

Hotel Nights with my Mother

by Linda McCarriston

The hometown flophouse
was what she could afford
the nights he came after us
with a knife. I'd grab my books,
already dreading the next day's
explanations of homework undone
*–I ran out of paper–*the lies
I'd invent standing in front of
the nuns in the clothes I'd lain in
full-bladder all night, a flimsy
chair-braced door between us
and the hallway's impersonal riot.

Years later, then, in the next
city, standing before my first class
I scanned the rows of faces,
their cumulative skill in the
brilliant adolescent dances
of self-presentation, of hiding.
New teacher, looking young, seeming
gullible, I know, I let them
give me any excuse and took it.
I was watching them all

for the dark-circled eyes,
yesterday's crumpled costume, the marks
–the sorrowful coloring of marks–
the cuticles flaming and torn.
I made myself each day a chink
a few might pass through unscathed.