

Winter 1989

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University of Maine at Farmington

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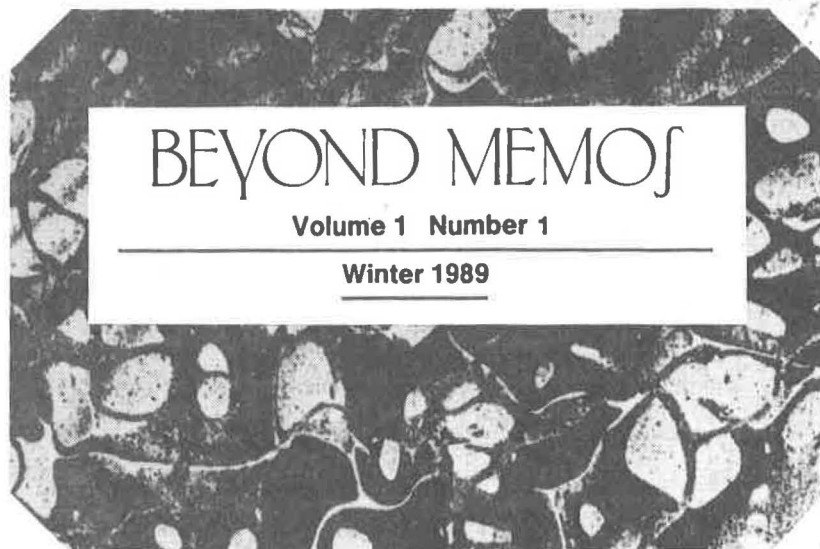
BEYOND MEMOS

A Journal of the UMF Faculty

Volume 1 Number 1

Winter 1989





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Beyond Memos is meant to be just that -- a forum where UMF faculty can share ideas and creative work that go beyond the day-to-day campus routine of teaching, advising, committees, and memos. We welcome submission of anything of general interest: poems, stories, essays, drawings, photographs, interviews, humorous pieces, etc. All materials, inquiries, and comments should be sent to Philip Carlsen, Editor, **Beyond Memos**, Merrill Hall, University of Maine at Farmington, 04938.

FARBER AND MR. WHITE

by Patricia O'Donnell

FARBER KNOCKED ONCE, THEN STOOD back. He shoved his hands into his pockets and studied the bare branches of the trees. He always did that, to make clear to whoever opened that he didn't mind waiting--was enjoying himself, in fact. He was about to knock again when he saw the doorbell. The sound jangled throughout the small frame house. He heard a thump; then the wooden door opened slowly. An old man, his chin thrust out defensively, stood waiting for Farber to speak.

"I came about the ad in the newspaper," Farber said. "Are you the person to talk to?"

"Eh?" The old man's forehead wrinkled above thick glasses.

"The newspaper ad." Farber pulled it out of his pocket and unfolded it. "Live-in companion wanted for elderly man. Light housework in exchange for rent. No smokers or drinkers." He showed it to the man.

"Yes, yes," he rumbled. "Come in."

The kitchen was dark. The man pulled out a metal chair for Farber. "I'm Mr. White." He held out his hand, and Farber took it gingerly.

"Glad to meet you. I'm John Farber." He wondered if he could pull this off. The guy needed help, Farber could see that; the linoleum floor was filthy, with garbage overflowing from a paper bag by the sink. He didn't mind housework.

"I'm looking for the right person," Mr. White said. "Someone who feels as I do about things. I don't eat meat, because killing another creature is wrong. I believe in things of the spirit, in the hereafter. I look at eternity, not on the temporary things of this world. Do you understand?" His gaze, which had been floating around the upper reaches of the kitchen, returned to Farber.

Farber shuffled his tennis shoes on the linoleum and nodded vigorously. He wondered what he'd have to do to live here. Weekly prayer meetings? He'd do it. He couldn't afford his own apartment now that he had been laid off at Parker's. A part-time job enabled him to just get by; no chance of paying child support now.

Mr. White went on, voice raspy. "Can you cook vegetarian meals?"

"Oh, yeah. I'm a vegetarian myself." It wasn't a complete lie; he didn't eat much meat. He had a vegetarian cookbook around somewhere.

Mr. White nodded, pleased. "I'll show you the place." He got up and shuffled around the corner, all baggy pants and flapping slippers.

The living room was also dark, curtains drawn. The room was neat but faded, as if the life were gone from it. Crocheted antimacassars covered the arms of the couch and armchairs; small china statuettes of dogs and ballerinas stood on dusty end tables. "Looks like you could use some light in here," Farber said.

"I like it this way. Been this way since my wife died," Mr. White said. He went down a hallway resolutely.

Farber followed. Should he apologize? No; the old guy was already showing him a bedroom.

"This is mine," Mr. White said, "and if you stay here this will be yours." The rooms were alike, with nondescript beds and bureaus. Mr. White's room had a desk covered with pamphlets and loose papers. A wooden crucifix hung above it.

"How old are you?" Mr. White asked.

"Thirty-two." It embarrassed Farber to tell his age; he felt like a pretender, a kid wearing his dad's suit coat. He tipped his head and brushed his hair to the side nervously. Mr. White nodded sharply once, and looked at him. What did he see, with those washed-out blue eyes?

"I think I'm a good judge of character," Mr. White said. "The job's yours if you want it."

Farber moved in two weeks later. He put his rocking chair and desk in his room. He stored a few things in Mr. White's cellar and gave the rest away. It was junk anyway. He never could see the sense in spending money on furniture. It was one of the differences he and Kathy had. One of many irreconcilable differences, it had seemed at the time.

He set the snapshot of his daughter in its plastic frame on the desk. He stood looking at it for a moment. Erin, three years old last winter, feeding deer at the zoo. Her cheeks were fat and pink under a knitted cap. He remembered that day, Erin's yells of excitement in the cold wind. He smiled, and

went to fetch his guinea pig. He didn't know what Mr. White would say about his guinea pig. He had bought her when he moved away from Kathy and Erin last spring. He carried the wooden cage into the kitchen. The guinea pig was making her high-pitched, frightened sound: *whee, whee*.

Mr. White was reading a newspaper through a magnifying reading glass. When he saw Farber, he set the glass on the table. "What is that?" he asked.

"This is my guinea pig." He set the cage on the table. She scurried into a corner, under crumpled newspaper.

Mr. White leaned back, as if she were attacking him. "Where does she...relieve herself?"

"On the newspaper. No problem."

Mr. White waved the cage away. "Take it into the bedroom. I don't want to see it."

Farber put the cage in a corner of his room. He reached under the newspaper to stroke her. Her body was trembling; he could feel the small, fragile bones under her white fur. "There, there," he murmured soothingly. "It's all right."

Farber's work load at Mr. White's was light; the old man moved slowly, and ate little. He spent most of his time on the couch, a large-print book open on his lap but his eyes gazing at the window, seeing nothing. Farber tiptoed around him, occasionally jarring him from his reverie with a comment or question. Mr. White was a little nuts, but harmless, and a nice guy. Though Farber was no athlete, he thought Mr. White was much too sedentary. He encouraged him to take walks. They established a routine of a walk together every day.

Farber worked part time at *El Charro*, a Mexican restaurant. He did everything from carpentry to cooking. Shouts of marital discord would reach the customers through the thin walls, with either Mr. or Mrs. Martinez, the owners, slamming the back door, vowing never to return. Farber almost enjoyed it, as he scrubbed or hammered or sliced; oaths sounded so expressive, so musical in Spanish.

He slipped in the back door quietly this Friday. He nodded to the cook and waited until Mrs. Martinez came bustling around the corner.

"Ah! Juan! *Como estás?*" She embraced him. There was a brief, overpowering scent of gardenia. Mrs. Martinez complained to him, in Spanish and bits of English, about business. About Mr. Martinez. "Ah! *Le gustan*--he like--the women." Farber shook his head, lifted his palms. Mrs. Martinez let him clear tables and wash dishes. He worked until closing, then walked home. The air

was crisp. Tomorrow, he would see Erin. The stars glittered in rhythm with his steps. He let himself in quietly, taking off his shoes and carrying them past Mr. White's closed door.

The next morning, Farber told Mr. White that he was leaving for the day.

"Where?" Mr. White asked.

Farber jiggled his keys in his jacket pocket. "To see my daughter."

Mr. White looked at him sharply. "You have a child? Are you divorced?"

"Yes." Again, this was not completely untrue; if he and Kathy had ever married, they would be divorced by now. Kathy had wanted to get married. He didn't think it would work, and as it turned out he was right.

Mr. White shook his head. "A great mistake young people make nowadays, getting a divorce at the first sign of problems. The children, the children...they suffer." He sighed. "My wife and I were not lucky enough to have children. But we weathered the problems. We stuck it out. And when she was on her deathbed we were as much in love as we had ever been." His hand, resting next to a cup of tea Farber had made for him, trembled. "As much in love as ever."

Farber zipped his coat. "There's soup in the refrigerator," he said. "In the green plastic container." Mr. White continued to stare at his cup, shaking his head.

Farber escaped Mr. White and drove the Gremlin to Kathy's house, easing it around corners. It was an old model, given to him three years ago by a friend. The passenger door was taped shut so it wouldn't swing open, and a piece of cardboard served for a rear side window. He hadn't seen Erin for nearly a month. First, Kathy had taken her to visit Kathy's parents; then Erin had the flu; then Farber was moving to Mr. White's. Kathy was now living with a man named Tom. They were talking about getting married. Farber didn't think much of him, but who was he to judge? He supposed he himself hadn't done as well by Kathy as he could have. She had been such a martyr, constantly forgiving. It used to drive him crazy. Inhuman, that's what it was. But Erin, now--Erin was perfect. He stopped at a grocery store and bought cookies, coloring books, and markers for her.

He saw Erin playing outside the small house as he drove up. She was in the sandbox, feeding spoonfuls of sand to her doll. She wore her bright-blue jacket; stubby blond pigtailed stuck out on either side of her head. Farber anticipated her small body thudding against his, picking her up and

swinging her around, as he always did. "Hey, Erin!" he shouted as he opened the car door. He waved.

Erin lifted her head and looked at him. She just sat there, looking. Farber got out of the car. Erin picked up her doll and began walking slowly toward the house. She stared straight ahead. When she was almost at the porch Farber said, "Erin..." She ran the rest of the way, letting the door shut behind her.

What the hell was going on, Farber wondered. She had never acted like that before. He went onto the porch and looked into an empty hallway. Kathy came out of the kitchen and walked to the door, by herself. She had a slight limp, which became worse when she was agitated. Her up-and-down gait was very noticeable now. Farber saw Tom behind her, standing in the kitchen doorway, his legs apart, his arms folded. His jaw was set.

"What's wrong?" Farber asked. He opened the door.

"I don't know if she wants to go with you today," Kathy said. She had a soft, little-girl voice that always trembled slightly, as if she were about to cry. "She's upset."

"But why? I want to talk to her."

Farber went down the hall. He came up against Tom. He could see Erin in a corner of the kitchen, hugging her doll. When she saw Farber, she began to cry.

"What's wrong, Erin? I want to see you." He tried to push himself around Tom.

Erin's cries turned into screams. "No! No! I don't want to! Go away!"

Tom said, "You're upsetting her." His voice was low, with an edge to it. "You'd better go."

Farber couldn't understand anything. Erin pecked around her doll, then buried her face. Farber turned and went outside.

He sat on the cool grass, trying to figure out what to do. He heard voices inside but couldn't make out what they were saying. In a little while, he heard footsteps, and looked up to see Kathy at the door.

"You'd better leave," she said in a voice barely loud enough for Farber to hear.

"No."

He waited. The wind blew a few dead leaves around the yard. A child, a boy a few years older than Erin, came out of a neighboring house and walked across the lawn. He stopped to look at Farber expressionlessly, then went on. After an hour or so, Farber saw a police car pull up beside the

Gremlin. An officer stepped out and hitched up his belt. He walked slowly toward Farber, arms hanging loose at his sides. Ready for danger, Farber thought. Ready to pull a gun on this danger to the civilized world.

"We have a complaint against you, buddy. Don't you think you'd better leave?"

Farber remained where he was, looking up at him. "I just want to talk to my daughter."

The policeman's grip was cold as he took Farber's upper arm and pulled him to his feet. "Not today."

Farber shook his arm free and walked to the Gremlin by himself.

It was late afternoon when he returned to Mr. White's house. The kitchen was empty and dark. The living room was also dark. Mr. White was sitting on the couch, looking straight ahead at the closed curtains. Farber imagined him there all afternoon, placed so carefully, motionless. An old-man rag doll.

"Hello," Farber said.

Mr. White turned his head slowly to look at him. His eyes were pale, strangely remote.

"What are you doing?" Farber asked.

Mr. White seemed to consider the question. "I was travelling," he finally said. "In my astral body. It's possible, you know. I can speak with my dear dead wife."

"Oh," Farber said.

"The soul travels into space, attached to the body by a silken cord."

"I've heard of that," Farber said.

At the sound of his voice, the guinea pig started her hungry cry.

"Take care of that animal," said Mr. White. He tried to push himself up from the couch. Farber took his arm to help. "We must be kind to all living things." He turned and began a stately, shuffling walk to his bedroom.

The next morning, the sun burst into Farber's bedroom, forcing its way past his closed eyelids. He tried to go back to sleep but couldn't. He had called last night. Tom had answered, and refused to let him talk to Erin. She was "ordering her priorities," he said. What a jerk, to talk about *his* daughter as if she were a clinical case study! It was a game for Tom, as Farber saw it--a power struggle in which Farber had the deck stacked against him. What could he do--kidnap her? Break the windows of their house? He wasn't the type. He felt the same helplessness he felt when Parker's let him go; he wanted to cry out, "Not my fault!" He sat up in bed, rubbing his face.

He went into the kitchen. Mr. White stood by the stove, fiddling with the catch on the teapot. "Thought I'd make us some tea," he said in a cheerful, raspy voice.

Farber took the teapot gently from him. "I'll do that," he said. He knew that Mr. White was afraid of the stove. He had lived on peanut-butter sandwiches and apples before Farber came. Farber pulled the box of oatmeal down from the cupboard.

"How is your daughter?" Mr. White asked.

Farber stirred oatmeal into water. He shrugged. "Fine, I guess." He didn't want to go into it now. Mr. White nodded. What the hell did he know, what did the old guy know? Who was he to even nod? Farber felt tears rise to his eyes, and looked down at the pan.

"That's good. Children are the light of the world."

Farber let his breath escape slowly, his cheeks puffed out like balloons. "Yeah. Want to take a walk after breakfast?"

Outside, Mr. White shuffled along, a good six inches shorter than Farber. He blinked in the sunlight falling on his curved shoulders and on his black winter cap with the earflaps. Farber was silent. Mr. White wheezed, chuckled, and rasped, as if he were continually about to speak. They walked past the ironworks foundry, past small, uniformly neat houses. They reminded Farber of the house where Tom and Kathy lived. And Erin. The houses seemed unbearably boring, staring blankly at him through their shining windows. Was that so important, that she grow up in a house like that? That she have "priorities?" He felt the sudden sting of tears again. Maybe she'd get over this and things would be as before; maybe he'd be high on her list of "priorities." Whatever the hell they were.

He saw that Mr. White was leaning against the chain-link fence surrounding the small neighborhood park. He was taking short, rapid breaths. Farber felt a twinge of remorse; had he, in his absorption, pushed the old man too hard? He retied the woollen muffler around Mr. White's neck, smoothing the frayed edges down gently.

Mr. White chuckled, his eyes glittering. "Ah...you're a good fellow, John. I knew it right away." He took one of Farber's hands between his own gloved hands and patted it gently, as a father might do. He was still breathing heavily.

Farber dropped his shoulders, a tension there suddenly gone.

"Don't worry about your daughter. It will be all right, you'll see. We live according to God's plan."

Mr. White let Farber's hand drop and straightened his shoulders. He shuffled slowly into the park. Farber watched his slight body outlined against the trees. Mr. White seemed perfectly in place, an old man in a black overcoat making his way toward the trees. Farber pushed his hands into his pockets and followed him. ■■

WEDDING

by Carol Wyckoff

The priestess dips her fingers in the wine,
The inner circle drawn--
Within, you stand, a quiet center,
While the wind sighs outside.

A respite--small oasis from the swirl?
No certainties in this harsh temple.
The line that guards you from the outer dark
Is but a hairsbreadth, too thin for saving.

The priestess draws another circle in the sand
Concentric to the one you tremble in,
Within are all the lives you've touched
For better or for worse
For kissing or for bruising
These frail loves buttress yours;

And form a band, tough-sinewed
From the joy and pain contained in human love,
You seal the inner confines with a vow;
The goblet passes round;
The priestess sheds a blessing.



SMEARED RABBITS, ETC.

by Paula Widmer-Wynn

ONE NIGHT MY CHILDREN'S PET rabbit was hit by a car. Ka-thunk, I heard as we sat in the living room playing a quiet board game. I knew. And felt the familiar spiritual weariness that comes over me every time yet another of our country pets meets an untimely end.

Not an hour earlier my young son and I had been outside in the dark vainly trying to coax the skittish bunny to us, so we could nab him and return him safely to his hutch for the night. Always before he had eventually trusted us enough to allow his entrapment. This time he was too wily. Ka-thunk.

The problem here is this: I want our pets to be happy. I need their lives to appear fulfilled. The dog chained to his doghouse, the cat meowing piteously at the door, the rabbit confined to his hutch--I anthropomorphize.

With what dark thoughts must the dog be wrestling as he sprawls captive in the dust every day of his life? What despair--or, worse, resentment--must fill him while walking his semi-circular beat to the left and to the right? If I were in his fur, I'd feel desperate.

I can't bear it. So, acknowledging my children's hard-heartedness in pet care, I let the dog loose. He is instantly delirious with joy. He scrambles into a wild sweeping dash about the yard. He stops to leap upon me with boundless gratitude and kisses. He has obviously forgiven at least me, out of our set of humans, for all past inequities. Anyone can see that he appreciates my empathy.

Standing pensively in the yard, my mind wandering this sanctimonious territory, I become aware of the phone ringing in the house. It is a neighbor a half a mile away, down in the village, and would I please come get my dog? He's bothering her poultry again, as he does every single time I give in to my sensibilities and enable his escape. Perhaps I'd like him returned with a new hole in him? Keep your damn dog tied up like everybody else does! I shake my head over this pet that refuses to follow my script.

Many are the cats and kittens I've scraped off the road in front of our house. It's hardly worth developing a serious relationship with any of them,

so brief are their tenures. With each new cat-start, I vow to be less lenient about overnight passes; but their reasons for wanting to go outdoors are clearly urgent. I've already deprived them of their notorious reproductive equipment, so I feel highhanded stifling as well their powerful drive to hunt. I no longer bother to record their names with the veterinarian. It's a waste of paper.

Categorizing an animal as livestock only complicates for me the issue of kept beasts. The heavy knowledge of the creature's ultimate fate drives me to further excesses of compensation. One year my boy caught a baby pig in the Pig Scramble at the county fair. Little grunting Wilbur was transported with great tenderness by his master to our makeshift pen. Four months of commiseration on my part ensued. Swine are known for their intelligent need for companionship. Poor solitary pig. His young keeper's cursory slopping and watering fell far short of satisfying Wilbur's hierarchy of needs. I made time for duty calls out back through the autumn, while my son was at school. The eventual result was that of course I forged a most unstockmanly connection with the doomed beast. Wilbur's end turned out to be as untimely as any of our other animals'. The household decided that a premature butchering was kinder than January's subzero temperatures. Better the freezer than freezing. So we ate young bacon that winter. Future bacon, swore this shaken next-of-kin, will be purchased at the A & P.

Back to the hapless rabbit. An inspired Easter alternative to sweets, the tiny bunny was a winning sight cradled in our little boy's arms. Daddy and son built a hutch together, with a bedroom wing for privacy separate from the see-through pee-through section with sanitary chicken-wire floor. The rabbit could set up housekeeping very comfortably.

We were baffled when the rabbit chose to use his solid-floored bedroom as his bathroom. We tried to litter-box train him in our house, so that he could consider himself part of our happy multi-specied fellowship. But, although the cats appreciated this second bathroom provided for their

convenience, the rabbit's choices were inscrutably other. And then gnaw marks were found on our electrical cords.

Well. One must remember that a rabbit is after all a Rodent. How much can you personify a Rodent? Rabbit is banished to his hutch. Son soon loses interest in his dull charge.

But a pet is a pet is a responsibility. The human at whose mercy the pet is ought to provide a Quality Life for it. To sit inert with expressionless rabbit face in a 2x2x3-foot cell all one's pointless life is an abomination.

So I began to set him free to be a real rabbit part of every day. There was no mistaking his self-fulfillment as he trundled blissfully about in the clover. He would execute an exuberant leap before vanishing for hours into the woods. If rabbits' faces could show expression like dogs' or cats', I am sure his would have portrayed grateful adulation. In any case, I'm sure I saw it in his eyes. I comfort myself that his life may have been short, but it was not without meaning.

Sometimes when I am very tired, or very depleted by the humans in my life, I see things differently. Our pets revert to mere animals, mindless, demanding, in fact tyrannical creatures that feel like shackles. I even wish then that I had the nerve to stop watering my houseplants. Whether my children put fresh leaves in the jar with their latest caterpillar no longer interests me. The dog, dumb beast that he is, can lie there forever blissed out on sunshine for all I care, or the cats make do with houseflies. It all then seems a trap, a trap from which I wish someone would set me free. Ka-thunk. ■■

SILHOUETTE

by Rod Farmer

In a late afternoon made dark
by ominous, fast-approaching
rain clouds,
I hooked, lifted the last bale
onto the wagon,
Let my weary arm heavily
hang hay hook onto low branch
of a barren persimmon tree,
walked toward the barn,
Only to turn and see rusty
hook still dangling, silhouetted
against dark sky, and
thought of my own lone self.



1/16/11

THE POETRY OF EARTH

by Rod Farmer

The pulsating poetry of earth
Never sleeps
Never retires,
Always new birth
A life cycle it keeps
Which never expires,
In desert sun, arctic winds
On all continents life bends
To diverse environments it conforms,
Unless....until....
Humankind's nuclear storms
Render forever still
The pulsating poetry of earth.

WHEN I INVENTED BUTTERFLIES

By Carmen Naranjo

Translated from the Spanish by Linda Britt

I KISSED HER ON THE CHEEK; I FINALLY conquered my fear and my virginity, just in time, because Nicholas had not only already held Ana's hand, but he had also kissed her ear, told her she was pretty, and she had smiled. I closed my eyes, waiting for the slap, it was better not to see it coming, but nothing happened. I supposed that Clotilde would be furious, but when I opened my eyes she seemed withdrawn, distracted, as if she were dreaming or maybe thinking about something very profound. Perhaps that's the way women get when you kiss them or perhaps she didn't even realize that I had kissed her.

Then you shook your tousled bangs and you told me, as if waking from a dream: of course, I'll make them out of little stones because they're pretty and shouldn't be quite so still, anyway they have a right to fly and to have their grayness dissolve into colors.

I thought you were playing games with me, speaking in riddles, since that's one way you hide your emotions. Whenever you concentrate so much on what you're holding in your hands, your cheeks turn pink and your eyes water. That happens to you when we're doing our homework together and you get upset about a problem you can't get right, or we're supposed to write up an exercise about our family lives and I tell you not to write the truth but instead write what they want to hear, that your parents never fight, that they love each other very much, that everything's going along just perfectly and you adore your brothers, but you, Clo, you take it into your head to write that there are problems, real problems that you don't understand but they are serious and at least once a month your dad packs his suitcases and swears he'll never be seen again and then everyone cries and yells and things get broken. And the same thing happens every time, they call your home and then they have a meeting with your parents, which always ends up with you being punished for telling family secrets.

And you ask me with your innocent, shining eyes: Do you truly believe that God created everything that exists in heaven and earth? Of course, it had to be someone and that someone was

God. And, He didn't leave room to invent anything, something new, something that will have a new life and dwell in the space between heaven and earth? I answer you, no, everything has already been invented, and then I suggest we go to the park to play ball, so I can watch you throw it softly, lovingly, and with that joy on your face that is so hard to find, my dear Cloti.

We go to the park, but you don't throw me the ball, you prefer to pick up stones and you confess to me that you want to invent something new, something like butterflies. You tell me: imagine the happiness God felt when He created them, how they clambered, daringly, all over His head and made Him sneeze, and how He thought that this was a delightful game of lights and colors that would irritate evil men but bring only pleasure to the good ones.

And I bring you back down from the clouds, because butterflies have already been created, God created them and He made them come from ugliness because first they were worms, horrible, disgusting, frightening worms, and they are only beautiful for a moment. You are silent, Clotilde, for quite a while and you turn within yourself again while you caress the stones. Then I suggest we go see what movie is on in case we can see it together later, and I don't say it out loud but I think about trying during the most interesting part of the movie to hold your hand, and about then hearing you smile inside which is how you like to smile when you're happy.

We get to the theater and you ask me if God also made the building and the movie. Of course not, but He created the human brain with the capacity for creation and so man can make secondary things all the time, but not fundamental things like the earth, the stars, the sky, and everything else in his universe.

I'm sure that Clo goes overboard too much, thinks too much about things and gets obsessive; I wouldn't find it at all strange if she were to sleep-walk and get up in the middle of the night to find out where she could acquire some of God's power. I am a little frightened by her silences and by that way she has of entering her own little private world.

I kiss her a second time on the cheek, sure now she won't realize it, while Clo lowers her head to rest her brow on the shop window, and she contemplates the stones in the rings, bracelets, and necklaces that are sold in the jewelry store downtown. Doesn't it seem idiotic to you that people pay so much for these little stones while the others, the ones on river bottoms, in the parks, and out in the fields, the really pretty ones, are completely ignored? And I don't answer your question because you are busy inventing under those tousled bangs.

When it was exam time, I saw that you were pale and almost feverish, I knew you were studying like crazy because your parents didn't tolerate bad grades, or even average ones. By that time I had already kissed you five times on each cheek and you still hadn't noticed.

I talked to Nicholas, man to man, to find out if those kisses were valid or if they didn't count at all in my efforts to lose my virginity. He answered me no, they didn't count, because when you're trying to gain experience through close encounters it's the response that matters and in the case of Cloti there was none; she wasn't even aware there had been an encounter. Even if there were a slight possibility that she was being very hypocritical and pretending not to feel what she was feeling, the only concrete evidence available was the very fact that she never let on that she had felt anything. With any experience there should be an interaction and in your case there is none, except on your part, and that's too one-sided. I advise you to find someone else, Clo isn't the only girl, there is Cecilia, or Flora, or what about Tatiana; nobody walks with them yet after school or carries their books or says goodbye a block before they get home.

Of the three he mentioned, I would prefer Ceci, although she's tongue-tied and kind of silly. Day after day I watched Cloti from a distance, but I still sensed her very near to me, still trying to invent what's already been invented. And I learned, sadly, that she did horribly on her exams, that they almost killed her at home and that her bangs had been combed back out of her face.

It wasn't until almost the beginning of the semester, when I went to register, that, standing together, we saw the list of those who had passed on the very last attempt. There she was. She drew a red circle with butterfly wings around her name. You see, she told me, when I set out to do something, I do it.

As we walked out, I asked her what was new. I have a lot to tell you. I do too, and I thought about all I would tell her about Ceci to make her jealous.

Do you want to meet in the park at three o'clock, as always?

As always, but what a baby Clo is, she hasn't even realized that it's been more than six months now since we've seen each other in the park, or even spoken, or since I kissed her on the cheek.

I wait for her in the park starting at two o'clock, and she arrives at three on the dot with a smile on her face, the first one I have ever seen. And what do you have to tell me? The most wonderful thing that will ever happen to me in my whole life, I finally invented a butterfly. You can't imagine what it's like, simply wonderful. I began with nothing but my faith, no tricks, just faith, I tossed the first stones into the wind and they fell again as stones, I tossed the second handful and the same thing, I threw the third with no results, but my faith was intact, I threw the fourth, the fifth and the sixth, now with doubts that started to nag, and the seventh I threw just to throw it, sure that nothing would happen, how was I going to work a miracle?, and I almost hurled the eighth just to get rid of it, I had no hope left. And what do you think happened? A little stone, the one that looked worm-eaten, the saddest, the most opaque, began to expand, to whirl, and it grew and it grew as if it were exploding from within, it was trembling, spinning together all the threads of separate desires, along with the doubts and the faith, it was a terrifying frenzy, it seemed thrown into the middle of a family quarrel, until one wing popped out, with red, yellow and green spots and blue daggers, yet transparent, and another wing that looked just like the first, in colors and in shapes, now round, now triangular, now all in harmonic union. There it was, just when my creative imagination seemed totally extinguished. The two identical wings trembled in their longing to fly and in the center was the caterpillar, radiant now, so svelte, so full of color, and it started to rise, to dance in the air, it was enraptured with the light, and it fluttered above everything as if it were lord of the space between heaven and earth.

I see you in all your beauty and I am ashamed of having kissed your cheeks when you were turned inward in the very act of creation. The bang has again fallen over your forehead, disheveled and blond. Your redness of cheek is also untidy, rather excessive near your nose and fainter in the corners near your eyes.

I ask you for one of the stones that you carry in your hands and I propose, out of your faith in miracles, to create another butterfly. You tell me yes, that with our faith, together we will make it fly. I throw it softly, not wanting to hurt it, and it almost

doesn't descend at all, it begins to fly, yellow with deep-blue stars and brick-colored spots. I am at the point of not believing anything, but then I remember that I have created you, Clo of my fantasies, and that I kissed the air that surrounded your absent presence, because I had to conquer my virginity in the Clotildes that do not exist and I need to invent them so that I can kiss their cheeks without them realizing it during the long, solitary summers of my innocence. ■

DEAR FRIENDS AND FAMILY

by Roy Van Til

THIS MORNING WE AWOKE TO HOWLING winds and an air temperature 18 below zero. By noon the thermometer, basking in the illusion of sunlight, soared to a bracing -8 degrees. Now this evening we are 16 below under calm, starlit skies. We expect 25 below by morning.

The squeak of my cold boots crushing the dry snow is the only sound I hear in the woods tonight. The mute majesty of Orion hangs a few feet above the crystalline spires of the spruces that encircle the clearing. The silence itself is startling. The rushing stream tunnels unheard far beneath yards of ice and drifted snow in the ravine to our east. There is no crack of brittle limbs, for the birch, pine, and hemlock have already protested as much as wood can, as all motion ceases in the January night. No sudden cascades of snow will tumble from the thickets of balsam fir since the wind brushed them clean three days ago. There are no scurrying paws nor fluttering wings, for those tough little creatures found their hidden shelters by December. There they huddle in silence, hoping to survive until the higher sun thaws this frozen forest. No planes drone above and no cars speed down the solitary highway that is the lifeline to the Vienna Woods.

On a planet with targeted weapons and fusion, rampaging viruses and war, brutal revolutions and crime, desperate cities and rampaging storms...in a cosmos teeming with spinning atoms, hurtling comets, and spiraling galaxies, can a silence like this last very long? Or will it be that the inevitable destruction comes slowly as we go about our lives in a cosmic second, moving here and there in a snapshot of eternity, merely hoping we are immortal?

There is no reason to stray far from the hearth on a night like this. Extra layers of clothing for the flesh, extra layers of oak, apple and maple for the fire. Mere birch or fir could never keep up with the biting cold that cuts through well-insulated windows and walls with mindless impunity. The wind-driven snows are sculpted into monstrous forms that bear witness to the fearsome power of the northerly gales. Beau the boxer tries to lift three painful pads off the snow at once, in futile protest

against the silent threat he cannot understand, as he bounds along the narrow pathways in search of his favorite trees. Then he tucks his ears and tail in close and races to his patch of rug in front of the glowing stove. Like his masters, he is too far removed from braver, hairier ancestors who once roamed the earth on nights like this, long before it was called winter. Dogs and people wait out the January freeze in far flung, isolated nests of energy that cling to this sprawling landscape of stillness. Cars will grudgingly growl to life in this world of suspended animation where the lightest fluids refuse to flow. The morning schoolbus will only run ten minutes late but it will seem much longer to Justin and Desiree as they wait in the sub-arctic dawn.

This is the frightening beauty of mid-winter in the northern forest. It is the price we pay for the clean air, the 50-mile vistas, the mild summers, the glorious fall colors, the four months of deep snows for skiing, and the lack of traffic jams and shopping malls. It is that numbing pain that starts in seconds on any exposed skin on these brutally cold days that really protects us, for a few more years, from the malignant northeastward spread of megalopolis. But come it will with its tract houses and traffic, pollution and street lights, and its arrogant subjugation and destruction of nature.

Here the natural forces are often in control, in all their ferocious power and stark beauty. We few who choose to live in the northern mountains have to deal with nature and respect it as our unforgiving master. We just want to live as part of it, so we don't seek to pave it, enclose it, bulldoze it into standardized treeless lots, or tame it by altering it forever for our convenience and petty comforts.

Yet the chainsaws and logging trucks scalp Maine remorselessly and turn the forest heritage into napkins and magazines. Land escalates in value as the wilderness is carved into less imaginative pieces. The secret is out. You too can make it through those bouts with the high pressure blasts from the Canadian Shield. Southern New Hampshire went first, chewed into a frenzy of unplanned development with all its ugliness and loss of harmony. Now southern Maine is falling fast, losing its affordable housing amid the building boom for the upper crust.

The mountains of western Maine with its idyllic lakeshores, spectacular ski slopes and accessible forests have not been spared from the shortsighted greed and dull aesthetic sense of the developers. It is like the Ice Age in reverse, a sheet of devastation moving inexorably northward. But unlike the mighty flows of 40,000 years ago, this economic glacier never retreats to its spawning grounds, except to tap more money or horsepower. Fire and ice. Tonight I'll root for the ice to win out.

Those who control the fire would rename Orion after Ollie North. They'd make the twisting two-lane into a straight and sterile four-lane expressway. They would dissect the varied landscape into homogenized, quarter-acre pigeonholes. They'd demand lights at every intersection, and thousands of useless shops for the bored would line every street and block off the real world. I can picture the sprawling cityscape: Tile City, Toys'R'Us, World of Mace, Paperama, Taekwondo Palace, Ralph's 24-Hour Natureland, Hernando's Pudenda, House of Curtains, Smokers Anonymous, Crazy Eddy's, Taco Bell, Sleaze Inc., Whiplash and Sons, etc. The winds would be twisted from their destined course and useless lights would obscure the skies and weather. No one in the grim cityscape would notice it anyway, for they would never look up from the sinister sidewalks. They would curse the cold and hurry off to their indoor sanctuaries. Maine would become just another location in the endless grid, but we who treasure this special place will try to remember these cold, starry nights forever. ■

CONTRIBUTORS

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