

The Understory

Pamela Erens

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“To look twice is not good, not the way things should be, but I decide it is better than failing to look at all,” admits Jack Gorse, the lonely protagonist of Pamela Erens’ *The Understory*, at the top of this mesmerizing tale.

Erens, too, has looked twice as a writer. A former editor at *Glamour* and other magazines, she has authored short fiction for literary periodicals such as the *Chicago Review*. *The Understory*, the winner of Ironweed Press’s Fiction Prize, is Erens’ debut novel.

Life, or rather Jack’s wooden imitation of it, is realized through his daily routine of riding a certain subway at a particular hour, strolling streets teeming with office workers and lingering in a familiar bookstore—tasks that provide form, if not emotional content, to his existence.

One sport saves Jack from monotony—his occasional “sighting” of identical twins. “Nothing so far but Nature can make these mirror images, her rare gift of likeness in a world of infinite variety,” Jack explains. Consequently, he awakens each morning with a “sense of expectation, knowing that *unusual* does not mean *impossible*.”

Hope, even of that trivial kind, thus becomes the driving force, the “understory” of this ex-lawyer’s life. Most striking of all is Jack’s familiarity as a prototype for the rootless urban men who linger in public libraries, dine alone in cheap restaurants, and cling to respectability in SROs.

As the story opens, Jack has a home—albeit an illegal apartment in Manhattan—until harsh reality, epitomized by his greedy landlord Giglio, intrudes and demands his eviction. Only the empathetic intervention of a young Buddhist architect, Patrick, allows Jack time to mourn the inevitability of eviction. “Was this me?” he wonders as he gazes at the unflattering photograph Patrick takes of him. “The man’s eyes were unfocused, his face slack. There was stubble on his chin...” After several furtive attempts to connect with Patrick at a meditation center in the city, Jack retreats to a Buddhist monastery in Vermont.

Even there, his inability to connect spells disaster. Having fallaciously claimed expertise in gardening, Jack tends to the monastery’s bonsai plants. Within a matter of weeks, they have died. Perhaps, he admits, he had been “too brutal,” cutting their roots, especially the older ones which “could not withstand such drastic alteration.”

The bonsai are a metaphor for Jack’s return to Manhattan. He is determined to remain in his burnt-out apartment, and to continue his ongoing obsession with Patrick.

Paradoxically, while the reader may fault the narrative’s droning quality, he or she is likely to recognize at the story’s end that Jack’s voice is intentional, a universal human cry for love in spite of an unprovoked moment of violence.

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