Switz City Anthology: The Plumber and the Painter

by Tori Kensington

And O, the Road goes ever on.
This Bilbo sang to the Plumber.
The Plumber was a girl with big hands
and big feet.
Once she had tried to give up plumbing
and had served old ladies wearing
Mercedes Benzedrine
Over their mink coats:
Hills, like dunn elephants
contrived of gourmet chicken salad
Over roast.
But since she was only a plumber
— and, therefore,
a plumbing image —
She put on Thomas Crapper's
Wax wedding ring
that welded her to craft
And dedicated her life
to the Municiple Building Code
of Plumbing.
And she grew deaf ears of Chicken Salad
With extra amounts of Mayonnaise.
So much Chicken Salad,
With so much Mayonnaise
That the old ladies couldn't
eat it fast enough to
keep out the
Ptomaines.
The Plumber smiled,
For she knew about the Ptomaines,
And the old ladies.
They wore the same perfume
As the faggots on Pennsylvania Street
In 1975.
And later she saw them hitch hiking
On the Road to Switz City
But she never stopped
to pick them up.
She knew where Switz City was,
But she never Stopped.
She had driven past Switz City;
But never through it.
And that made all the difference.
She had been successful at getting the car started again. She was unusually mechanically inclined. Automobiles seldom proved mysterious to her but her specialty was plumbing. But years of skillful plumbing had given her big calloused hands and big feet. She felt that she was too tall, and even this she had blamed on plumbing. "Just like Pinocchio," she thought. "Use some that you shouldn't and it'll just get bigger on you."

She called the Painter. "Let's go," she said. "It's time to get out of here, and on the Road."

"Okay," said the Painter.

They drove down the highway, and the real estate passed under them. They drove south like going to the principal's office for a paddling for not doing her homework. The Road unfolded.

Black asphalt,
Flat and fresh,
With yellow lines of mascara,
Cosmetically covered the chuckholes of long ago.
The Plumber knew them well,
But the Painter didn't seem to notice.

They drove on State Road 67.
They passed at least
67 Billboards
displaying
67 Lies
on which
67 Fortunes
were Made
off of People
Who could not go home anymore.

And the two travelers on 67
Equaled 69
Two opposites
Yet alike
One leaden, one hunting;
One driving, one riding;
One hardboiled, one over-easy;
Both traveling.
O, what a long Road it is to Switz City:
To find out the dream
Is not in the Road,
Or in driving,
But in your eye.
And by keeping
Your eye on the Road,
You can drive to Switz City,
Where grandmothers
Will stand on the back porches
Of their country homes
And watch,
as satellite tv dishes
bloom like daffodils
to put us
in
touch;
to bring us
closer
to—
get—
her.
And to pick up MTV
Among the soybeans.

III
The two travelers continued on their way to Switz City.
On the right was Observatory Road which led up a hill to the Goeth-
Link Observatory. It was built in the twenties, and now little used.
“It was bound to be here,” said the Plumber.
“Let’s have a look,” said the Painter.
They turned off and drove up the hill
To the Citadel
of those
Who would watch
the stars
All night long.

They would sit
behind great instruments.
And the light
of stars
and the planets
would fall
on their retinas
only.

And then they would name them.
Name them all;
With small hand whittled pencils
They had manically kept
To write in their notebooks;
To name the name
they had named them,
And number the number
they’d numbered them —
Like stray cats or dogs
or lost bicycles
Getting a registration
and putting them all
IN ORDER
as if the chaos of the universe
Wasn't orderly enough
For mankind
And the watchers would say,
To their wives and other lovers,
"There....right up there.....that star right there....that's MY star....I
named it....that's the one right there....C7861FGH/871KCH-01....
that's it, tha's the name of it .... tha's my star ....

But there were no watchers there now. They had all gone home and
so there was nobody to help the Plumber and the Painter.
But there it stood. Ready.
"I wonder where the watchers are?" said the Painter.
"I'm afraid they've used up all the stars," said the Plumber.
"Nobody wants to name something that's been named already."
"I can see their point," said the Painter.
They stood and looked at the observatory.
But it didn't look back. Its great eye was closed with a
mote of obsolescence. The building stood there, waiting, like a ship
in dry dock, or in mothballs, ready to sail the skys of united.
"United we stand," thought the Painter.
"Divided we don't show a profit," thought the Plumber.
And since there were no stars left to profit with, the observ-
atory mothed in its mothballs and would not let them in.
"Let's get out of here," said the Plumber.
"Okay," said the Painter.

IV
The Plumber and the Painter drove back to the highway that led
south to Switz City. The Plumber continued to drive. She had learned
plumbing in the south. Now she had big hands and big feet and was
too tall. "Plumbing," she thought. "That's what did it. And now I've got
to drive to the goddamned south.
She drove.
It seemed to her that she drove a lot. Driving and
plumbing, that's what did it to her. That's what.

Outside of Worthington they turned onto State Road 57. They had
turned the wrong way.
"It was bound to happen," said the Plumber.
"Oh," said the Painter.
"We'll turn around by the Bridge."
When they reached the Bridge, they left the car on the northern shore, and walked out over the water. They stood in the middle of the Bridge and looked south. The Plumber did not like the south. There was nothing down there that did not leak. All of the houses were full of bad pipes that seemed to run the wrong way.

"It'll never work, I told 'em," said the Plumber. "It ain't according to code."

They stood in the middle of the Bridge and the Road ran to the leaky south and it ran to the dry north.

The Painter wondered what the south was like. "Are there houses to paint down there?" he asked.

"Yeah, but they ain't built to code neither. Your paint won't do 'em any good. It won't hold 'em together.

The water flowed under the Bridge. And in the water they saw their shadows dance like trolls who live under bridges. And the shadow-trolls reminded them that the Bridge was not theirs and they could not stay there without paying. And since the Road ahead went away from Sitz City they turned around and headed back to the car.

"Let's get out of here," she said.

"Okay."

V

And so they found the road to Switz City.

O, it is a long road to Switz City.

"There must be a place for us," said the Painter.

"No there's not," said the Plumber.

There wasn't. It was all a lie. A hoax. A story.

The Painter knew better. He knew that colors were good, that he could make things clean and fresh and new again. All you needed was a gallon of Sear's Latex indoor/outdoor.

But the Plumber didn't understand latex novelty.

"Pipes leak or they don't. It's either to code or it ain't. You can lie with paint. You can't lie with plumbing.

The Painter sighed.

The Road stretched forward ahead. And the Painter thought how the Road was like his life. Coming. Being. Going. He saw. He was. He remembered.

He closed his eyes and laid back in his seat. "Soon we'll be somewhere. Soon this life and trip will take on some profound meaning," he thought. He looked at the Plumber. She was sniffing some Poppers.

"They're fun," she said, "just part of the trip."

He thanked her much for that.
The car moved.
The Road moved.
The Earth moved.
Every thing was moving around them.
   "Actually we're doing the moving. They're just standing still," thought the Painter.
   "And that makes all the difference," thought the Plumber.

VI
The wheels turned.
The Earth turned.
The observatory turned.

Their grandfathers had turned.
And their fathers had turned.
Now it was their turn.
Some will turn onto State Road 67,
but others will turn on State Road 57
(Outside of Worthington)
They will all go to Switz City.
   "They're bound to," said the Plumber.
   "And when they get there, they'll say:
   'Let's get out of here'
   They'll do it 'cause it's according to Code."

—Coda—
Soon they came to the hitchhikers. They were all lined up along the side of the Road. They all stuck out their thumbs and smiled. In the group were some bridge trolls, Drs. Goethe and Link, some building code inspectors, and several unemployed star watchers with full notebooks.
The Plumber pulled over and the Painter rolled down the window. The group of hitchhikers ran up and smiled into the window.
   "We all want to go with you," they said.
   "Where are you headed?" asked the Painter. "Switz City?"
   "Yes, yes! Give us a ride! Give us a ride to Switz City!"
The painter looked over at the Plumber.
   "Let's get out of here," he said, and he rolled up the window as they sped off.