door and pressed her hands hard into her face. It would be futile, after all, to report the theft. The passport was gone for good, receding like the half of her life the face reader had predicted would split away one day. Besides, Liska didn't want Diego caught. She was sure the Liska in the passport would have an immensely adventurous life at his side.

When the policemen's footsteps ceased to echo in the

stairwell she released her laughter. How horribly funny. The face reader's fate must have gotten tangled up with hers--switched circuits, numbers fatally transposed in a top-secret but poorly-edited document. Now, if the gypsy and the face reader had come together, with their talents, that would have made sense. They would have been covered in money every night.

After New Year's the residence filled up again, and the story of the depressed woman who had jumped to her death over the holidays circulated in tandem with the January cold. Liska withdrew from school, closed forever her window to nowhere, and with the last of her money bought a ticket for the capital. She sat in an empty third-class compartment waiting to start the journey home.

Anything yet? the face reader always asked, as if there was some indispensable asset Liska had been sent to acquire in the ugly town. Yes, anything, Liska thought she might answer now. A spear of light on damaged stone, for example. Things hard, things soft, things altered by malice or desire. Anything would do, really, even a story built of lies, if the lies were beautiful enough. But be advised. There was so little beauty left to go around that whatever you managed to get might well be at someone else's expense.

Take it anyway, Liska said to no one.

As the train pulled out of town she saw spires shifting forward behind the concrete facades of the present. The cathedral seemed to be traveling with her, an enormous souvenir.

Dead Wood

J. Catherine Freise

Attached to a tree,
this twig was flexible, tender and green.
It had stretched and pushed itself out
until it was long, slender and thin.

Frayed edges left ragged by a dull saw blade
record the place where the tree was cut off.
Fragmented, frozen,
a three-dimensional line
clutched and carried from the place of its birth.

Stripped of its bark, it lies naked: white, smooth and
iridescent.

Scores of teeth marks engraved in the flesh.
Pin-hole indentations grown brown with decay

possible extensions stripped off with the bark.

Chiaroscuro

after Anselm Kiefer

Daniel Locke

Densely mapled,
Coral-barked swale,
Night watches.
Alone, frail woman,
Barefoot boldly,
Whitely clad,
Paces, flaming
Branch upheld:
Lighting the bark
Bloodless reds.
No search, her task
Her own, to light
A dusky forest
Not for stray bowman
Or fey calf, just
To light the murk.

Pietro's Intermezzo

Jonathan Small

There is so much that I must tell Her
Before she leaves, Eastward
To begin anew where
Nobody lived and Nobody died
With her buzzing fly and carriage
Carefully filled with Immortality.

* * *

This is our last afternoon
Of a summer that has been reduced to
A faded yellow, with wrinkles around the edges
And she has come to say good-bye

She looks very lovely
With her dark eyes and pale skin
As she sits upon my bed
In her almost tense, haphazard way,
With her self-assured floral printed skirt
And the awkwardness of the conversation
That seems to mimic the creases in the bed-spread

There is so much to say
But no sound way of saying it
And we listen to the afternoon die
Throwing quick glances at one another

I can't remember who thought of it
It just happened instinctively--
An old habit of Pietro's Intermezzo
That we often listened to together:

A soft beginning, tinged with sadness
That reminds you of someone very far away
Climbing slowly, slowly up to a resplendent peak
Of consummate emotion with its simple F-scale
That lapses slowly into nothing, just as it began.
I played it because I didn't want her to leave.

* * *

And I returned after the inevitable
To the almost silence of absence
Made more comfortable
By Pietro's Intermezzo
In the afternoon's shadows.

Scranton X-mas Blues

Chris McCreary

Broken-down steeltown
with no more coal
or railroads
got a new mall,
then some new strip bars
and adult bookstores
to share the prosperity.
There's always this
50-foot tall plaster snowman
in the courthouse square
who used to recite
prerecorded X-mas greetings
when you came near him,

and we used to get high
and dance around him
for hours. He hasn't
had much to say
for the last three or four
years, though.

If I could afford it,
I'd send my friends
and relatives
those boxes
from Pepperidge Farms
along with a note saying,
"I love you so much!
Here, have a cheese log,
have some pepperoni
and sausage, I've even
enclosed some fudge!
Here's to your fucking health!"
Instead, all I can afford
is some generic smokes
and a case of Schlitz.

At Midnight Mass
to hear my sister sing
in the high school choir.
Hours before, she cried
because she didn't
get enough presents.
Surrounded by people
that I hated in high school,
doing our damndest
not to make eye contact.
This, then, is my penance,
Lord, burning in hell here,
surrounded by all of these
other hypocrites, crammed
into these neat, little rows.

Diner Talk

Paul Busenitz

--And this beautiful diamelle-studded, 14 karat gold-plated ring can be yours for only forty-nine dollars!" the man in the TV said. "Did you hear me? Only forty-nine dollars!"

"Yes, Bob," Nick McQuade said from his easy chair in the middle of the dark apartment. "Yes, I heard you." He took a drag from his cigarette, knocked some of the textbooks off of the coffee table next to him and flicked his ashes into an empty beer can. The home-shopping show, Nick thought. Dial-a-porn for old women and wives without cars.

Nicholas McQuade lived in a small apartment in what used to be the attic of an old house. It was a Bob Villa nightmare, Nick always thought, but nothing to complain about. The low rent and nearness to campus outweighed any other domestic problems. Nick often thought of the words of wisdom his landlady had imparted to him on the day he moved in. Roaches scatter when the lights turn on.

Although never immaculate, he always managed to keep his dwelling "livable," as his Aunt Shalene would put it. Livable, but not quite presentable. Nick squinted around the room at the aftermath of the intense discussion that he had been through with his former, weekend live-in/girlfriend the previous evening. He decided that the apartment had seen better days.

"I'm taking everything that I think is mine," Tamara had said. The battle had raged for three hours, and she wasn't about to leave without consolation prizes.

In the corner of the room on his bed Nick noticed something round-looking and black. After the flash-shadows from the TV light had cleared from his eyes, he realized what it was. He took a deep breath and looked back at the TV.

"She takes nearly everything . . . but she leaves the cat." Eventually he chuckled. "Unbelievable."

Nick heard the rain tap-dancing against the roof.

Felicia Walker opened her eyes and noticed the drops of water streaking down her window. She sat up in bed and sighed. "Mornings," she mumbled and thought of that elevator tune about rainy days and Mondays.

She looked at the man lying next to her in bed. His body was concealed by the covers that he had stolen during the course of the evening. Felicia thought that was a good thing. The man was a professor of English, and so was Felicia. Seemed fitting, she had thought. They always say misery loves company. Felicia smiled. Hating her job had become such a cliché. She glanced at the clock next to the bed. It read 7:45 am. Plenty of time, she thought, to close my eyes for a little more rest. Although she wasn't, Felicia couldn't help but feel alone.

"It's just too early for this," Nick said as he watched some woman on the television praise the tackiest ring he had ever encountered. "Come here you little shit," Nick said as he laid the plate of old tuna on the floor, then reached into a drawer and grabbed a spoon for the cereal he had just poured.

Nick was about to sit down when he saw the telephone lying off-the-hook on the floor. He looked at the cat who was intently smelling, but not eating the tuna. "I should probably call her, shouldn't I?"

The cat didn't answer. Nick scooped up his first bite of Super Sugar Crisp before he finally answered himself. "Yeah, I should call her."

The phone rang four times before the machine picked it up. A glib, female voice answered. "Hello, this is Holli and Tamara's place. We're not here right now but if you leave us a message and tell us who you are, we might call you back . . . maybe (giggle). Bye-bye." BEEP.

He paused for a second, collecting his thoughts. "Hello, Tamara? This is Nick. You probably don't want to talk to me right now but I think it's very important that--"

He stopped talking when someone answered the phone.

"Nick, this is Tamara," she started. Her voice sounded shaky. "I don't want to talk to you."

Nick thought for a moment. "Then why did you pick up the phone?"

"Because . . . I wanted to tell you I didn't want to talk to you."

That makes sense, Nick thought. He went on anyway. "We said some pretty nasty things last night, Tam--"

--You," she interrupted. "You practically told me you didn't want to see me anymore."

He shook his head. "I only said I didn't think you should stay over so much. I need my space." He smacked himself in the forehead with the phone for saying something so corny.

"That's not good enough, Nick," she started. "I gave a lot up for you and you treat me like I'm an inconvenience. I should never have let you take me home that night, but since two of my tires were mysteriously flat--"

He shrugged in defense. "You're still have delusions about that? Do you really think that I would stoop so low as to let--" He stopped himself when he noticed that the bowl of tuna had been left untouched and that the cat was lapping the milk out of his cereal bowl. "Hey," he yelled as he hurled an empty beer can at the table, "that's my breakfast!"

"Company already, Nick?" she asked with a hurt voice.

"No, no. It's the cat!" Nick said defensively as the animal ran under the table. "It's your cat and you left it here. I would greatly appreciate it if you would take it far away from me as soon as possible."

Her voice was quieter now. "That cat was a gift from you. You paid for it. It's your cat now. Besides, it would hurt me to look at anything that you bought."

Nick smacked his hand on his forehead for her saying something so corny. "Well, you sure weren't writhing in pain when you took the rest of my worldly possessions."

She sobbed. "You've made it very clear just how you feel about me. Well, let me tell you. You can just go to--"

"Oh, hell. I'm going to be late," Felicia said as she

jumped out of bed and headed for the bathroom. The man next to her grunted and then spread himself out across the entire bed.

When she got into the shower she leaned against the wall and let the water massage her back and neck. She started to hum and then sing "Rainy days and Mondays always get me down . . ."

As she walked past the bed to her desk, she noticed that the man in her bed was still sleeping. Felicia sighed and started stuffing papers from her desk into her bag. She picked one up in particular and looked at the title page. "A Hot Night in L.A."

Nick noticed the manuscript lying on his desk. "Oh, shit, he said. "Not today." He rummaged through his bookbag until he found a crumpled class syllabus that read, ENG 500--Creative Writing. Felicia Walker, Instructor. He looked down at the agenda for Monday, May 2. It read, "In-class reviews of short story second-drafts." The date was circled and Nick could barely make out his own name scribbled off to the side. Nick looked back to his story. "Today's the day."

As he walked to the bathroom, he stopped to look at the black cat eating his breakfast. There sat the only tangible thing left from his doomed relationship with Tamara. He leaned over and picked it up by the scruff of its neck. Nick shook his head at the limp animal in his hand. "I know you, don't I? You've been crossing my path for years." He dropped the cat down and resumed his path to the bathroom. "Oh, hell. If I have to be unlucky I might as well be consistent."

2

This was a perfect rain, Nick thought as he walked down the sidewalk towards campus. It was a humid shower, not a cold one. Perfect for walking. He lit up a cigarette.

Felicia Walker was a closet smoker, and like most closet smokers, she smoked in the car on the way to work with plenty of Dentyne on hand for camouflaging purposes. She

turned the ignition of her GEO Storm, pushed in her car lighter and drove rather speedily out of her apartment-complex parking lot.

Felicia looked at her watch and knew she was going to be late.

8:20, his watch read. "Perfect," Nick said as he reached the edge of campus. He flicked his cigarette butt into the gutter. As he walked along he noticed there weren't many people on their way to class. Being this close to summer, going to class when there wasn't a test was like going to church when it wasn't Easter or Christmas. It just didn't happen very often.

Nick laughed when he saw a little Oriental man jump for his life after nearly being run down by a GEO Storm in the staff parking lot.

As she pulled into the parking lot Felicia realized she had forgotten her umbrella. "Damn," she said as she looked in the rear-view mirror to see if the little Oriental man was all right. She opened her window a crack and threw out her half-smoked cigarette.

When he reached the sidewalk, Nick immediately noticed the woman walking in front of him. After a whole semester of walking to class at this particular time, he thought it was strange that he had never seen this girl before. He knew that he would have noticed her.

Nick shook his head and sighed when he realized he was looking at his professor, Ms. Felicia Walker. After admiring her walk for a moment, he sped up his pace until he was nearly beside her.

"Good morning," he said with a smile.

She looked at him for a second and returned a vague smile. "Good morning, Mr. McQuade."

Nick sensed the bad mood she was in. He looked at his watch. "Tsk, tsk. You're late, teach," he said with a smirk.

“No apple for you.”

She didn't even look at him. “Apples are for grade-school teachers and corny jokes are for high-school students, Mr. McQuade.”

They walked up the steps towards the doors. Nick walked ahead and stood in front of them, blocking her entrance. “You know, you can call me Nick.”

“Using first names can be misinterpreted with certain students, Mr. McQuade.”

“Call me Nick,” he said as he opened the door for her. She sighed and walked in shaking her head. After she was by, he chuckled to himself.

When Nick walked into the classroom everyone was already seated and Felicia was starting to arrange the papers on her desk. It was a small room and a small class of about fifteen students. Nick walked through an aisle and took his normal seat towards the middle of the room. When he sat down the student sitting next to him tapped him on the shoulder and leaned towards him.

“You're Nick, right?” he asked quietly.

Nick nodded.

“I read your story last night,” he said. “It was great. It could be a movie or something.”

Nick smiled. “Thanks, man.” He opened up his book bag and pulled out his story and the two others that were to be reviewed today. That compliment had only succeeded in adding to his anxiety of what she would think. He really couldn't care less what the guy next to him thought.

Felicia Walker was beautiful, Nick thought. She looked so young to him. She couldn't have been over twenty-five. He often wondered why her opinion mattered so much to him. He didn't know whether it was the fact that she was able to teach college-level at such a young age, or that she didn't take any of his shit. Probably a mixture of both. Nick didn't feel he would have any trouble impressing her after reading the other stories.

Felicia didn't mind the stories all too much. As she warned her students to enter at their own risk, most of them

had stayed in the wading pool where they belonged with simple characters and storylines that they knew about. Then there was Nick.

"Mr. McQuade's story is next," she said as she pulled it from her desk.

Nick smiled to himself. After reading the emotional vomit submitted by his fellow students, he didn't feel it was necessary to open the flood-gates of his heart in this particular piece of prose. Nick didn't understand why fiction had to be so damn serious.

"A Hot Night in L.A.," she read aloud from the title page. It looked for a moment as though she held back a smile. "This . . . is a detective story." Felicia leaned over her desk and thumbed through the manuscript. "Let's go over the premise, quickly, shall we? This is about an L.A. detective--" She stopped to look at a certain page. "This detective is hired by a woman . . ." She read from the page. "'She slid into my office like a six-pack of broken promises.' "

Nick looked down at his desk as she read. He could hardly contain the smile on his face. He didn't know why he was smiling--whether it was pride or just hearing his words spoken by someone else.

When she finished, Felicia looked at the manuscript for what seemed to Nick to be a long while. "Did you find it believable?" she asked the class.

The smiling boy next to him was about to open his mouth when she answered her own question. "I didn't either," she said. "The characters were one-dimensional and the plot was faulty."

Nick shrank back in his chair. I know we all decided to be candid about our reviews, he thought, but let's not go overboard. Finally the cavalry, he thought when Ms. Walker pointed to the guy next to him.

"I think I'll have to agree with you, Ms. Walker," he started.

Nick's mouth dropped open.

"This is a little unbelievable," he continued. "These are the bad parts of every Bogart movie ever made."

Other people in the class laughed. Nick folded his arms and just looked at his desk. Turncoats, he thought, as the other class members joined in on the roast.

After about ten minutes Felicia figured that she should let the victim defend himself. She had been wondering just how she would go about doing that. "Mr. McQuade," she started, "Why a detective story? Do you know any detectives?" Nick thought about opening the family closet and telling about the sweaty man his Aunt Shalene had hired to follow her philandering husband, but then decided against it. "Actually, no . . . but does that really matter?"

"Does it matter?" she repeated. "Mr. McQuade, you could write me a story about a small-town preacher who gets naked and dances around a fire by the light of the full moon, but I probably won't believe it unless you have a common frame of reference."

Naked preachers, Nick thought. You've got a kinky streak in you, Ms. Walker.

Felicia stood from the desk and started walking around in front of it. She looked as though she were searching for words. "It seems . . . contrived. I just don't believe it."

Nick smiled at her cynically. "I hate to make you feel silly, Ms. Walker, but . . . it's all contrived. It's fiction."

The rest of the class laughed. Felicia smiled and sat down on the edge of her desk. "If you don't know your characters, it shows. It looks fake to your readers. You have to write what you know, Mr. McQuade."

She walked over to him and laid the ink-ridden manuscript on his desk.

Nick made sure he caught her after class. "Ms. Walker!"

She stopped on the sidewalk and looked back. When she saw it was Nick who had called for her, she kept walking. Nick stopped jogging when he was next to her. "Ms. Walker, I'd--"

"My office hours are on the syllabus, Mr. McQuade." Nick shook his head. "Did you miss the shit they taught about positive reinforcement or something? Because you

have been nothing but rude to me since I started your class.”

“You’re in my first class of the day,” she said, still looking ahead. “Flirting isn’t acceptable in the morning.”

“When is it, then?” he asked sarcastically.

She stopped, and for the first time in the conversation looked him in the eyes. “I’m sorry if you don’t agree with my review, but that’s just the way it is and there’s nothing I can do about it.”

Nick nodded in understanding. “Well, what do you want me to do about it?”

“Look in your syllabus,” she said, and started walking again. “Re-writes are due Wednesday.”

3

“Felicia, you’re being foolish,” Ben Cooper said as he pushed his pencil into the automatic sharpener.

Felicia closed her book and looked across the room of empty desks. “Ben, I am not being foolish, and don’t talk to me like that.”

Ben Cooper was in his mid-thirties. He was tall, his hair was dark and his forehead seemed to have grown two inches since she had met him. He chuckled. “Living together is the next obvious step in this relationship. Look, I’m not talking about marriage. I just want--”

“--a steady piece of ass?” she interjected, and then regretted it.

His mouth opened slightly. He looked around to verify that the room was still empty. “You sound like one of the students, and you’re being utterly ridiculous about the whole thing.”

She hit her hand lightly against the book and threw her head back. “Don’t call me ridiculous.” And I’m as young as some students, she thought. “I don’t need a roommate, Ben. I’m not sure what I need.” She began to massage her temples.

Ben Cooper got up, walked across the room and kissed her on the top of the head. “That’s what you’ve got me for.”

With her eyes closed Felicia pictured her pencil sticking in the side of Ben’s neck. It brought a smile to her face.

Ben saw the smile. "That's what I thought," he said as he grabbed his keys from his pocket and headed for the door. He stopped himself and turned back in. "Hank Belding had invited us to a little, end-of-the-year, faculty get-together tonight at his place. I told him we'd go."

"I can't," she said, pointing to her desk. "These stories have to be critiqued by tomorrow."

"Grading?" he said. "Don't be ridiculous."

Her knuckles popped as she clenched her pencil.

Nick leaned back in his chair as he held the phone to his ear. His pencil lay dormant over a blank piece of paper. He propped his feet on his desk. "I told you, man. I'm not going out tonight. I got shit to do."

"With your grammar, I wouldn't doubt it," said the voice over the phone.

"Ha ha," Nick laughed sarcastically. "I'm serious, man. I have to rewrite this entire story by Wednesday."

Nick held up the copy of his story that Ms. Walker had given to him. It looked as though it had been bleeding red ink. "I can't do that, man. Not this time."

"Yeah, whatever," the voice over the phone said. "Maybe it's better you don't go out. I hear your old lady has her big brother after your ass."

Nick laughed. "I don't sweat that guy, and she's not my old lady."

"Isn't he a football player, Nick?"

"It doesn't matter. I won't be there anyway."

"Oh, you'll be there--"

Nick shook his head as he pulled the receiver away from his ear. He still heard the voice. "You'll be there."

"There is no way I'm going to get these stupid things done here," Felicia said to herself as she looked around her office. It was more like a big room with a lot of desks where they put all the professors who weren't tenured. Not very conducive to grading, she always thought.

She looked at the phone on her desk for a moment and

then picked it up and dialed Ben's number. Ben Cooper picked up on the second ring. "Hello," he said, but to her it sounded like, 'yello.' That always annoyed her.

"Ben, it's me. I--"

"--Felicia, where the hell are you? We should be on the way to Belding's by now."

She closed her eyes when she spoke, and spoke quietly when she did. "I'm still in the office."

"The office!" he yelled. "Honey, I told you about tonight. What am I to tell everyone?"

"Tell them I'm doing my job," she said, rather sharply.

"What is that supposed to mean?" he asked after a short pause. When she didn't answer he went on. His voice had become very cold. "I think you forget if it weren't for me you wouldn't have a job, Felicia."

She saw red for a split-second, then it disappeared. She calmed herself. "Just what are you trying to say, Ben?"

"You know where Hank lives," Ben Cooper said. His voice was in its normal, flat tone. "I'll expect you there in half an hour."

"I can't," was all she could force herself to say.

"Felicia," he said sternly, as though he were scolding. She heard him take a deep breath. "I'll see you then." CLICK.

Felicia held the receiver in her hand and once again felt alone.

"That's it," Nick said to himself, or perhaps to the black cat who was cleaning itself on his bed. "That's all I can take." He threw his pencil onto the desk and grabbed for a cigarette. "I definitely need atmosphere for this writing stuff."

"Screw this," Felicia said as she leaned back and rubbed her eyes. She looked around at all the empty desks. "This is depressing." She stood up and decided it was okay to smoke since no one was watching. After pulling a cigarette from the pack in her purse, she scrounged over the desk of a colleague, an admitted smoker, for a light. The back of a matchbook caught her eye. She smiled.

“Milton’s Diner,” Nick said to himself as he stuffed his manuscript into his weather-worn bookbag. “Now that’s atmosphere.”

He grabbed his keys and looked at the cat who was now asleep on his bed. “Hold down the fort for me, will you?” The cat twitched its whiskers in response as Nick slammed the door behind him.

4

Milton’s Diner.

Nice, Nick thought as he sipped from his coffee.

“Anything to eat?”

Nick looked up to the elderly waitress in front of him with order pad in hand. “No, thanks,” he said after a moment of thought. “Just keep the coffee coming.”

This was only the third time Nick had been to Milton’s Diner, but he found it to be a great place to study. It stayed open all night, they served beer, and the coffee refills were free.

Nick liked the regulars the best. Although he’d only been there three times, he was almost sure he always saw the same people in the same seats. From the old man in the ratty jean jacket who told blonde jokes to the waitress to the lady with the tattoo of the rose with the snake wrapped around the stem. They were like organs to the place as a whole.

Nick was chewing on the tip of his pencil when he saw Felicia Walker walk through the door. He blinked a few times to make sure he was seeing straight.

Felicia hadn’t been to Milton’s for years, or maybe not quite so long. It had been when she was an undergrad student, she remembered, which had only been a few years before. She sat down at a more secluded table and set up her new desk.

“Excuse me, Miss,” Nick said in a loud whisper to one of the waitresses.

Felicia was about ready to dig into her next dull manuscript when the waitress approached her table with a cup of coffee. She looked up. “I haven’t ordered yet.”

Nick watched as the waitress pointed him out from across the room. He saw the look on her face when her eyes focused on him. For a split-second he thought it was a smile.

Felicia looked to the waitress. "Under the circumstances . . . I'll take it, but put it on my tab."

The waitress half-smiled and set the cup down on her table. "Give him an A for effort, honey," she said and walked off.

"That's probably the only A he will get," she said quietly to herself. Felicia almost smiled again when she looked at him. She raised her cup to him and then went right back to work.

"Ice queen," he mumbled to himself. Golden opportunity, nonetheless, he thought. He picked up the story that she had ripped to shreds before his eyes just hours before.

She tried not to look over again, although she wanted to. She didn't have to.

The manuscript slapped when it hit the table. "What do you want from me here?" he asked her.

Felicia sat there for a moment without moving.

Nick smiled. "You're not going to give me that office hours shit again, are you?"

Felicia lifted her cup and took a sip. She looked up at Nick. "Sit down, Mr. McQuade."

5

"Can I buy you a beer or something?" Nick asked.

"No," she said, "and don't change the subject. You have to write what you know, McQuade. How many times do I have to tell you?"

Nick leaned back with a pencil sticking out of his mouth. "At least you dropped the 'Mister.'"

Felicia shook her head and sighed.

Nick leaned up again. "How many times do I have to tell you that realism has no place in fiction. If life were creative we wouldn't need creative writing, would we?"

She continued shaking her head. "That's ridiculous. You're rationalizing a bad story. I'm talking about real

emotion. Something you can't fake."

"You're not going to start talking about naked preachers again, are you?" Nick asked, straight-faced. "Because that really kind of scared me."

She chuckled and shook her head.

She thaws, Nick thought. "Are you sure I can't buy you a beer or something?"

"I don't think I trust you enough to sit and drink alcohol with you," Felicia said openly.

Are we blunt tonight, Nick thought. "Why in the world wouldn't you trust me?"

"I trust no one who's not willing to reveal themselves to me."

Nick's eyes opened wide as a million obscene thoughts ran through his head. "I think you'd better clarify yourself." "I mean that your story has told me nothing about you except that you can hide well. I'm talking about real emotion, Mr. McQuade."

Nick picked up his manuscript and leaned back in his chair. "Real emotion, huh?"

She nodded. "That's what I think."

Nick soon returned with his hand in his bookbag. He searched through it and pulled out a thick, manila folder. From it he took a slightly wrinkled manuscript. He laid it in front of her. "There you go."

She smiled and picked it up. "'The Mistletoe,' by Nick McQuade," she read. "What is this, a story about Santa Claus moonlighting as a bounty-hunter or something?" she asked as she began to laugh at her own joke.

Nick sat back with a smile and shook his head. "I wrote that about the first Christmas my father and I spent together after my mother died."

Felicia sat there silently for a moment. "I'm sorry. I didn't--"

"--Just read it," Nick said, cutting off her apology.

She obeyed and started on the first page without saying another word. Nick watched her. She had a strand of her hair twisted in her finger. He noticed a certain pouting quality in her lips that he hadn't seen before. Her eyes--

Enough, you sap, Nick thought as he mentally slapped himself. "That waitress isn't coming back. I'm going to get us another pot--"

"--I'll have a beer," she said without looking up.

Nick stopped for a second and was about ready to ask her to repeat herself, but then decided against it.

6

Felicia took her first sip of beer when she finished the last page. She looked up at him. "This is excellent work." She slid it back to him.

He held it in his hands, looking at the title-page. "Revealing enough for you?"

She looked him straight in the eye. "This is exactly what I mean. You can't fake stuff like this."

"I just did," he said.

"What are you talking about?"

He took a sip from his bottle as a smile stretched across his face.

Felicia sat back and stared for a moment. "Wait, what are you talking about?"

"My mother is fine," he said matter-of-factly.

She sat back and stared into nothing. She was silent for a long moment. "You're a pig, Nick," she said calmly. "I can't believe you. You make me sick."

"You called me Nick."

"Momentary lapse of reason," she said as she waved her hand to the waitress for another beer. She turned back to face him. "I can't believe you. I wish I could have written stuff like that when I was your age."

"I seriously doubt that. My advisor told me you were winning writing awards while you were still in high school."

"And who would your advisor be?"

"Ben Cooper."

Nick saw a strange look on her face, but only for a moment. She took another sip of her beer.

"What else did he tell you?"

"Not much," Nick said as he sipped from his beer. "He

said you were really talented. He was one of the reasons that I took your class.”

She looked down like people do when they're given a compliment. She doubted that Ben had really made such a fuss over her. Felicia still felt very bitter about the things he had said on the phone. Those weren't the words of a tender man, she thought.

“Do you still write?” Nick asked.

She shook her head. “Not much anymore. No time.”

“It's too bad, you know.”

“I'm happy where I am,” she said defensively. “I went to summer-school every year so that I could graduate early.”

She drank from her beer. “I'm happy where I am.”

Nick held his hands up. “Hey, I believe you,” he said. “I didn't realize that I'd touched upon such a tense subject with you.”

There was a pause. She tried to change the subject. “So, tell me. Do you have a girlfriend?”

Nick smiled. “I did until about three o'clock last night. Didn't work out.”

“With the way you handle your feelings I don't doubt it,” she said as she drank from her beer. “You can't fake relationships either, Nick.”

Nick laughed as he shook his head. “Boy, you just don't pull any punches, do you?”

“Writing says a lot about a person,” Felicia said assuredly. “You try to fake things, like that detective story, but sooner or later you get caught. Is that what happened, Nick? Did you get caught?”

“That's three times you called me Nick,” he said ignoring her question.

“Extended lapse of reason,” she said as she pulled a cigarette from Nick's pack. She put the cigarette in her mouth and looked around the table for a light.

“You know,” Nick started as he handed her the matchbook, “you're getting off easy here. You sit there in the class and talk about other people's stories, and now you're doing the same thing with my life. What about you? You

haven't been in the most jovial of moods lately." He leaned back and held his arms out. "Reveal yourself to me."

She inhaled on the cigarette. "It's very simple," she said. "I don't have the guts to get out of a bad relationship." There was another pause. Felicia felt the desperate need to change the subject. "Did you even like her? Your old girlfriend?"

Nick let her change the subject. "Tamara? Yeah, sure, I guess." He paused. "No, not really." He circled his finger around the rim of his bottle. "I guess it was convenient. It was easy. If you have somebody you don't have to look for somebody. You know?" He didn't say anything more. They were silent, both having said more than they had intended.

"Do you want to go out some time?" he asked out of nowhere. She looked surprised at first. Nick noticed and went on to explain himself. "It's difficult to find a girl who you can sit and smoke and drink beer with."

"And you think I'm blunt?" she asked. She knew he wouldn't let it go without an answer. "You're one of my students and . . . you're too young."

"Right," he said sarcastically. "I'd be willing to bet I've dated women as old as you."

She smiled again. Nick thought that he recognized that as a lean-over-and-kiss-me smile. He thought about finding out. But he didn't.

He's really not bad-looking, she thought. She began to wonder whether Ben would be at her apartment when she got back. He would probably get drunk at Belding's and go back to his own--Felicia quickly caught herself and realized that nothing could come of her evening with Nick and that it would be best to just end it.

She looked at her watch. "I need to get home."

This is the turning point, Nick thought. He nodded. "I'm going to use the bathroom. Will you wait for me here?"

She nodded back. "Hurry."

Nick made sure she wasn't looking when he stepped out to the parking lot.

"It's a shame," Nick said with his arms folded as he looked at the flat tire. "Damn vandals."

Felicia didn't say anything. She just stood there looking at the tire, wondering again if Ben would be home.

"I can drive you if you want," he said quietly. He was standing very close to her now.

She turned to look at him. She had that smile on her face again. "You don't have to. I can--"

--It's no trouble," Nick interrupted.

She smiled again. "Okay, Nick."

They didn't talk in the car on the way home. She saw right through me, Nick thought. It was that easy for her. He knew she had read him as easy as one of the manuscripts in class.

I can't believe I'm doing this, she thought. This could be considered unethical. Felicia ran it over and over in her mind, trying to find her justification. As hard as she tried, she couldn't find one that was practical. To hell with practical. She knew Ben wouldn't be there. And if he was, Nick would just have to get a new advisor. It was that simple.

Nothing could be this simple, Nick thought as he shook his head. He knew that God had a better sense of humor than that.

In a few minutes they were in front of her apartment building. When Nick got out of the car he felt a warm breeze against his face and smelled the traces of the earlier rain. It was almost hypnotizing. He walked around and opened the door for Felicia.

When she stepped out of her car they were standing very close. "It's nice tonight," she said as she closed her eyes and let the breeze cover her face.

"An evening made for lovers," Nick said. He tried to keep a straight face but couldn't.

She smiled and then laughed.

"Now that's emotion," he said. He gave her a smile, but not intentionally.

Felicia moved even closer to him. She leaned her head in.

Nick looked at her closely, and then asked, "You're not doing this this just to piss off your boyfriend, are you?"

"No," she said as she looked at her feet. "Not completely."

"Good enough for me," Nick said as he leaned towards her.

"Felicia?" a voice yelled from somewhere behind and above them.

Nick closed his eyes and started to shake his head. "God?" he asked sarcastically as he turned to find the voice. Ben Cooper was squinting down on them from the balcony of what must have been Felicia's apartment. Nick squinted back and then realized who it was. "Oh my god," he said and then turned back to Felicia. He looked up once again and then back. "That's Mr. Cooper, my advisor."

Felicia's head was still down. She nodded.

It took Nick a second to let everything sink in. He tried to say something but for a while nothing came out. He refused to accept the visual picture that his mind had conjured up. It started to make his head throb.

"You and him?" he asked calmly. He laughed and shook his head cynically. "That's poetic."

Nick turned and looked up again and waved. "Hello, Mr. Cooper."

Ben Cooper pulled his bathrobe tight. "McQuade, is that you?"

Nick turned back to Felicia again. "I guess when he told me you were good I took him out of context . . . Felicia."

"That's a cheap shot, Nick," she said calmly.

"Felicia, I'm coming down there," Ben Cooper yelled and then disappeared into the apartment.

Nick tried very hard to be angry, but couldn't. His stern look turned to a smile as he thought of the incredible circumstances surrounding his evening. "I think this could be considered creative non-fiction."

Felicia nodded with a smile. "I'm sorry." She leaned forward and gave Nick a quick kiss on the lips.

He smiled. "I suppose I'd better leave before I get beat up by a forty-year-old man."

"Thirty seven," she said quickly.

He smiled and started to walk back around his car. "You know," he said as he stopped. "I feel so revealed, I think I'll get naked and dance in the moonlight with all the local preachers."

Felicia laughed.

"Well, I guess I'll see you Wednesday." Nick started to open his car door when he suddenly stopped himself. "Hey, Felicia," he called.

She was still standing in the same place. "Yeah?"

He started walking back. "I've got to be honest with you. I let the air out of your tire so I could take you home." She smiled. "While we're being completely honest, I had a spare in the trunk."

Nick smiled back. He walked around his car and had opened the door when she stopped him again. "Hey, Nick."

He looked over the top of his car. "Yeah?"

"That story about your mother," she started. "It was true, wasn't it?"

He looked down and scraped his feet on the pavement. He thought for a while. Nick looked up at her and gave a slight smile. "Yes, it was." He looked down as he started to get into his car once again. "I'll see you, Wednesday."

"Goodbye, Nick," she said as his car disappeared around the corner.

8

Ben Cooper didn't say a word about Nick McQuade. Felicia almost wished that he had. He spent ten minutes explaining how terrible his evening had been and the next ten minutes apologizing for the things he had said on the phone. She knew he had been drinking, but accepted his apology to shut him up.

Felicia Walker went to bed alone that night thinking about one of her students. A student who probably still would only get a B.

Ben Cooper slept on the couch.

When Nick McQuade got home there was a message on his answering machine. It was from Tamara. She apologized to him and asked him to call her the next morning. Before she hung up she said that she loved him. He listened to that part twice.

Although it had been a long time since he had slept, Nick didn't go right to bed. He sat in his chair, smoked a cigarette and watched the home-shopping network while the cat lay curled up on his bed. As his eyes swam in a sea of cubic zirconium, Nick thought about the events that had transpired that evening. Not very realistic. Nick laughed out loud at that. Oh well, he thought. If you want realism, there's always fiction.

The Lady and the Dog

Robert Cooperman

She drifted down
dawn streets in slippers,
a nightgown, her mink coat.
A pink poodle trotted beside her,
snarling at anyone
who stared at its mistress's
open coat, breasts bouncing
to waken boys on paper routes.

Then for a whole week
she stopped haunting our streets.
The police found her in bed,
the dog ferocious when men approached
with body bag and stretcher.
Someone grabbed its neck
and they went to work.

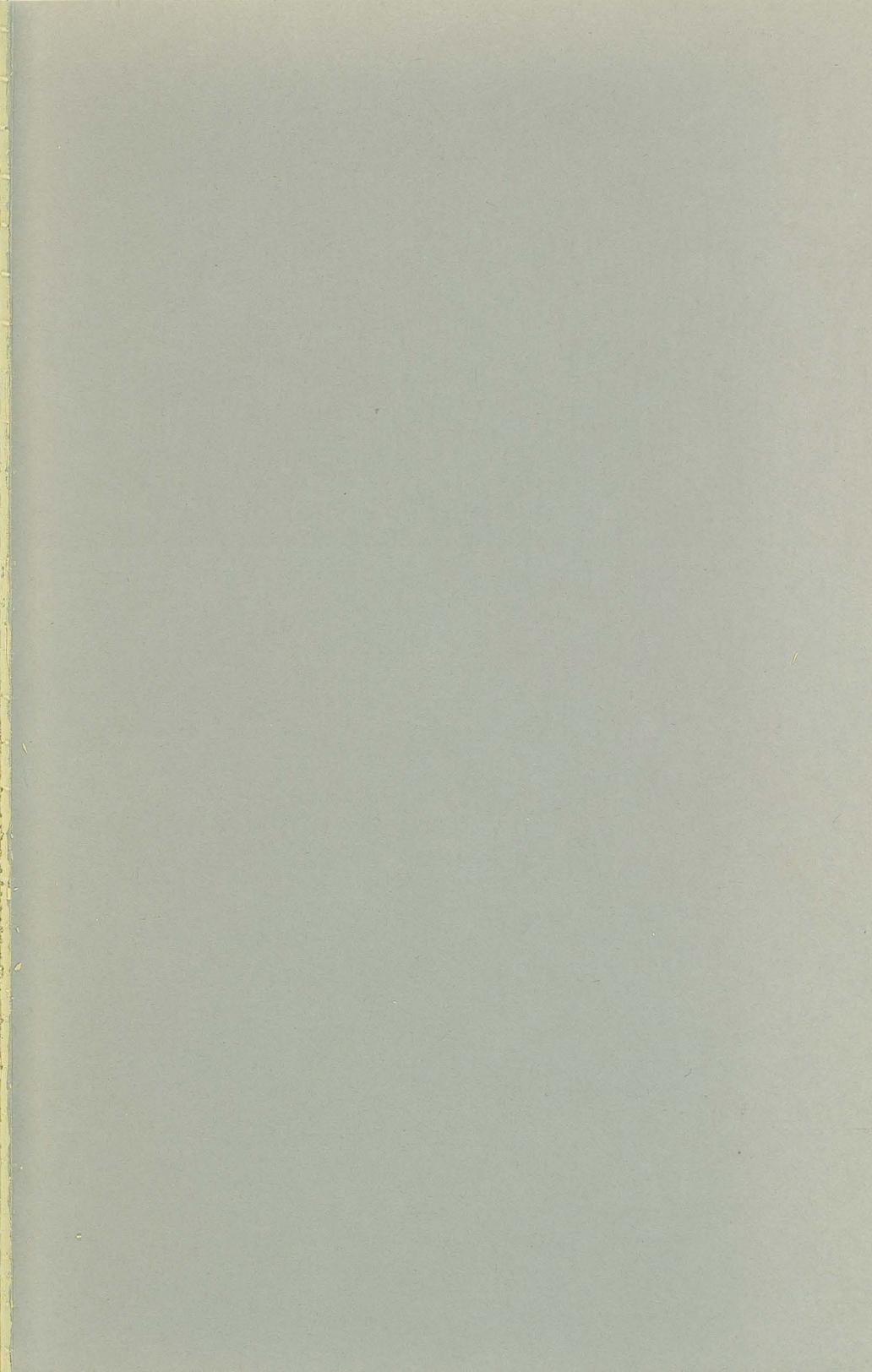
Inside a desk delicate
as a fairy tale,
the cops found love letters,
then one flowery with apologies
meant to last a lifetime.

While they read choice lines
they'd try on their wives
and sniffed empty gin bottles,
the dog escaped. For weeks,
it followed her route,
its coat a ragged, filthy white
as the pink faded,
a tiny ghost refusing all food.

The Sting of Barbed Wire

C.R. Wilson





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