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Winimisset

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WINIMISSET

By Michael Joseph Bennett

1. EAST TO WEST

EVEN ONCE THROUGH THE NEWTON tolls and on the sprawling six lanes of the Massachusetts Turnpike, the drive west requires quick reflexes. Here Metro-Boston relinquishes her magnetic grasp of gridlock reluctantly. An hour passes

and Wellesley and Framingham drift by. Gradually, what once was the dark interior of the Massachusetts Bay Colony slowly begins to rise in altitude, an imperceptible shift, the land sweeping upward in small fits toward the seven hills of Worcester.

Emile Lameuroux kills the truck's radio and notices a line of grimy brown snow, a vestige of February, bordering the Pike. He turns from the sun's glare and consults his map — Auburn exit, to Route 20 west, to 56 north to 9 west. From there, the cities and major roads recede and the map becomes useless. Directions turn from route numbers to landmarks scrawled in a yellowed notebook — a small wire company, a river oxbowed and slow, a town common, an abandoned set of tracks. It is here the language of the interior begins to thicken with age and Algonquin origin — *Quaboag*, *Wickaboag*, *Winimisset*.

* * *

Twilight falls, and Emile has arrived. Hired by the Metropolitan District Commission as project archaeologist, he sees for the first time the landscape he will sift for history and narrative thread. Atop the hill, he stops the motor and steps outside. In the dying light, snow-covered fields sleep in cadence to the rise and fall of the land, following a bone structure known in these parts as ledge. Stone walls stitch the quilt tightly and form a memorial to the efforts of colonial plow, oxen and man.

Emile listens as early spring draws breath like a slumbering god, its ribs lean and exposed by forces of wind and cold. The drawn breath is held, time slips, then slowly it is let out. Dried, stubborn leaves, attached throughout winter, rattle like skele-

Michael Joseph Bennett, 32, of Leicester, was inspired to begin writing after reading Hemingway's short stories for the first time about 10 years ago.

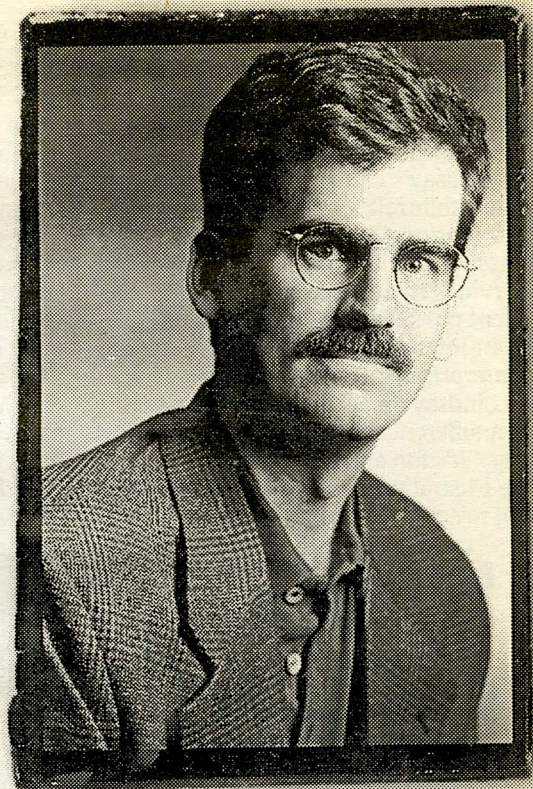
"I'm still influenced by that feeling that takes you off your feet after reading something strong," Bennett says. "It's something great that you can't define, like you can define a square root. It's a different measure."

Bennett has written 30 or 40 short stories, but readily admits that many of them will never see the light of day. "I've kept maybe five that I think are interest-

ing to go back and read."

In between being the library director at the Merriam-Gilbert Library in West Brookfield and writing his short stories, Bennett is also at work on a novel that is set in New Braintree.

Winimisset began as a drive down a couple of roads in New Braintree that I hadn't been on," Bennett says. "It was raining; the windows in my truck were rolled down. And it was something that is still interesting to me — there seems to be a history lying fallow under the landscape there. I've been intrigued by it ever since."



tal hands. Between his fingers, Emile rubs a blade of grass freshly picked, pulping the chlorophyll, smearing it like blood, the earth's blood, against his skin. The wind settles, then dies back into itself. Winter holds as night approaches the quiet fields of New Braintree.

2. A WATER STORY

The year 1895 marked the dawning of a golden age of civil engineering in the commonwealth of Massachusetts. It was then that an engineer by the name of Frederic Stearns had a vision. In a photographer's portrait from the time, Stearns wears a heavy tweed jacket and vest. His gaze falls not on the tripod and hooded lens, but toward a point beyond the limits of the room. With only a high school education, Stearns worked as an apprentice in Boston, teaching himself the engineer's art of the T-square and slide rule, conducting studies, writing the clear and lucid papers for which he became noted. In due time, he was recognized as an authority on water supply.

Throughout the coming century, it was Stearns' far-reaching vision the Metropolitan District Commission would continually cite as its solution to the lack of potable water for Boston. In his 1895 report to the state Board of Health, he declared this vision based on fact. The water sources surrounding the city were too polluted for safe treatment. Filtration was a technology in its infancy, one that could never be foolproof and one that required skilled, high-paid technicians to operate. The people of Boston would never stand the slightest possibility of tainted or high-priced water. At that point, Stearns trained his eyes away from the city's turgid rivers toward a sparsely populated Central and Western Massachusetts. There he

saw the pure watersheds of the Nashua, Ware and Swift rivers spread like clear veins over the heart of the state. There he saw the dikes, dams and massive reservoirs of his vision.

* * *

It is dawn. Emile slowly awakes at his bunk inside the M.D.C. gauging station at Coldbrook Springs, five miles north of New Braintree. The granite and slate station is a monument to the '30s, a time when public structures took on an air of permanence. It is here that millions of gallons of pure water from what was the Swift River Valley to the west channel underground toward Boston. By 1947, the valley and its five towns had been laid to rest under one of the world's largest reservoirs.

The word *Quabbin* is an Algonquin term meaning *great waters*. Throwing off his blanket, Emile discovers only a hazy border between his wakened state and the trance of sleep. Soon he will begin to set up a small office and sort out his equipment from the truck. Down below, water continues to draw itself like an avalanche from the 17-mile-long reservoir known as Quabbin. A credit to Frederic Stearns' vision, no pumps are needed along the underground system as it follows the dip in pitch to the city. Outside, the sun begins to fan through a stand of red pine, burning off the morning's fog. As he listens, now fully awake, Emile hears the dialect of meditation and mathematical formulae, the slip of liquid, the flow of force. It is the voice of great waters, a tongue heavy with velocity and the feed of gravity.

3. SIN

"Some people just wear it a little better than others," the girl says from her bicycle. For some time now, she has been circling

back and forth in front of the gauging station as Emile warms the truck. The girl is high-school age and too big for the trashed bike she is on. She stops for a moment and leans back against the bent sissy bar. "And some people have it spelled out like a billboard, don't you think?"

Emile says nothing. The girl's presence slightly annoys him and disturbs the morning's solitude. He busies himself with equipment from the truck.

The girl takes out a bent cigarette from behind her ear. "My ancestors were obsessed with it, you know. My brother, he thought you could run away, but you can't." She passes her hand through a tangle of sandy hair. "*Abigail, we've got blood on our hands*, my grandfather used to say. See, our line goes back nine generations on that hill, and he believed guilt was an inherited trait."

"Are you supposed to be somewhere?"

The girl laughs. "Right. You're absolutely right. I've got to go to work, like you. ... Except there's a problem. There is no work." She wipes her nose with the back of a sleeve. "Joke's on me." Lazily, she rides another circle in the road before stopping again. High in the trees, a loose flock of crows flies randomly in and out of the boughs. The girl peers up at them, her eyes narrowed into slits. "Are you M.D.C. guys going to flood again?"

For a moment Emile feels queasy. He glares at the girl, but is silent.

"Nothing? Not a peep? OK, maybe I'll check back later." She pushes the bike forward. "Remember," she says, "God's keeping score and he's a Puritan."

4. NOTES

The dirt road deteriorates in scarred, washed-out fits for more than half a mile. Up ahead, the winter's cold has heaved out-

crops of ledge, exposing them like segments of spine, making the way impassable.

Emile parks the truck and steps out. Through a tangle of laurel, he works his way to the clearing. Here, for a moment, a plain broadens, parting the New Braintree hills like an open curtain. Emile stops and gently opens the brittle notebook, pulled years ago from the recesses of the M.D.C. Archives. Soon he finds the place in the moldering catalog of another's observation ...

Burial #26, orientation Southwest, approx age 3-6 years.

The child in this burial rests in a tightly flexed foetal position without benefit of mortuary offerings. The skull is crushed, upper and lower mandibles parted. Before the face the hands are crossed as if in mourning. A dark organic layer lines the small circular pit ...

He looks up at the thawing field, his gaze a flat, lighthouse sweep of landscape. Under the scrim of ice, a brook flows quiet as a rumor, its essence hidden beneath the protection of thinning frost. Meltwater over stone, the lone sound of the ancient burial ground of Winimisset. Emile locks the notebook in the truck before slowly treading across the soggy meadow, each boot step thick with the suck of mud, deep with each impression stamped. Two hundred yards out, he stops to peer back at his first prints. He counts until they disappear into the fog at 20, the truck no longer visible in the density of air. All is still. As time passes the light fades and collapses all dimensions of sky. Emile stoops and presses both palms into the chilly earth. Soon the beacon sweep grows indistinct, the gaze now lidded and inward. A yellowed page, a tiny, curious hand, the crabbed letters barely lifted above the horizon of line ...

as if in mourning ...