

Critique

by Brian Ferguson

It was a typical modern classroom. Rectangular like a box. The drab tile floor stretched to the far end of the room, where it was cut off by an eight-foot wall of cold, hard, brick. On top of the wall was a row of short windows – more suitable for peering in than for looking out. The ceiling was covered with acoustical tile to absorb the sound, and the fluorescent tubes cast a cold, clinical light throughout the room.

Thirty-five desks, with cheap plastic seats, were precisely arranged in seven rows of five. They faced the blackboard, an instrument of torture so common its victims don't even scream when its contents are poured into their brains like sand.

The Instructor sat quietly at his desk watching the students enter. He had seen this scene often during the last 20 years. Year after year, the matter how happy and noisy they were in the hallway, they became hushed as they entered the door. "They know what we do here," he thought.

Middle aged, with brown hair, the Instructor had one wife, two TVs, three kids, and a mortgage. He was John Doe, Joe Average, a face in the crowd, and "Who cares? A job is a job."

"Could you move your desks into a circle please, so that we can all see each other?"

Immediately there was the sound of moving desks. People bumped into one another in the rush to please. Interestingly, however, the circle never completely closed. None of them moved their desks near the Instructor. He was sitting in the opening of a horseshoe, eight feet from the nearest student.

"I believe we were going to begin with John today. Since he isn't here yet, why don't we —"

The door opened.

"Ah, John, we were just getting started. We didn't know if you were coming. Are you ready to go first?"

John, embarrassed at being late, nodded an answer to the Instructor's question and quickly pulled a desk into the semicircle. He was a slender young man with sandy blond hair and sensitive blue eyes. There was a slight bulge in his jacket that he cradled carefully with his left arm. As soon as he was settled, the Instructor called on him.

"Go ahead and begin."

John unzipped his jacket halfway and was reaching in with his right hand when he suddenly paused. He looked at the faces of his classmates. All eyes were on him. They seemed to be – hungry? He looked away from them.

Slowly and gently John withdrew his surprise. It was a dove. Soft, gentle, and perfectly white. It nestled comfortably in John's hand, cooing quietly as he stroked the back of its neck. One of the girls in the class began to sigh but caught herself before anyone noticed.

John cupped the bird in both hands and leaned his head forward to whisper a prayer of hope in the bird's ear. Then, sitting up straight, he raised his arms, opened his hands, and the bird *flew!*

The walls of the room disappeared, and the entire class was caught up in flight. The dove sang of waves crashing on a beach, and they all flew with him along the sand

while a crimson-orange sunset ignited the clouds. The dove sang of branches waving in a breeze, and they chased each other laughing through the trees of a giant forest. The dove sang of the majesty of high mountain peaks, and they soared over a Himalayan sunrise.

And *oh!* the blue, blue sky! And the sheer immensity of the clouds! And the peace! And the vision! And the beauty! And the freedom! ...

"Any comments?" the Instructor asked.

The girl who had almost sighed wanted to say, "It was perfect! I loved it!" but she didn't. The class sat silently, not looking at one another. The bird stood on the Instructor's desk.

"What worked for you and what didn't?" Silence. "Let's see, who haven't we called on? Tom?"

"Well, I thought he captured the feeling of flight..."

"Was it believable?" asked the Instructor.

"No, it wasn't," Dennis interrupted. "Doves can't fly that high."

"Did that strain its credibility for you, Dennis?"

"Yes."

"How would you fix it?"

Dennis walked to the Instructor's desk and picked up a pair of scissors. Grabbing the bird in his left hand he quickly and efficiently clipped its wings so that it would never fly again.

"Thank you, Dennis," the Instructor said. "Who else would like to help John?" There was no reply. "What about the bird's song?"

Tom spoke up. "I guess that wasn't a very believable either."

"Why not, Tom?"

"Because doves don't really sing, they just sound like pigeons."

"Will you fix it, Tom?"

Tom took the scissors and cut out the bird's tongue. Being less experienced, he did a messy job, and blood continued to trickle out of the bird's beak after he finished. The bird was now lying on its side quivering.

"Yes, Betty?" she was raising her hand.

"I was turned off by the bird's whiteness. Nobody's that pure, even in fairy tales. It seemed a bit, well, childish."

"Do you have a solution?"

Betty dumped half a bottle of India ink on the dying bird.

"Are there any more comments for John?" asked Instructor. No. "John, do you have any questions for us?" Staring at his hands, John shook his head. "Very well," said the Instructor, picking up the lifeless bird and dropping it into his box of Things To Be Graded. "I believe Karen is next. Is that right?"

John, who had been thinking about his once beautiful dove, looked up just in time to see Karen open a small shoebox and take out a tiny chipmunk. He smiled to himself and reached into his pocket for his switchblade.