The Last Shakeress

Gregory Blake Smith

Osie Johnson

Mother Ann:

I am a member of the world's people. I've got the fury and the mire running in my veins. I've got the moral mud of America spattered on me and a sickness in my heart. I've got Jesus and Satan see-sawing in my soul. And I am afflicted with ardor for your final virgin.

For a year now I've been spying on her, mapping her movements, her routine. At dusk I lock the chapel office, get on my bicycle and pedal along Undermountain Road until I get to the New Eden community. I hide in a tangle of scrubby bushes across the road from the white clapboard buildings. I set up my tripod on the dead leaves, screw on my spotting scope and take out a 300mm lens. If I get there before six o'clock I can spot her at work in the Sisters' Weaving Shop, see her through the Shaker-paned windows, in the soft Shaker light: the angle of her elbow in one pane, the flannel knuckle of her shoulder in another, the incurve of her waist, a vagrant scrap of hair falling from under her bonnet, and in one antique pane—in the wavy glass of another century—her inexplicable face.

Her name is Sabbathday Wells. Sister Sabbathday Wells. She's the last Shakeress.

My name is John Venner. I'm a Doctor of Divinity in love with a woman sworn to chastity.

In the winter it's not so easy. It's cold and it gets dark early. I take my ex-wife's car out, and under the cover of darkness, vault the white picket fence that encloses the grounds. Sometimes I see her footprints in the snow, the chevron grid of running shoes (my modern sweetheart!) going from the Weaving Shop to the Goods Store, the barn to the Dwelling House. I stand in the lee of one of the outbuildings and wait for her bedroom light to go on. There are no curtains and no shade on her window. At the sight of her nineteenth-century underwear, I bite my mittens in tumescent torment and hurry back into town.

"If you're going to lay me," my ex-wife says, "lay *me*, not her."

"Okay," I say, trying to get her undressed.

"And don't call me Sabbathday this time."

"Okay."

"And don't sing 'Simple Gifts' for Christ's sake!"

"Okay, okay! Jesus!"

"And not so fast. Give me a minute. Kiss me."

I kiss her.

"Kiss me again."

I kiss her again.

"Okay, now. Easy. No!" she says. "You'll have to do something."

I reach for the Vaseline.

"Something better than that!"

I do something better than that.

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THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW

An Audience With Madame Katanga

a short story by Gwen Head

Osie L. Johnson, Jr.

There was a woman in my exercise class who wore the most amazingly patterned leotards. Week after week I noticed her. Or tried to notice her. I am very nearsighted, and even low impact aerobics produce centrifugal forces that make my glasses fly off, up, and away. When that happens, I cannot see to find them. There is, in addition, the risk of sudden death by squat thrust.

What I seemed to see, from the corner of the second row from the back, was a sturdy, front-and-center person with fashionably bushy hair, whose thorax and abdomen changed with each class from one electric color to another. Meanwhile her limbs remained a mélange of weirdly harmonious patterns, as in one of those decorator rooms full of clashing prints that manage to get along together after all, like the occasional compound-complex post-divorce horde of heterogeneous children that somehow becomes a family.

The woman's irritable neon center made me think of a spider molting. Her unchanging limb patterns—unchanging from class to class, though each arm and leg had its own mix of designs—were a mystery. Clearly the wearer must like them very much. Less clear was whether she had several sets of the same t-shirt and tights, or only one that she washed and wore over and over. If the latter, I wondered what would happen when they finally wore out. Perhaps she had reinvented the lost art of darning? I wanted, in all senses, to see her more clearly.

The day her center turned striped, black and white but bold as a barber pole, I could stand it no longer. Usually I slip a wrap skirt and a ratty cardigan over my exercise togs and rush home to shower. That day I sidled toward the entrance to the locker room and loitered, fiddling with my skirt tie, until my quarry cantered past, flip-flops clattering like zebra hooves.

I sent a gesture of excuse and entreaty her way.

"Yes?"

From my not quite conversational distance, I could make out bits of pattern: stars, something vinelike, something paisley, and what seemed to be a pair of long, black kid gloves, crushed back to the wrist, where one of them looked glittery. The gloves threw me for a loop. Was she trying to sweat off a bad case of fat fingers? The woman's striped center seemed covered with straightforward cotton, but the texture of the rest eluded me, tight as spandex but not so shiny, matte but tenderly gleaming. How to begin?

"I like your patterns," I stammered. "They're beautiful. So—individual. Can you tell me where you got them?"

"What do you want?" the woman asked, ignoring my question.

"Well, I'd like to—oh, just talk to you a little, I guess."

"Talk to my agent."

Even at seven and three-quarter diopters, the look of a person who thinks you are very stupid and probably crazy to boot is unmistakable. I felt it envelop me. The paisleyed legs moved a step apart. The black gloves curled into fists that rested on the zebra hips.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I don't give— Wait a minute! Is it possible you can't *see* who I am?"

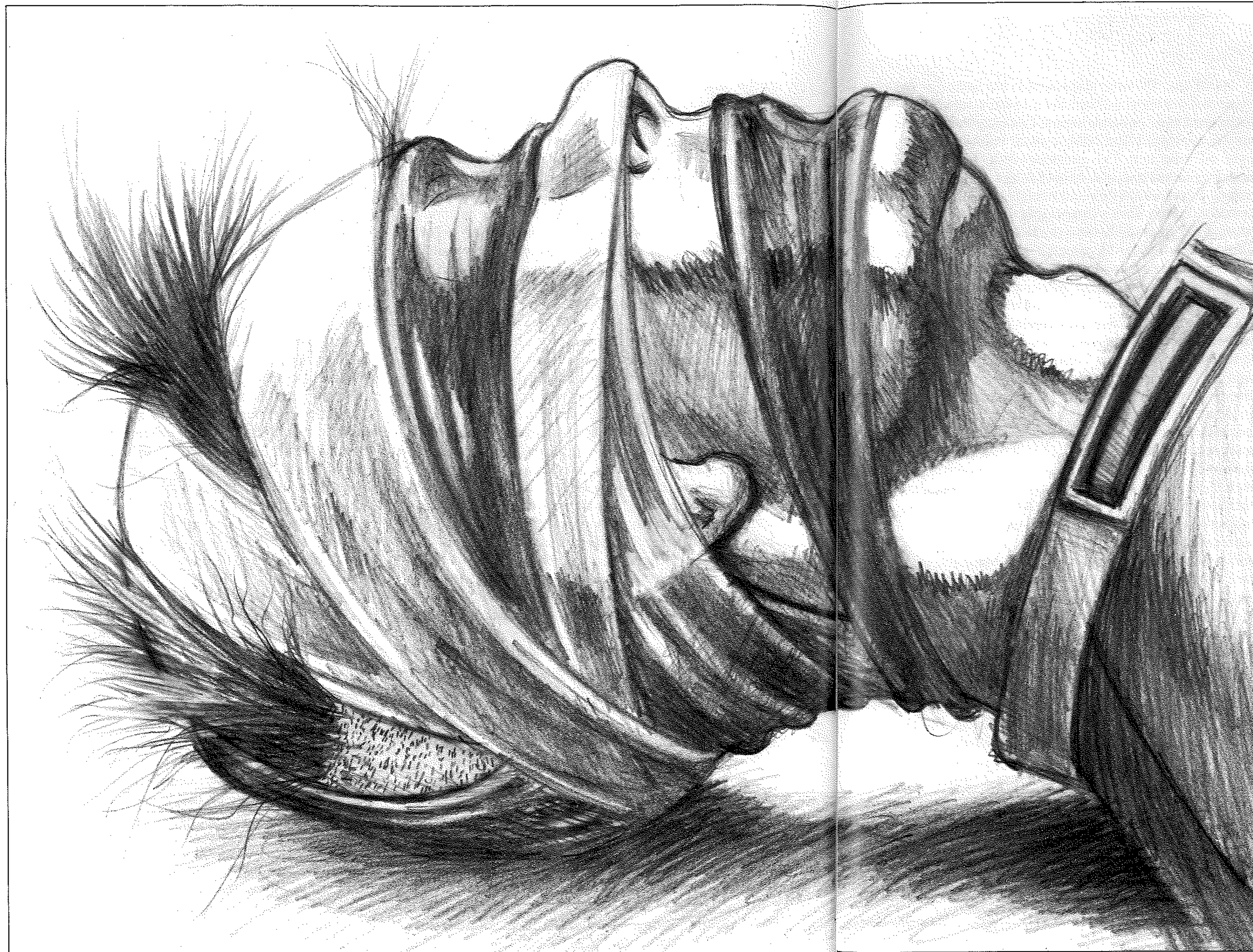
Humbly I unzipped my tote, fumbling the slide past a sticking point, and rummaged in it for my glasses. I carry several pairs, for various conditions of light and combinations of distance, and it can take quite awhile to find the right ones, even when I use the cases as an identifying color code. Exercisers brushed past on either side, pretending to notice neither of us. With glasses, it became clear that the parti-colored garment that fit this woman like a second skin was in reality her embellished first.

"Oh! Oh dear, I didn't realize. I mean, I—"

"Why should you apologize? As you yourself said, the patterns are beautiful."

And the woman drew herself up, buttocks tucked firmly under her tailbone, chin and chest high, and proceeded, one by one, to unfurl each dazzling limb before my eight-fold (natural plus trifocals—I wanted to be ready for anything) eyes.

"I am Madame Katanga," she said. "The *famous*



Osie L. Johnson, Jr.

Rubber Life

by Francine Prose

That winter I read a lot and worked in the public library. A fog settled in on my heart like the mists that hung in the cranberry bogs and hid the ocean so totally that the sound of the waves could have been one of those records to help insomniacs fall asleep. Always I'd been happy when the summer people left, but that fall I couldn't look up when the geese flew overhead and I avoided the streets on which people were packing their cars. Always I'd felt that the summer people were missing something, missing the best part of something, but now it seemed that I was the one being left as they went off, not to their winter office life, but to a party to which I had not been asked, and I felt like you do when the phone doesn't ring and no mail comes and it's obvious no one wants you. Of course I had reason to feel that way. But oddly, I hadn't noticed. How strange that you can be satisfied with your life till the slamming of some stranger's car trunk suddenly wakes you up.

I was trying to be civilized, cooking fresh produce till the market ran out, although it was only for me. The house I was caretaking had a microwave oven that seemed important to resist. The microwave surprised me. It was a colonial whaler's house, white clapboard with a widow's walk, so perfectly restored and furnished so obsessively with period pieces that all the comforts of modern life were tucked away grudgingly in some hard-to-find wing or upstairs. There was a cherrywood table on which I read while I ate. I had promised myself: no television till 10:30, when *Love Connection* came on. I loved that show

Osie L. Johnson, Jr.

The Facts of Air

by Antonya Nelson

She had left a pretty-enough life behind her, and because she could not yet be certain she had taken the correct step, Regina probed each new day the way one might old fruit, only too ready to find rot. She had been in her new home two days when she lost one of her cats in a sandstorm. Regina had not lived in Tucson long enough to understand that the storm was unusual, troublesome not only to a newcomer but to oldtimers as well, people who took for granted benign, happy weather. Nor did she know that, for the duration of her time there, she would not experience another like it. For the year that followed, Regina anticipated sandstorms the way she had used to blizzards or tornadoes in Ohio, battening down against the luminous sky and the facts of air.

The second cat, sister to the missing one and a homebody by nature, stuck close to Regina's heels, howling plaintively as if recounting her side of the story. It was a late afternoon in September and the sun burned, though barely, on the wavering line of the horizon. The door slammed behind Regina and sand stung her skin like bits of broken glass. She tried to shield her eyes,

face a friendly direction, but the wind and grit were omnipresent, erupting from nonspecific sources.

Giving up the search, Regina sat defeated in her new dining room gathering her wits. Sand flicked at the aluminum-cased windows. Door frames rattled and wind sent the loose lawn furniture sailing from the front porch into the gravel driveway. She had rented this home—"home" because its owners had not yet taken their belongings and so a family personality remained—from a divorcing couple. One of them was, apparently, a gynecologist; on the concrete porch, arranged as a kind of centerpiece among the transient plastic chairs and chaise longue, was an inert stainless steel examination table, complete with stirrups. Though the house had once obviously been custom-designed for these absent people and all its parts therefore desirable, half-empty it spoke of carelessness and waste, mutinous betrayal. Looking around at the ornately carved dining room chairs, Regina believed the family had tried to purchase a solidity, a comfort, they could not summon from one another. She felt not sorry for them but superior.

The wind seized the house like a contraction. Above Regina on the roof, a clatter followed; soon a piece of grill work covering the swamp cooler toppled down onto the withered back yard, blown bow-leggedly on its corners across the dead grass until it fell into the contaminated swimming pool and slowly sank. Regina clutched her arms as if they, too, were in danger of disengaging.

She could not imagine that her cat would survive—her mere nine pounds would be nothing in this wind—and decided to go ahead and cry about it. The cats had been the largest constant in her life for the last eight years. They pre- and post-dated her marriage; they reminded her of the good parts of single life. Most recently, they'd allowed themselves to be contained like luggage and hauled across the country, unpacked on the other end in the land of galing debris and dirt. Regina was thirty-two years old and by choice alone; it was not too much, she told herself resolutely and with no small part self-pity, to need her pets. She watched this unfamiliar city become further obscured in the churning air and thought nostalgically of Ohio, where storms originated in clouds and fell toward the earth, adhering to the basic laws of gravity and weather; life on the desert, it seemed, would be upside-down.

Overnight the wind died and the dust rearranged itself over the cactus land. Lux, the missing cat, came home, her coat heavy and dull with grit, her eyes weary and resentful. She was not the same animal she'd been. Regina offered her a guilty smorgasbord of foods, everything a cat could want, cream and lox and rank canned beef and quivering raw liver and diced cantaloupe, Lux's old favorite, but the animal would not eat, turning her gray nose up at it all. She did not seem to recognize her sister, though she didn't attack her, as she might a truly strange cat, but snubbed her, as if her experience out in the storm had elevated her to a plane of suffering the uninitiated would not appreciate. Regina thought of her friends who'd given birth; Regina would understand, they claimed, when she had a child of her own.

Regina's husband ferreted out her phone number and for a few weeks, his were the only calls she received. She continued to answer the phone because the odds kept building that it would have to be somebody else on the other end.

"Lux has a fever," she told him. She'd been testing the black pads of the cat's feet every few hours. When her paws felt abnormally warm, the two of them would head for the Emergency Vet clinic a few miles down the road. Regina's rented house was on the high desert outside of Tucson; she had believed the open-aired sanctuary of a western city's outskirts would be just what she required after her separation. She and Lux became such frequent late-night visitors at the clinic that the vet quit charging her for anything more than the medication; still, the bills ran up. Regina would hold Lux's front end while the vet bunched the gray fur at the back of the cat's neck and gave her an injection. Then the two women, the vet and Regina, would dunk Lux in a stainless steel sink of cold water. Soaking wet and shivering, the animal had the slick, grotesque look of a newborn creature, and Regina felt a frightening aversion to her.

"They have this disease here," she told Tom over the telephone, "called Valley Fever. It's from fungus in the air. Everyone gets it, but only some people get it bad. This man walks up and down Speedway talking to himself and scratching his back until it's bloody. Valley Fever went to his brain."

"'Speedway'?"

Regina paused, vindicated all over again in having left her husband. "See, Tom? Is it possible for you to ever really get the point? I tell you stuff about this horrible disease, this poor bastard, and you say 'Speedway.'"

"I'm just saying, 'Speedway'? Like a racetrack?"

"Anyway, there's Valley Fever in the air, getting sucked down in everybody's lungs. Speedway's just a street."

"So what *is* the point, Reg? You chose to go there."

She sighed, not sure herself. "Why did you call me?"

"You don't know what you're doing," he said in exasperation. "You're like a sleepwalker, about to step off a cliff."

Regina pictured then his laborer's raccoon-eyed tan, the soft white skin his sunglasses protected, the way his brown hair seemed permanently indented by the cap he wore, the way he whistled through his widely-spaced teeth when he enjoyed himself, the way his slim hips never quite held his pants. At a distance, these things endeared him to Regina; in person, she had found them insufferable, just the presence of him, his long arm not

Osie L. Johnson, Jr.

EMILY'S FATHER

BY MELINDA ROONEY

Emily's father was a little crazy. He hid things in his beard. It was thick and long, down to the third button of his union suits, with two white streaks as neatly parallel as road stripes. He wore nothing but union suits with holey jeans over them, boots with steel toes, and a crocheted cap shaped like a big aspirin. He had dozens of union suits dyed all different colors, and Emily had dozens of her own, much smaller. She was in charge of laundry and folded and stacked them by color so that there were two exactly matching piles, differing only in size.

Emily's father had a room with a window and a spindly black pedal sewing machine where he decorated Emily's union suits with ribbons or glittery rickrack, stitched up the skirts and baggy shorts she wore over them. When he sat down to sew he'd tie off his beard with a length of whatever was handy and fling it over one shoulder so it wouldn't get caught under the needle and pull him in.

He bought a tiny jean jacket for one of Emily's birthdays and spent evenings embroidering it with foreign words in bright colors. He said good night to her in seven different languages. She learned to repeat them, dancing syllables flying from her lips, ringing noisily around her father's head like carousel horses.

He had delicate fingers, full of sensation; when he touched something pleasing Emily could see his face change. They were permanently stained from the dyeing of the union suits, which he did upstairs in the bathtub. He sometimes did the legs in two different colors, sometimes tied them in tight bundles with pieces of thread so that they unwrapped to reveal cloudy star shapes. The tub had a collar of dye around its drain like the drink stains around Emily's mouth.

At Christmas he'd string his beard with lights and tinsel and round metal ornaments that fell when he laughed, shattering like eggs on the floor between his feet. At Easter when other children rooted through baskets of colored grass Emily rooted through her father's beard for jelly beans and chocolate eggs wrapped in foil. On Valentine's day she sat in his lap and ate right from his beard, tasting his hair's odd perfume at the edge of the cinnamon balls and chalky printed hearts. Hey Cutey Pie, they read. Hubba Hubba. This year she'd felt her weight pressing against his narrow thighs, felt the way they trembled beneath her. She had pulled herself up, willed herself to lighten.

She knew her father was a little crazy. Sometimes he laughed for no reason.

Each morning before school he took her for coffee to a dark, noisy place with red plastic booths that hissed when they sat in them. He would order while Emily staked out a booth, spreading out her crayons and books and fistfuls of ribbons. He came with cups of coffee, a small one in an espresso cup for Emily, and two muffins. As they drank he would tie sections of her hair into tiny pigtails, each with a different ribbon, until her head was a mop of color. He'd catch their reflections in unlikely places—stainless steel pitchers, the backs of spoons, the cashier's glasses—and point them out to her.

"Take a look at that," he said one day on their way to the shop. Ahead of them was a blind man with a blonde retriever in a harness. The dog mistook the mirrored wall of a storefront for the road ahead of him and walked the blind man right into it, sniffing at its own reflection. "That's what happens when you don't recognize yourself."

"But he's blind," Emily said.

"I was talking about the dog," he said.

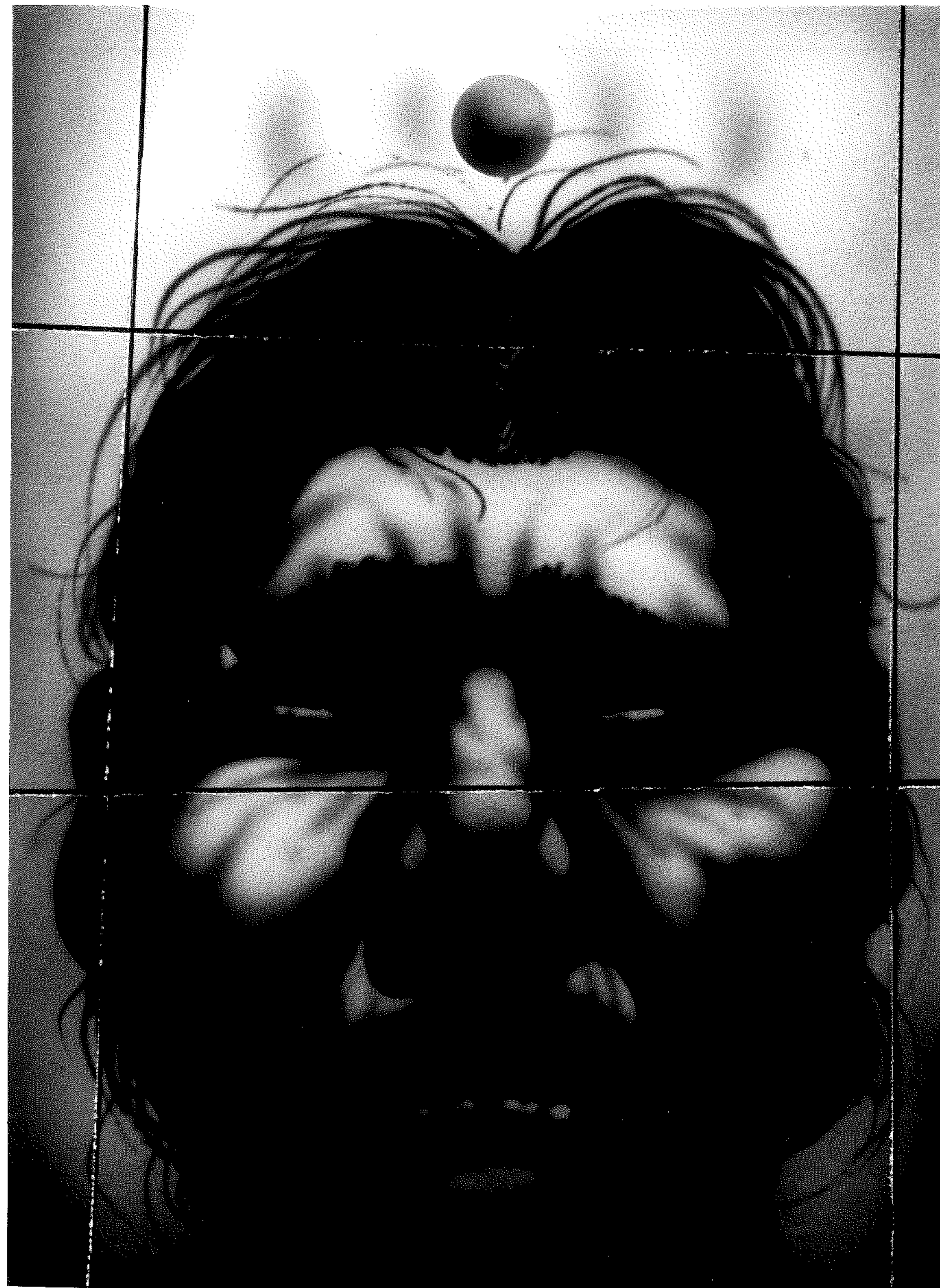
People watched them. It was hard for them not to. She took tiny sips from her espresso cup and sharpened her crayons, leaving waxy curls scattered over the white formica. Often she heard her father begin to laugh, way up above her head, a bird nested in the mess of his beard. With her face against the rough coloring book paper, its dusty smell heavy in her mouth, she felt people's eyes on them—like hands held over her ears, like roaring in a shell. She sat safe, cushioned by watchers, held in her father's laugh like a fairy in a flower.

At the end of October Emily's maternal grandmother called to invite Emily and her father to her annual Halloween party. They were invited every year even though they never went, even though Emily's mother had been dead for two years.

Emily and her father had their own Halloweens. He'd make her whatever costume she asked for: a giant felt banana, an Eskimo girl. For the Eskimo girl he brought home a slab of bacon for whale blubber. She carried it through the neighborhood on a skewer. He'd fill his beard with plastic spiders and tiny glow-in-the-dark skeletons, and they'd go trick-or-treating.

"Wouldn't you like to come, darling?" her grandmother said. "There will be a lot of children your age, and a haunted house and a playroom all to yourselves." Emily's grandmother was loaded. Her father told her this like it was something dirty, like she pooped in her pants. She called often, dropped by with foil-covered dishes, gave Emily appraising looks, touched the top of her head with the tips of her fingers, made fine adjustments. During one visit she discussed riding lessons.

"Your mother was a great jumper," she said to Emily, appraising Emily's limbs, searching them for signs of horsemanship.



Osie L. Johnson, Jr.

A Story by A. Manette Ansay

SYBIL

The twins pat mousse into Sybil's hair, working the tight, carefully-blued curls into stiff barbed wires the color of salmon. She cannot escape without her walker, and they have taken her walker down the front steps and across the lawn to the hickory tree. The mousse stings her scalp. It's strawberry scented, and myriad tiny flies circle blindly overhead, lured into the kitchen through the screen door which is propped open by a brick.

"She's crying," says the first twin.

The second twin peers into Sybil's face, small pink mouth agape. Sybil can see a sliver of white in the child's gum where a new tooth is coming in. The twins have lost their top front teeth this summer. *Angel teeth*, their mother calls them.

"No she's not," says the second twin. "She's just thinking, that's all."

"Maybe she's thirsty."

The second twin considers this and goes over to the refrigerator. She takes out a pitcher and pours Kool-Aid into a glass she finds on the counter. She carefully brushes an ant from the rim of the glass. A smoke-gray cat, panting with heat, is coiled between the dishes in the sink. The twin scratches its head. Everything she touches gets kissed with a faint, pink smear of mousse. She holds the Kool-Aid to Sybil's lips, but Sybil turns her face away.

"See?" says the twin. "She don't want anything."

Her sister kisses Sybil's neck. Both twins are solemn little girls with pale yellow cheeks and yellow ponytails and their voices are pinched and whispery. They make more barbed wires with the mousse. They work until every inch of Sybil's head is spiked and rosy.

"She looks bea-u-tee-ful," says the first twin serenely.

"I don't think she likes it."

"She looks just like a movie star."

The second twin drinks the Kool-Aid. They look at their grandmother with wispy blue eyes, their bright gazes crossing and recrossing her face the way spotlights search a dark sky.

Margie gets home from work at five, and the first thing she sees is Sybil at the table with spiked, rosy hair. The twins are nowhere in sight. Ants cluster on the table where drops of mousse have fallen.

"Oh, God," says Margie. "Where are they? Where'd they go? Oh, Sybil, I'm so sorry! It washes out, though, I've used it on my bangs. It'll rinse away in a jiffy, I swear."

Sybil tries to form words and strange sounds come from her mouth. The stroke has garbled her speech. When she's calm, she can write out words, gripping a pen with her fist. But Sybil is not calm.

"I've got a *date*! Can you believe it?" Margie says, brushing past Sybil and twisting on the cold-water faucet in the sink. The smoke-gray cat hops out onto the counter top. It flicks its paws, one at a time. Margie splashes water on her face. She hasn't had many dates since Victor left four years ago, but she makes the most of what she gets.

"God, this heat, can you believe it? Ninety-five downtown, hotter tomorrow, I bet. Johnny Hecht asked me to dinner at The Gander. They got air conditioning and big-screen TV."

Sybil says, "H-H-Hair!"

"Johnny, he don't mind kids, he got his own two anyway. We got talking on lunch today, and he said, C'mon, let's get outta here, so we went mini-golfing at The Palace. You know, that place off I-94? With the big dinosaurs?"

Margie wipes her face and twists a pen into Sybil's hand.

"Write down where they went to," she says. "I gotta get dressed. And don't worry, I promise that'll wash right out."

She trots down the hall toward her bedroom, unbuttoning her uniform as she goes. Margie is a receptionist at the Lakeside Hotel. Sybil's

Poor Man Road

A STORY BY WILLIAM MATTHEWS

Was it seven years ago—Good God it was—that Janet twined up the road to Nederlands to look at a house for sale the day before it officially came on the market? What an address it had: Poor Man Road, Sunshine Canyon, Boulder, Colorado! For 142,000 impossible dollars Janet could buy a house, site and view so drastic that surely they would mend Janet's tattered life.

Wouldn't the girls love it here? She took them up for a look to confirm that fantasy, but Alison was a smudge of resentment and Patty said, surveying the angles, the cedar, the glass, the cantilevered views, "Well, Mom, I guess this is what they mean by a broken home."

"It's preventive dentistry," the dentist said, but earlier he'd said "twelve thousand dollars."

"Well," Janet replied, "I'll think about it, but for today I'll just have that cleaning."

"First, some x-rays," the dentist decreed.

"Put your forehead here," Shula, the dental hygienist, said, and brought *here*—a perfect curve, like a beach in a travel folder, of molded plastic—to her forehead.

"Now bite this," she advised; "just find the groove with your front uppers." She cranked to get the groove the proper height for Janet to bite, and Janet bit.

"Right," she said, and draped over Janet's shoulders a cross between a flak jacket and a cape. "Lead," thought Janet, when her shoulders sagged a little from its weight. What kept the lead in was a fabric like the one moving companies used to wrap your furniture. They sent a man to scour your house with you and list each piece you wanted to move. On a crumpled form clamped to a clipboard he noted the condition of the bed, the bureau, the night-table: "SM," meaning "scratched & marred." Her mouth would be like that on the x-ray film.

"Now inhale," Shula commanded. She had a new diet scheme each time Janet came in and the same reptile of a boyfriend. "Relax," she'd suggest, as if all evolution were designed to make us accept sharp objects in our mouths. "He's taking me skiing," she'd say, "but it's supposed to rain all weekend, so we'll sit in the bar and bitch about the weather. The future in ruins...," she laughed, "but the brandies will help."

"Mmmph."

"Sorry."

"Mmmph."

"What?"

"Mmmph."

"Rinse, please."

Janet rinsed and spat.

"He'll go down on me," Shula explained, "but he won't talk nice to me. I guess you don't usually get both."

"Not at the same time," said Janet.

If I could pay twelve thousand dollars to prevent dentistry, she thought, it might be worth it.

It's blackmail, she thought. I don't have mouth pain, I don't think dentist. But this is the way he flies in under the radar.

It's fear they want to sell you, she thought. They take a picture of your bones and teeth and show it to you. Show, don't tell. It's a protection racket.

But what if my teeth fall out? Then I'm a toothless paranoid, she thought, and I'll have the satisfaction, mmmph, of being right.

It was twelve thousand dollars she'd been short of the down payment for the house on Poor Man Road, dollars eroded and grown decrepit by the intervening years, and each pale, absent one of them was as much a taunt this year as it was then.

If you divorce a man with whom you've had children, the children are the noisy afterlife of the dead marriage, even if—perhaps especially if—you remarry. The divorce papers serve merely to make your bigamy legal. It's five years since the divorce, let's say, and he would call to talk about the girls' travel plans for Thanksgiving. His voice was squinched like the face of someone who knows he's being photographed, and she could hear and hate in her own voice the same false ease. "Now let me talk to the girls," he'd say, and Patty would gurgle and chirp, and then Alison would listen raptly and hang up and turn to Janet and ask with a flounce, "Don't you just love him?"

I shouldn't be doing this, Janet thought. He had called, the girls were off playing with pals, he'd asked how she was, she'd answered unguardedly, and the next she knew she was talking about money with her ex-husband.

"Twelve thousand dollars," she was saying.

"That's a mouthful," he said.

"If there were twelve thousand-dollar bills," she thought, and she was saying it at the same time, "you could get them all in your mouth at once. Have you ever seen a thousand dollar bill?"

Suddenly his guard was up. She could hear it, not by any change in his voice, for he didn't speak, but by a change in the quality of the silence as he paused. "Once or twice," he said, stage casual, "at the office."

Now she didn't know what to do.

Nor, evidently, did he, for the next thing she knew he was offering to lend her money for dental work.

It took her five minutes to get off the phone more or less gracefully, and five more to begin weeping and five more after that to stop.

"And then," she told Ben, pausing to slosh a little wine into his glass, and for dramatic effect, "he offered to lend it to me."

"That's why they call it a bankroll," Ben said.

This too had its dramatic effect, for Janet had no idea what he meant. I'm in a play, she thought, and perhaps not a good one.

"What?"

"I mean when it's rolled up it's like a penis. This is how they compete."

"What do you mean, 'they'?"

"Men like him."

"Why should he compete? I've never mentioned you to him."

"Be reasonable," said Ben, not pleading at all. "That's how he knows there's a me."

"Mommy," Alison was asking the next morning, "do you like Ben?"

"Of course I *like* him." Janet was instantly wary.

"Well," Alison started, and waited to be spurred on. Janet spurred. "Well, are we gonna move there, or is he gonna move here, or what?"

So. The issue was large, direct and simple. This would be easy after all. "None of the above."

"Mom*my*," whined Alison—she was getting younger by the sentence, "what does *that* mean?"

"It means I only like him a little and nothing's going to change."

"Whew," said Alison, "I was afraid you were going to marry the bozo."

"No," Janet was saying into the phone, "just for a cleaning," and she was thinking: *what, six months already?* If she were across the room, she could imagine the other half of the conversation, and surely, then, it would have more interest and less naked salesmanship.

"No. You see, preventive dentistry means that dentistry gets prevented, and what you're talking about means dentistry happens and bills are mailed, so it's a euphemism..."

And if she were across the room listening, she could imagine that the missing half of the conversation was not words at all, but a series of gargled *Mmmphs.*

"A euphemism. It's been gift-wrapped. It's been translated into polite and doesn't say *money* and doesn't say *pain.* From my end it sounds almost like a lie and from your end it sounds almost like marketing."

Another pause.

"No, I didn't call you a liar. Please. I was trying to say what *euphemism* means, and that's all." This was of course a lie, but Janet wasn't trying to call herself a liar, either. She was trying to get off the phone without anger or tears, during or after. "Let's not fight. Let's not make up either. Let's just disagree. Ask Shula to schedule me for a cleaning."

That caused a pause, but not a long one. If Janet had been across the room she'd not have known at all what to make of the next thing she heard herself say. Damn the phone. Praise the phone.

"Oh, really. When was the wedding?" □

ILLUSTRATION: OSIE L. JOHNSON, JR.

LUCKY

A Story by Philip Graham

ILLUSTRATION: OSIE L. JOHNSON, JR.

I have a nice shop—men's clothes, all of them classic. No young kids bother to come in for whatever's latest because they know they won't find it here. I don't mind, I've known most of my regular customers for years—the second anyone walks through the door I can remember his collar size, sleeve length, you name it. I've always been the fellow who tucks everyone nicely into suits and pants and shirts, and I know more than measurements, I know what my customer doesn't want to see in the three-way mirror: usually it's the bald spot, the paunch or the neck wattle, so I divert attention to the shoulder pads, the cuffs, the snappy angle of a lapel.

Maybe I know my customers too well, because when old age settled in and they started dying I took it hard, right from the moment I heard the first bad news. I remember I was standing behind the register, enjoying the look of the long row of suits against the wall—I liked to think they were waiting patiently in line for something, maybe opening night at some big Broadway play, and they were all happy to have tickets. Joe Baxter walked in—the fellow who always goes through the tie racks three times before making up his mind. I was already thinking, Hat size: 7 3/4, when he said, "Hey Pete, guess what?"

He was holding back a nervous grin and I knew I was about to hear some awful surprise—that's just the way he was. He'd done this to me before, once when Sadat was shot, another time when the space shuttle blew up. But Joe stopped smiling when he finally said, "Tiny Martin died—his heart. He just fell down on his way to breakfast."

I leaned back against the counter and could only manage a weak, "No—Tiny? That's terrible." I liked Tiny and always felt sorry for him, beginning with his nickname—he was almost too big for the largest size in the shop. And the poor guy was afraid of the dressing room—he never tried on anything before buying. "No thanks," he said to me the first time he ever stopped by, "I don't need to go in there." So I rearranged the cufflink display while he stood in front of the mirror and held shirts under his chin; after he picked out something, he told some little joke at the register, almost like he was thanking me for leaving him alone. Later, I heard talk that he'd seen real trouble back in the Korean War, squeezed inside some narrow prison cell.

Harriet and I went to his wake—a room full of flowers with nothing cheery about them—and poor Tiny looked awfully cramped in that coffin. The morticians had done a terrible job dressing him—the collar could barely contain his neck, and the knot of his tie was pulled off to one side, just like my brother Jamie's tie at his own funeral so long ago. I hadn't thought of it in years—I was nine, maybe ten at the time—though I could clearly recall waiting in line for the viewing, nervous even though I knew there was barely a scratch on him—only internal injuries from his fall while chasing me up a tree. Jamie was dressed in a suit—something I'm sure he never wore when he was alive—with a thick blue tie knotted funny and twisted almost sideways. He looked so unlike himself that I leaned up close to his peaceful face, even though I was still afraid: sometimes at night he used to turn on the light by my bed and I'd wake to see his face inches from me, twisted up in some vile and gruesome way until I started crying.

Then there I was, standing beside Tiny's coffin, tears pouring down, and Harriet whispered behind me, "C'mon, honey, people are waiting."

I was so spooked that we left, too early to be polite. After that I avoided wakes and saved my respects for the funeral service, where Harriet and I sat in a pew in the back with the ushers and the less popular relatives. Because there *were* more funerals to go—Jack Banes, a lover of cardigans, wasted away from cancer; and Paul Markowitz, a tie clip collector, died of kidney failure. Worse, more funerals were on the way. One afternoon I got a call from Larry Johnson's wife, Gloria, and she said, "Pete, Larry needs a shirt for my niece's wedding tomorrow, but he can't, um, come by today. Could you pick something out for him and drop it by later?"

"Sure, I know his size, and you're on my way home," I said, a little surprised, but her tone of voice said, Don't ask questions.

I brought along a nice selection, but Larry was in no condition to choose. He was sitting in the den beside a record player and listening to this scratchy Benny Goodman tune—when the clarinet hit its stride and went in loops around the beat, Larry's face opened up like he was hearing it for the first time. Then he flipped the needle to the beginning so he could hear it for the first time again, and he gave that spinning record a silly grin. This was not at all the same man who rattled off baseball statistics while I chalked cuff lines on his pants. Gloria had a terrible look on her face, like she was a convict counting the minutes before parole, and I knew Larry'd been doing this all day, at least. God knows what was on *my* face, but she leaned in close to me and whispered fiercely, "You think *he's* bad? Tom Peterson is some big fan of Sesame Street—he watches letters and numbers dance and sing all day long. Poor Ann."

So one day I finished my lunchbreak sandwich, glanced over at the rows of suits, and they looked like they were all lined up to view the deceased. Next thing you know, I might start seeing ghosts poking through shelves of sweaters or avoiding the dressing room. What's needed here is a change of scene, a walk to the park, I told myself, and I tucked the local paper under my arm and closed up shop for the rest of the hour.

I sat on a bench and watched the children playing their games in the sandbox for a while, then I opened up the paper and worked my way into the international news, all that faraway trouble. The national news followed—the usual sleazy dealings in Washington—and then I came to our town's police blotter, the minor local fires, the major sales in the malls. Finally I turned a page and there were the obituaries.

I closed the paper and let it flap in the wind a little bit—after all, I'd come to the park to avoid this sort of thing. But what if someone I knew was in there—was I going to let Joe Baxter surprise me again with another awful grin?

All the names were unfamiliar. How could this upset me? So I read on. Everyone was survived by *somebody*: a wife or husband, brothers or sisters, kids grown up and scattered in different towns or states and *their* kids grown up and scattered. A job was listed too, just like another next-of-kin, and so was the time of death, down to the minute: 12:35 p.m. or 8:34 a.m. or whatever. I thought back to the day before and I tried to remember what I'd been doing at those times: maybe squeezing a tube of toothpaste, or finishing off a tuna sandwich.

That afternoon, when no one was in the shop, I stopped in the middle of arranging a shipment of socks in bins, checked my watch, whispered, "Goodbye and good luck," and wondered if I'd just given a friendly send-off to someone I knew. The next day I read the obits to see how I'd done: no one there was even an acquaintance, and I hadn't even come close to any time of death. But I kept up this little game for weeks, and I began to seem strange to myself.

I started thinking that when I retired—just a few years off, really—Harriet and I should move far, far away where we didn't know anybody, where the obits wouldn't have one familiar name: I didn't want to wait for Tom Peterson or Larry Johnson or anyone else to die.

Usually when Harriet made breakfast, I watched sleepily and thought about how lucky I was—she could have done a lot better than me, that's for sure. But one morning I finally had to say, "Why don't we move when I retire?"

She kept stirring those scrambled eggs and wouldn't turn around, so I knew I had to speak carefully. Harriet was always the quiet one, and over the years I had learned to read her whole collection of quiets. I even had a favorite, her Out-of-the-Body quiet: I liked watching her knit, hands on automatic while her face took on this kind of faraway peace, like she could see something really wonderful that was miles off.

But the way she was slowly stirring those eggs I knew she was into her I-Wish-You-Hadn't-Said-That quiet.

"Say we move south," I said to the back of her head. Her hair was up in its usual bun, with a wisp loose here

HILL COUNTRY

By Madison Smartt Bell

In August of 1791, a large number of the black slaves of the French colony of Sainte Domingue met at the LeNormand Plantation on the borders of the forest called Bois Cayman, to organize a revolt against their white masters. The slave uprising, which broke out a couple of weeks later, lasted for ten years and finally, under the leadership of Toussaint L'Ouverture and other black generals, resulted in the independence of Haiti.

The uniformed footman laid a tray of coffee on the table before Isobel Cigny. Her spoon jingled cheerfully against the edge of a china cup. Doctor Hébert watched the movements of her small white hand. When she beckoned him, he came forward and accepted a cup and saucer and returned to his chair. Captain Maillart, meanwhile, leaned forward from his seat on the sofa to help himself to a plate of cakes. He turned to offer one to the girl Celeste, who sat beside him there.

Doctor Hébert inhaled steam from his coffee, without yet tasting it. The odor of the sugared brew reminded him oddly of the smell of burning that blew daily from the plain. Isobel Cigny looked up at him teasingly, as if she had read his mind.

"Our sugar is still of a perfect whiteness here," she said at large. "We do not follow the vicious saying of that English minister."

"*Pardon?*" said Celeste. She looked blandly about with her large blue eyes. She had declined the proffered cake, leaving her hands demurely folded on her lap.

"William Pitt has remarked on our misfortune," Captain Maillart said. "'It seems that the French prefer their coffee *au caramel*.'"

The doctor surprised himself by blurting out a laugh (although he'd heard this bitter jest before). Madame Cigny looked at him rather sadly, three fingers pressed against her small pink lower lip. The doctor's eyes slid away from her, toward Claire, who sat apart from the others at a small sewing table in the corner, a basket by her feet and work on her lap. By her position in the room it was unclear to what degree she might or might not belong to this social group, though of course an untrained eye would probably not have doubted her *perfect whiteness*. She had not taken coffee. Her dress was vastly simpler than before, merely a pale loose shift a little better than what a household slave might wear. Her eyes were lowered to her sewing. The doctor had had no opportunity for as much as a private word with her, nor was he certain he'd have sought her intimacy, were it more available to him. Though he came here often, twice a week, he had little idea how to comport himself with her in these half-public circumstances. She tossed a lock of hair from her face and bent again to her work; the movement was not quite enough for him to catch her eye.

"*Oui, vraiment,*" Celeste said almost tonelessly, peering into the sugar bowl. "*C'est évident.*"

Captain Maillart looked at her, at a loss for a direction to continue. He had been trying to flirt with the girl for the past half hour, but she was most unplayful.

"And you," Madame Cigny said to the doctor. "You will be leaving us as well, I understand."

"Yes," the doctor said, and sipped his coffee, meaning to go on.

"You tear yourself away," Madame Cigny developed her theme with a brittle vivacity, "from our fair city, with its... spectacles. The gallows and gibbets. The execution wheels."

"Painfully," the doctor said. It was not an ideal choice of word. "Affairs at *Habitation Thibodet* have been neglected...."

"During your long absence," Madame Cigny said, helping him along. "And will require your most earnest attention."

"Yes, as you say."

"No word from the mistress?"

The doctor shook his head, understanding her to mean Elise. He smiled at her, in thanks for her tact. It had entered his mind that his sister might have returned to the plantation, especially if news of her husband's death had somehow reached her. But he had had no communication from anyone there and so could not know if the plantation itself was still in existence, for that matter.

"I do wish you would dissuade this child from undertaking this foolhardy journey," Isobel Cigny said, looking at Celeste, who was perhaps four years her junior. No one answered her. The doctor set his cup aside, on a small table. Celeste had been offered hospitality at the Paparel plantation, in Marmelade, and she was intending to set out for the place the next morning, escorted by Captain Maillart and a party of militia.

"You might do very well to stay here," Madame Cigny said directly to Celeste. "I will gladly open my house to you. In any event we seem to have become a hostelry for displaced persons... of various sorts." Coolly she glanced at the doctor, who dropped his eyes toward the toes of his boots.

"You are kind," Celeste said. "Yet I have always preferred country living to the distractions of a town."

"It must be admitted," said Madame Cigny, "that for the moment our town is less than an ideal setting for a girl such as yourself—much as I regret to say it. Still I wonder at your journey. Is it wise?"

Celeste smiled, sweetly or stupidly, as the disposition of an observer might interpret it, and said nothing at all. Madame Cigny got up and quickly crossed the room to her. Seating herself lightly on the arm of the sofa, she took Celeste's face between her two hands and twisted it up toward her own. It was rather an abrupt movement, and to the doctor it didn't seem entirely friendly. Isobel Cigny was examining her visage much as a horse trader might examine an animal. Captain Maillart stared at the pair of them, open-mouthed.

Seeing himself unobserved, the doctor thought he might at least exchange a glance with Claire. But when

ILLUSTRATOR: OSIE L. JOHNSON, JR.

Still, the bark was the only thing that helped him hold his perch. There were no branches. He had thrust himself waist high into the long serrated fronds that sprang from the crown of the tree. They seemed to rattle with his breathing. There was a particolored patch on one that proved to be a giant katydid when the doctor nudged it with his thumb. Through its artifices it had turned itself the precise color of the palm leaf and mimicked veins and fibers, even a few patches of leaf rust, to make itself more completely frondlike. The doctor wished he had a similar ability.

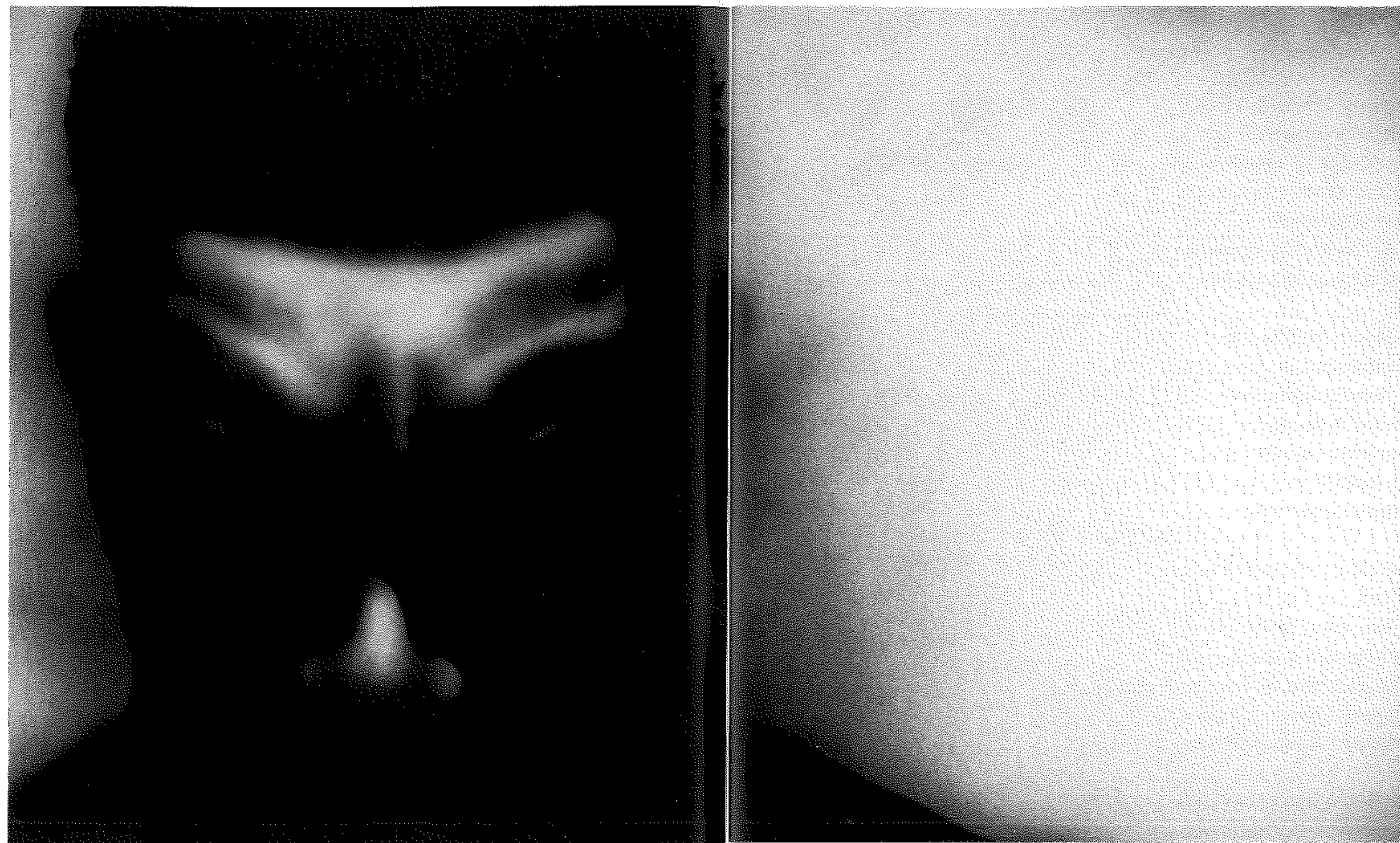
His eyes went out of focus. He was tired, dazed really. Thirsty too. It was uncomfortable to cling there in the tree and still less comfortable to speculate on what might be his chances if and when he ever came down. Supposing he escaped discovery by the blacks, he still had no way to get out of the area. The horse was still screaming in the shale. He imagined from what he had seen that the rebel slaves would be looting or destroying all the provisions on the plantation. Though one could live on the country here. There were fruit trees, other edibles too if he had known how to identify them. He licked a little blood from the heel of his hand, sliced in parallel lines as tidily as a razor could have done it, and peered down at his naked ankle. It hadn't swollen too much, and he hoped it was only sprained, not broken, but it couldn't carry him very far or fast. The horse kept on screaming; he wished someone would shoot it. The pain in his ribs was soft, dull, not the sharp-edged sensation of a break, so maybe only bruising, though he didn't know what internal damage he might have sustained. He laid his cheek against a shiny wedge of bark and as his eyes glazed over and slid shut he saw again the severed heads swinging across that lead rider's lap. The woman's head, he now recognized, belonged to the girl Celeste; those slack lips pulling off the teeth had been her petal mouth, that matted bloody rope her wealth and treasure of long flaxen hair.

It wouldn't do to wonder what had happened to the rest of her. The horse was still screaming, hoarsely now. It would break off for a time and then start over. Somehow it bothered the doctor more than anything else that happened all that day and he knew he would be hearing it ring in his head for a very long time afterward, supposing he survived long enough to enjoy this experience or any other. A great commotion started up around the foot of his tree. The doctor parted the palm fronds and looked down. Several rebel slaves in the tattered cotton breeches of fieldhands were gesticulating at him and chattering loudly among themselves in creole. The doctor couldn't make out one word of what they said. The only arms they had were cane knives and he was a little relieved to see no guns among them. His dragoon pistol had been lost, it occurred to him now, when the horse fell or else earlier in the headlong flight.

Another man stepped into the clearing, carrying a sort of pike improvised by splinting a cane knife to a long pole from the sugar mill. The others clustered around him as if he had some special knowledge or authority. When he had spoken one ran off and the others drew a little back. The new man set the butt of his makeshift pike on the ground and stared up at the doctor. He was quite tall, emaciated, with a long face and a sorrowful expression. One of his ears had been lopped to a stump and the other was large and wrinkled like an elephant's ear. He gazed at the doctor sadly, intently; the doctor found he couldn't hold the stare. His own eyes went wandering over the tree tops. There were other trees nearby he might have better chosen, taller, with branches for his seat and more leaves to hide him from the ground. The tall man said something to him in creole, a question evidently.

"Comprends pas," the doctor said. He showed an empty bleeding hand and smiled foolishly. The tall man lifted his pike over his head and probed, without especial vigor. The point of the cane knife pressed into the arch of the doctor's bare foot. Too dull to cut with such a light thrust but it hurt his ankle some. There was nowhere to go. He bowed out his back and worked his knees a little higher in the tree, all the long fronds clashing loudly together with the movement. The crown of the tree bent sideways with the shift of weight and the doctor found himself hanging almost upside down, while the tall man nudged the pike into his thighs and buttocks. The others bystanding laughed and clapped and capered a little. The tall man's expression was gloomy and disinterested, like a bored child teasing a toad with a stick.

The doctor slipped a little way down the tree trunk, which righted itself elastically. But the tall man could now reach as high as his heart with the point of the cane knife. The doctor slapped the flat of the blade away from him, wondering if he might work it loose from its binding and get possession of it, but it seemed futile to try this project or even to succeed at it. Away out of sight the horse's screams cut off with a gurgling sigh, and then another man entered the area below the tree, riding bareback on a mule. He spoke sharply to the tall man, who lowered his pike and backed away. The mule rider craned his neck and addressed the doctor in passable French.



"You look like an ape up in that tree," the mule rider said. A red bandanna was bound tightly over his whole head, knotted at his skull's base, and he was otherwise dressed in surprisingly fresh-looking coachman's livery. He sat the mule as if he had sprouted from its hide. On his knees lay a pendulous cloth sack full of some sort of plant matter and pillowed across that a short military musket with a bayonet fixed.

"Are you an ape, or a man?" the mule rider said. "It's hard to know."

The doctor was too astounded to reply. He just stared back. The mule rider's eyes glittered darkly under the tight crimp of the bandanna. A sprig of gray hair was caught under the edge of the cloth. He too was elderly for a slave in the colony, late forties or early fifties perhaps. His jaw was long and underslung and full of long yellowish teeth separated by little spaces which his half smile revealed. The mule's long ears revolved and it dipped its head to nose at the base of the tree.

"Not a soldier," the mule rider said musingly, studying the doctor's clothes. "Not a planter. Not creole, certainly. You'll be some sort of artisan, perhaps, or one of the adventurers that come here."

"Antoine Hébert," the doctor said. The sound of his voice pronouncing the words made him feel faint and giggly. "I was born in Lyons and trained in Paris as a doctor."

"A doctor." The mule rider pursed his lips and nodded. *"Médecin."*

"Yes," the doctor said. He still felt like giggling, or weeping perhaps. "And yourself?"

"Toussaint," the mule rider said, disarmingly, looking at the doctor sidelong. "Just old Toussaint." A practiced obsequiousness in his tone. His eyes glinted below the bandanna and that simpering note left his voice. "Do you want to stay up in the tree and be an ape?" he said. "Why don't you come down here and be a man with me?"

"I'm afraid," the doctor admitted. It surprised him how good it felt to say it.

"Of course," Toussaint said. "So are we all. Except the pure fools." □

Chicken Little at Home

A Story by Alvin Greenberg

Parked well out beyond the edge of the galaxy, all his astronomical equipment deployed and his only slightly antiquated computer spitting out the answers almost as fast as he could feed the numbers in, Flaubergas, a small uncomfortable man in a small uncomfortable ship, finally found the experimental confirmation for his theory that the speed of light was not, after all, a universal constant.

Uh-oh, he clucked to himself.

He'd found slow light—slow, that is, in reference to the usual 186,000 miles per second that everything in physics for the last two centuries had depended on—and fast light, light so fast it left the old, dependable stuff more or less in its shadow. Even though this was exactly what he had set out to prove, he was less than thrilled. He was not surprised to look down and see that he was actually wringing his hands. They are not going to like this back home, he thought, they are not going to like this at all. And he did not want to be there when they found out. He did not want to be anywhere when they found out, because it was not going to make any difference where he was, the effect would be the same everywhere: disbelief, then fury, then panic. Maybe there was a universal constant after all, he considered: human behavior. The apocalyptic sects would be taking over the mountaintops again, waiting for the end; world leaders would assure their peoples that since this was a purely theoretical discovery, it meant nothing, daily life could go on as usual; meanwhile stock markets would crash, schools and factories would empty, and the avant-garde would frolic in the streets in silly costumes and parades of confetti. Well, thought Flaubergas, truth to tell, it wasn't a purely theoretical matter. Maybe the end of the world *was* coming, maybe it *was* time to empty the institutions, maybe they *should* all party in the streets. He just didn't want to be the one to tell them that. He knew the fate of the messenger.

The computer was silent now, though the monitor still displayed its final set of calculations, strung out across the screen, Flaubergas thought, like a trail of mouse turds. He didn't have the energy to clean up the mess. It was too late anyway. Instead, he spun his chair around and looked out at the edge of the galaxy, the section of it that fell within his range of vision. It was doing something very strange. Instead of just glowing there, the way it had all these months, a bright, dense crust of stars forming the sturdy edge of his horizon like a thick overbaked pizza, it was all in motion now, portions of it thrusting toward him, other pieces backing off, individual stars or clusters of stars doing their own eccentric things. Just what you would expect from variable speed light. And probably not the worst of it, either. It was, thought Flaubergas, like finding out that a close friend had committed a terrible crime. Suddenly his mouth *did* seem to coil into a sneer, his eyes to grow beady.

"But I didn't *do* anything," Flaubergas whined.

When he heard himself speak those words out loud, he recalled how, years ago, he had said the very same thing to his wife, who in turn had whipped out her copy of the New Testament to show him where Jesus said that thinking of adultery is the same thing as committing it. Fortunately, he and Belinda had managed to work that one out over the years. He was not sure it would be possible to achieve the same sort of reconciliation with the universe.

He wondered if anyone else would be able to. The "bright ones," as he sardonically thought of them: the ones who had hooted him off the platform in New Delhi a decade ago when he had first tried to present his mathematical argument for the variability of the speed of light, who had refused to give him a place on the program two years later when he sought to propose an experimental scheme for testing his thesis, who had for years undermined—after all, they sat on the grants panels—every application he made to foundations or governments for funding for his project. It was only when still more years had slipped quietly by, and they no longer paid any attention to him at all, that he'd managed to slip a proposal through the space agency under another guise and with the help of a still-embarrassed university that was happy to get him as far off campus as possible, and even that was only thanks to the availability of the unused last-generation equipment that he sat out here cramped and uncomfortable in now, contemplating the twitching eye of his home galaxy.

Well, the news was already on its way to them, simultaneous data transmission to Earth being a requirement for all space projects these days, though it'd be a while before it got there and a hell of a lot longer before anyone figured out what to make of it, given how thoroughly they'd suppressed his work. If he'd known how to manage it, he'd have transmitted via slow light. There was definitely a time for dawdling. He half sang, half mumbled one of those last-century pop tunes that Belinda liked to collect: "I'd like to get you/ On a slow boat to China," and then laughed to think that it probably was China where his data would arrive and be processed—or, he assumed, ignored, given what the scientific world thought of him.

But very soon now, he knew, he was going to have to return and face the music himself, and the music was going to be very dissonant, if not downright out of tune. He did not know whether it was a relief or not to know that he would be home before his data. He wished he didn't have to return at all. He wished Belinda were here with him. And their kids. He'd always heard that each generation passed the world along to the next generation in a bigger mess, but *This big?*, he thought, Does it have to be *this* big? Thinking about the implications of his discovery made him, as it always did, both nauseous and ravenously hungry, either of which was usually enough to forestall any further thought. But this time, squeezing his way to the galley, he managed to sustain his line of thought, even dizzy as he felt, long enough to realize that nothing, any longer, could be at all certain. Things that appeared close by could be arriving via slow light from infinitely great distances, and thanks to fast light objects seen as safely distant could be almost upon us. And that was only the beginning. He almost expected to find the little pantry, already pretty well diminished, totally empty. If it was even there.

"So, F-frederick, a century and a half ago Heisenberg bushwhacked certainty on the sub-atomic level, and now you think you have to do the same thing on the c-cosmic level?"

Flaubergas's left leg was twitching so badly he had to cross it over his right one to control it. He wanted to answer in the tough guy lingo that had been around more or less since Heisenberg's time and that he knew from Belinda's collection of holograph versions of old films: Yeah, it's a tough job but somebody's gotta do it. Instead he said, "You don't believe me?"

"What I b-believe or don't b-believe," said Dr. Slythe, "has nothing to do with it."

Flaubergas couldn't get over the fact that with all the bureaucratic rigmarole he had to go through on his

ILLUSTRATOR/ROSIE L. JOHNSON, JR.

Guy hears the door closing behind Dooley; Jordan is still dancing, by herself, in the periwinkle blue dress, a dress of purplish-blue redder and deeper than lupine or zenith.

"Later," she says, either to him or the vanishing Dooley, Guy's not sure which. "Dance with me."

He moves toward her.

"How did it go?" she asks.

"You can guess. What does a jigsaw puzzle do when it gets bad news?"

"Goes to pieces." She smiles, a smile like a safe passage. "I really can't stand writers," she says. "They're like children, and I already have three. Sometimes I wish you were in VCRs."

It seems to him as if the overhead light has become a chandelier, because there are sparks and shadows flickering around the room, and the music sounds like crystal ringing against itself. If he doesn't look too closely, he can imagine that the furniture in the room is rosewood and mahogany. He can almost hear the harpsichord, something by Scarlatti or Mozart.

"Dooley's the best friend I ever had," Jordan says. "He's so much fun to talk with. Do you understand what I mean? A friend is someone you talk with. And a person can have many friends and a best friend and still be married to a friend."

As he dances with her, he can see, down the front of Jordan's dress, that her breasts are shaped by light and shadow, as if by a corset, a bodice, into a lively fullness.

Guy thinks of all the friends he, too, has, as the music shifts, becoming something slow and easy. He puts his arms around his wife. The man and the woman beginning to dance, moving toward each other, moving away. □

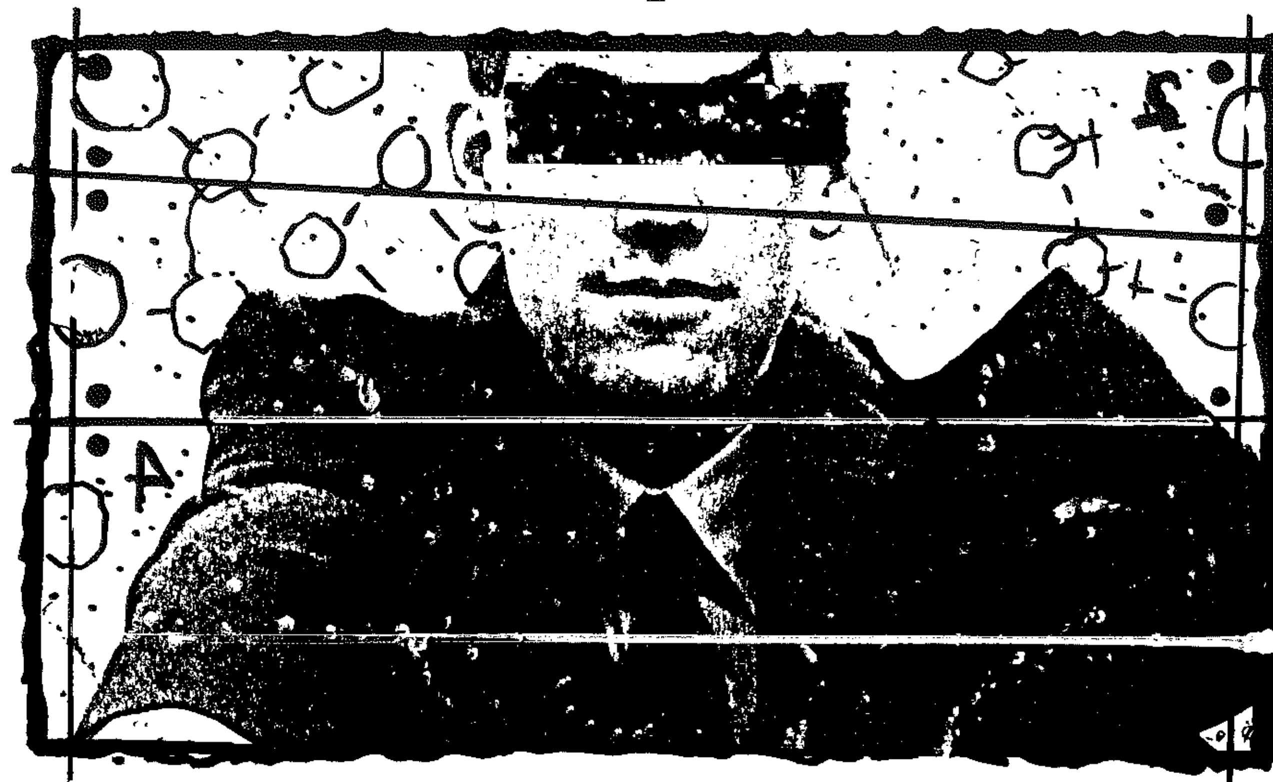
WILLIAM HATHAWAY

HOMECOOKING

A gray meal steams in a center
of shining plates. Optimism
is back in fashion someone begins
and dishes clatter from the kitchen.
Come eat Mother they cry come eat
your good food. No No she cries
someone must clean. Go on eat—
Eat while my empty chair echoes
at the center of the happy clatter
of your forks and knives. My salt
runs sweet from this soapy steam.
No listen someone resumes the poor
are always with us yet hidden
in their fat and the kitchen drain
sucks its last like a gooey sob.

The moon whose tremulous glimmers
we praise for certain midsummer eve
kisses is the same moon we blame
for the starch-eaters' hopeless
hungers. Channeled through trailer
portholes it bounces off formica
against the foreheads of the poor
springing sweet water to bathe sore
spongy gums. Then tongues thirst
for salt and guts knot and unknot
like white blind worms squirming
in the darkness craving fats carbos
lipids sugars to fill hollow echoes—
to soothe trembling lights to stillness
so the moon can't unfold the sea
and uncover that saltsweet stink
of kelpbed rot the swarming gulls
scream over in crazed circles . . .

It's as rude to lecture at table
she says as to sing. Ghosting
in her chair. Tines zigzag furrows
on every mound of gelled paste
plowing up peas the green of helmets.
This rain's a blessing someone
says. No it's a curse someone else
thinks nodding. Everyone fidgets
to a different rhythm pelting
the black windowpane. You hate
my meal she cries and they eat.
Famished gluttons eating without
taste. Like old sailor star-cheaters
who hungered beyond their fates
even before first last suppers
anointed starving cries for always
in us with certain moonlit kisses.



THE BUSTLE MAKER

A STORY BY KIM CALVILLO

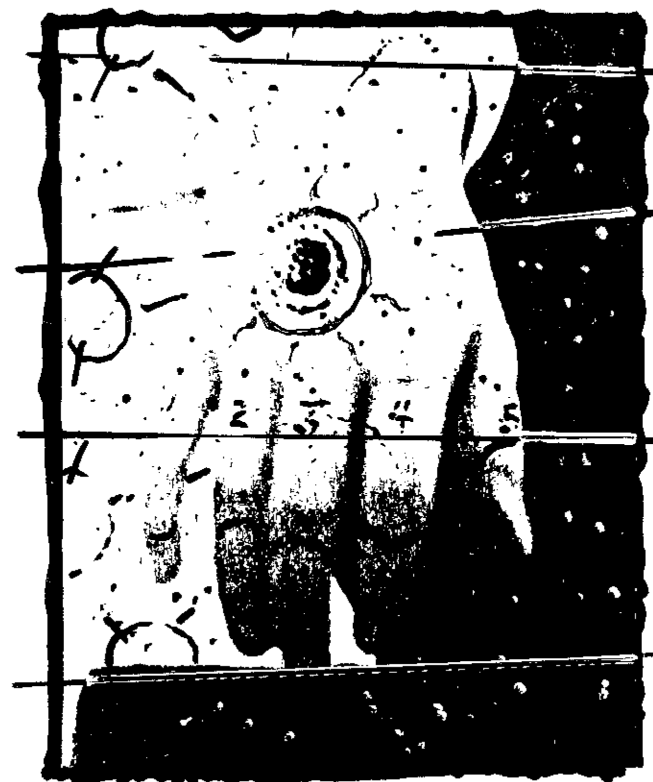


ILLUSTRATION: OSIE L. JOHNSON, JR.

In the mail we get feathers from Wisconsin so my brother Truitt can have his dance bustles. So he can keep his mind on the national championships in Oklahoma and not on the reasons why his woman Bernice stopped loving him.

He tries really hard to concentrate on his steps and the drumbeats. How he makes his moves with his arms and his legs. Sometimes it is like he is not in the same room with himself. There is a spotlight that shines out from under his skin. You should see the effect he has on people when he dances. Or even when he is standing still. Women practically swoon at his feet. Men stare at him. There are so many girls snagging on him. But it is like he is on the moon. Really what you might say Out There. I guess he got no more time for love since it hurt him so bad.

My Dad George used to have a Thunderbird car that was this all-pink color. When Junior totaled it the night George went away to be with some other lady, the insurance people sent him a check. George just signed that money over to my Mom Annie. She never spent any of it. She saved it all. Twice she almost used it for lawyer money to keep Junior out of jail. She wouldn't play Bingo with it and she wouldn't loan it out or pay the light bill when the electric got shut off. She kept on saving it. When Truitt got sixteen, she paid for his camper van. That was when he decided to make something of his dancing. To try and win money.

I never remember a time when Truitt wasn't dancing. Or reading. Or walking really far away somewhere to be by himself. He never drank very much. Hardly at

ILLUSTRATION: OSIE L. JOHNSON, JR.

THE ANGEL

A Story by Semon Strobos

I was walking along the quai of a Mediterranean harbor town one March not long after I retired from professional rugby. I'd had a bottle of roditis with dinner in a cheap portside restaurant and, unused to drink, floated in a surcease of pain. I recognized the quai had been undermined by winter storms, but I didn't care. Perhaps I missed the playing field, the wine pressed by an athlete's heart. I'd been on my own for some time, in bad spirits, but for the last days I'd felt calm.

Near the point I stepped on a loose embankment. Some rocks gave. I slipped quietly into the water, smooth as old glass, roiled by a deep and evil ebb, three or four knots.

Buoyed by the air in my slicker, I rose to the surface. I didn't have it in me to make much effort but neither had I any longing for death. I could see the tide would pull me past the harbor's stone pier, and knew my filling slicker would soon hinder me greatly. I began to feel cold.

But I felt calm, as though time had stopped, as in the intense slow pocket of quiet during the heat of play, but more subdued, relaxed. I had a strong sensation of being watched, though it was dark and no one was near. I paddled, hardly in earnest, almost because moving my hands felt better than not.

I felt a push on my thigh. Rather than astonishment, I felt strong but unemotional curiosity. I recalled dolphin stories.

The push continued till I reached the pier. Soaked clothes weighing, I grabbed a slick rock, but with no footing even a grip built from a million reps of lat pulls could only match the ebb.

I heard rustling down the embankment. A figure rose out of the water so rapidly as to indicate incredible strength. It jumped over two rocks, grasped my hand and yanked me out of the water as you or I would pull a dog by the paw. I sat stupefied on a rock, teeth chattering.

Beside me stood a young woman in a loose white dress, very tall, slenderly but strongly built, with curly short dark hair, olive skin and deep eyes. Like a polite cat, she glanced curiously at me and then looked away. The eye contact was electric.

I felt awe. She paused in thought, then shook herself dry like a dog. She looked at me without eye contact, her teeth flashed and she again grasped my hand, pulling me up the embankment. The overcast and moonless night was black.

Burdened by wet clothes, I misstepped on a mossy rock. She stooped impatiently, passed my arm over her shoulders, seized me under the knees, straightened, and bounded to a nearby shack, carrying me like a sack of potatoes. Even below playing weight, I carry 225.

She opened the shack's door to drop me on my feet on a rug in the middle of the single room. A fire burned in a metal hearth. The rug and furniture were antique, Victorian, the curtains and lampshade lace, a couch rosy velvet, its wood dark. I felt sick from the toting.

"Dolphins never help people, you know," she said. "It's us."

She bowed, grasped her wet hem and pulled her robe over her head. Her goosepimpled skin was brown with rose accents. Narrow of hip and rib cage, she had smallish upturned breasts with dark nipples, long very powerful boyish legs, and stood an inch or two over six feet. Amazed, I was reminded by her carriage of the Winged Victory.

She turned to take off my wet clothes, throwing them one by one into a heap in the corner, then stood me by the fire, a hand firm on each shoulder, and buffed me top to bottom with a thick rose-colored towel from a closet. Her dark eyes looked at my body with simple curiosity. She examined my penis, squeezing before she let go. I was sat in a chair by the fire, bundled in a terrycloth robe and sheepskin slippers.

She returned from a kitchen closet with a mug of hot chocolate. After I held it she sat opposite, folded her legs and looked at me gravely. A jolt of heat passed through my body. She dropped her eyes.

"You do have the maddest ideas about us." She spoke accentless English with a-regional colorlessness, like a musical prodigy who has traveled from an early age. "The Victory is quite puny next to me, and I'm rather small for one of us." She turned her neck like a swan and her dark lashes rested on her cheek.

"That's why we don't talk to you much, you know. Just think how amusing you'd find people falling on their knees terrified, or demanding information about

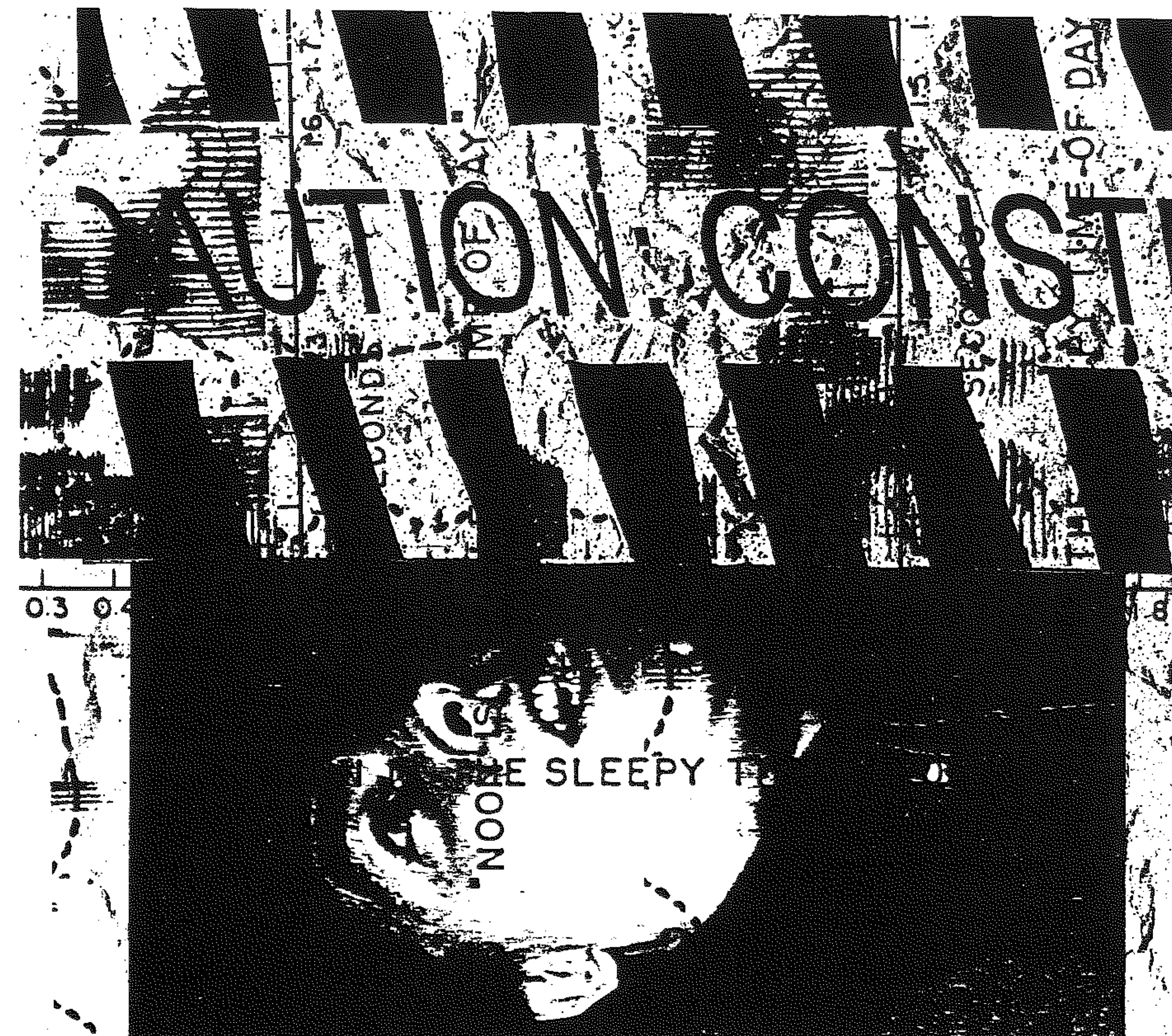
the post office was of course closed. Were the postcards piling up there, he wondered, or had she long since quit sending them? And the telephone service was so intermittent Margaret had given up calling out of frustration. Even when she could get through, half the time they were cut off in mid-conversation; the rest was static or other people talking right over them, Gall couldn't believe the sorts of things people said to each other over the phone these days and Margaret didn't want to hear them.

Neither did he want to tell her about the state of the house, his clothes, himself. When water was available he took a quick shower, rinsed out a few socks, some underwear, in the bathroom sink, hung them over the shower curtain to dry, put them on stiff and gritty. He'd given up watering outside; the grass was patchy brown, the shrubbery wilted, the petunias dead. He'd tried dusting a few times a week, but the stuff just shuffled itself up into the thick air of the house, hung miserably there through the hot afternoon, then resettled on furniture, countertops, windowsills, even himself—his thin hair felt permanently thickened with . . . something. It wasn't pleasant. The two garbage cans he kept beside the garage had filled quickly, and the alley was slowly becoming clogged with plastic bags, mostly his; he couldn't understand why it wasn't the same for his neighbors, how they were dealing with this, where they'd gone, how long their summer vacations could last. In the late summer heat the alley had begun to stink, to truly earn its name, Gall thought, but in the house his nose was always so clogged with dust he couldn't smell a thing. He assumed it was late summer from the heat. With the electricity on one day, off the next, the clocks screwy, the TV zapped by power surges, no paper delivery, he had no firm sense of what month it was, what day, what time of day. Sunday was the day the ruckus in the street paused for a while—the pounding and screeching and rumbling, the horrible shrill beeping of the back-up warnings—and Monday, or morning, or dawn, before dawn even some days now, was when it started up again.

When he thought of Margaret he had a hard time calling an image of her face or the sound of her voice to mind. Would he recognize her voice on the phone if she were to call again, be able to pick her out from the tangle of speakers on the crossed lines? He scrounged around in his desk drawers one morning, the ratty wooden desk that was the one thing he'd salvaged from his office when he retired, till he found all the postcards she'd sent him, but the messages were like empty vessels, dried out, dusty, containing nothing of her, and the pictures on the reverse sides, all of which he recalled with great clarity—the shiny black seals, the red-gold bridge, the stark island prison—seemed far more vivid and alive than any Margaret he could summon up. How could this be: that they'd lived together for forty-seven years and now clumps of trees he'd never actually laid eyes on in person—eucalyptus, redwood, acacia—seemed more real than she did? It was enough to make a fellow doubt his own reality.

Especially with no one around to confirm it. The Kaminskys had never returned. His councilwoman never returned his calls. He saw no one on the block though he often stood on his open porch or out on the sidewalk for an hour or more at a time, tolerating the worst of the heat and noise just for a glimpse of some neighbor he didn't even know by name. But their doors and windows stayed shut, and he could only assume they were gone or, like him, cowering inside most of the day. Still, you'd think they'd come out for a breath of air after dark, when things quieted down, when they'd eaten supper and could relax a bit. Gall's own meals were quick and frugal. He had a pantry full of food he'd stocked up on when he could still make the walk to the grocery easily—canned goods, soups, noodles, dried beans, toastables and microwavables—but no appetite. Everything tasted of dirt, even the soup. Sometimes he left his dinner uneaten on the kitchen table and walked down to the corner where the workmen were still at it under the violent blue glare of the floodlights, hoping that one of them would look up at him from down in the trench where they were wrangling huge concrete pipes into place and acknowledge his presence, the fact that there was still someone up there on the avenue. But all he ever saw were the ribbed orange tops of hard hats.

Was it September—October?—the morning Gall awoke in his living room, later than he'd slept in months, from a horrendous dream of earthquakes, thinking suddenly of Margaret—and how long had it been since he'd thought of her at all?—perched with her fragile china coffee cup on the high, overhanging balcony of her sister's condo on a steep hillside overlooking that distant, precipitous shore? Weeks ago he'd given up sleeping in his bed upstairs, doing nightly battle with gritty sheets and dust-filled pajamas, and taken to sleeping on the couch, rarely even bothering to get out of his clothes, what was the point, they were soiled as soon as he got up anyway. Sitting on the edge of the couch, running his fingers through his thin hair, over his crusty scalp, feeling about with his feet for the old pair of sandals he'd kicked off last night, he couldn't shake the dream, the sudden, nightmarish shifting of the earth and the roar it set up, the thunder of tumbling cement and crashing of twisted metal, rockslides, mudslides, the great plates of the earth grinding angrily against each other. Minutes passed, the whole world still tumbling down about his head, before he realized that it wasn't the Pacific coast crumbling but his own West Worthington Avenue.



OSIE L. JOHNSON, JR.

By the time Gall got to the porch the street looked like the parking lot for an earth moving equipment company. Enormous, bright orange dump trucks, as shiny as if they had just come from the factory, lined the opposite side, and at each end of the street a gigantic machine was slowly chewing up the asphalt while a front loader trundled along behind it, shoveling up the thick hunks of gray-black tar clotted with dripping masses of red clay and avalanching them into the back of a dump truck waiting with its heavy engine rumbling. The air was thick with dust and truck exhaust and diesel fumes and the beep-beep-beep of the next empty truck backing into position with a grinding of gears, and then with the thump of metal tread on concrete. Gall, standing motionless on his front porch, looked up. It was a bulldozer grunting right down the sidewalk on his side of the street from the corner at Agmont, flipping aside the big square paving blocks as if they were cardboard so that they landed upside down on the lawns, its one set of treads half off the walk and tearing into the burnt grass as it came onto the stretch in front of Gall's house. It paused for a moment where the walk crossed Gall's driveway, as if that were an odd configuration, something worth considering. Gall, wrapping himself in his thin, dry arms, watched as the operator leaned his hard-hatted head out, looked down, and then, starting the dozer up again, straightened in his seat, glanced toward the house, caught Gall's eye momentarily as the heavy machine groaned forward now, ripping up sod and cement, and tossed Gall a quick salute. □

LILI

A Story by David Hellerstein

"You're big, I'm amazed you're still working," Jay said.

"This is my last night, I'm off after this," answered Lili.

"Well, you deserve it. Tomas here tonight?" Hands saffron-yellow, arms sudsy and elbows dripping, they flirted while scrubbing into L&D.

"Oh, yes. Not that I've seen him—he's in MRI all night."

"So you get a few weeks off beforehand."

"Yeah, if you count sitting in 95-degree weather in a one-bedroom apartment with a three-year-old being off."

Ai! Ai! Ai! Ai!

"Here we go! Number six and counting."

Down the marble-floored corridor came Sister Jolie, wheeling Mrs. Oquendo's gurney toward the delivery room. Age twenty-three, aortic regurg, poorly-controlled juvenile-onset diabetes, pressures bubbling past 210/140—a sweaty, thrashing Botero. Deep groans, Ai! Ai! Ai!, her head whipping back and forth across the plastic mattress, purplish bare belly shaking, legs flailing.

"Don't push!"

Planted between her legs, gloved fingers rounding the crowning skull, he cut a generous episiotomy, and was drenched—suddenly—in hot fluids as he eased out the clotty forehead, the chin, the wrinkled blue shoulder. Finding the mouth free, suctioning mucus away ("Okay, now push, push!")—he painstakingly extricated an enormous baby boy (*"¡Felicitas, Señora!"*). He clipped the umbilical cord and made a handoff to Sister Jolie, who wrapped the floppy infant, doused his eyes with silver nitrate, and passed him to Lili Cambok.

Lili went to work, doing pediatrician things.

Jay watched: her forehead crimson under the hair cover, her body graceful despite its pregnant enormity. The way Lili lifted the infant, the way she suctioned him deep down with soft tubing and checked his limbs, until finally satisfied that, yes, once again they'd beaten the odds, and how then she placed him in the heated incubator (an entirely unnecessary gesture, since the entire Lamb radiated with the New York sun's August primordiality, making each one of them glow like a red dwarf star)—just watching her brought a sense of equanimity, of inner calm.

Jay gently pulled out the placenta—plop! in a silver bowl—and reached his hand deep inside Mrs. Oquendo's fiery womb for remaining fragments.

"False alarm. Guess we didn't really need you here."

"God! I have such a headache!" complained Lili. Later he would try to recall how she said it, time and again, trying to discern any particular urgency in her voice.

OSIE L. JOHNSON, JR.

"How're we doing for the rest of the floor?" he asked Sister Jolie after Mrs. Oquendo was safely in Postpartum. She filled him in: five more *mujeres*, all at least three or four hours away from delivery.

"Then I'm cutting out. I've got an acute asthma in the ER," said Lili.

"Okay," Jay said. "We'll call if we need you."

They stripped off gloves, masks, caps, shoe-covers, stifling blue-cloth gowns. Both of them were soaked—God forbid The Lamb's AC should be fixed before Labor Day!—clothes pasted to skin, hair wet against foreheads and necks. Even so, Lili looked gorgeous: freckled, tousled, affectionate. The way she smiled at him...he had always envied Tomas for having married her, but never more than now, seeing her *enceinte*, bursting with new life. More than once, she'd inhabited his dreams.

"What's your order? Two slices, green pepper and onions, and large Sprite?"

"No onions, they're making me nauseous." Lili straightened, put a hand against her aching lower back.

And that was that. Jay had some postpartums to check; Lili had to go down to the ER by way of the Peds ICU, then no doubt there'd be a few preemies to tune up in Neonatal. Just as he was the only OB on tonight (unless you counted Ponka, the rotating surgery intern, currently floating around the ER and basically useless) so too was Lili the only pediatrician on tonight for the entire 450-bed hospital, covering the PICU, neonatal unit, L&D, the ER—the works.

"See you at midnight," he called as she walked away. Pizza delivery time for all dozen-or-so moonlighters.

Off she went, and Jay returned to Labor, where women groaned and sweated, trying mightily to land their babies in the world.

It was where they worked, but where they'd never go as patients. The Lamb, that is. They rotated through as medical students, they moonlighted (illegally, in violation of their contracts) during residency and fellowship training, they supplemented their private practice incomes (covering malpractice premiums and receptionists' salaries) once they opened up their private offices. But God forbid they got sick—really sick—when they were in that part of the world: they only prayed that they could snag a gypsy cab across the bridge to Manhattan and get to a real hospital in time.

And yet, all agreed that The Lamb was a remarkable place. Located on the rim of the South Bronx, in a blasted no-man's-zone between the turfs of a dozen different ethnic groups, Dominican, Puertoricano, Italian, Jewish, Senegalese, Mississippi black, the tall yellow Victorian buildings of The Lamb stood behind a rusted cast-iron fence, absorbing the endless ills of their community, providing at least some semblance of healing. The Lamb's trauma team was justly world-renowned, due to a steady stream of gunshot and stabbing victims, drive-bys, immolations and MVAs-by-DWIs that the neighborhood beneficently provided. Its other services were, to put it mildly, variable. Nevertheless, medical students and residents never minded rotating through The Lamb, if only because that was where they could treat tertiary syphilis and cholera, and where they could try their hand at learning whatever (subclavian line placement, valve replacement, reconstructive surgery) with the least hassle should the procedure go awry.

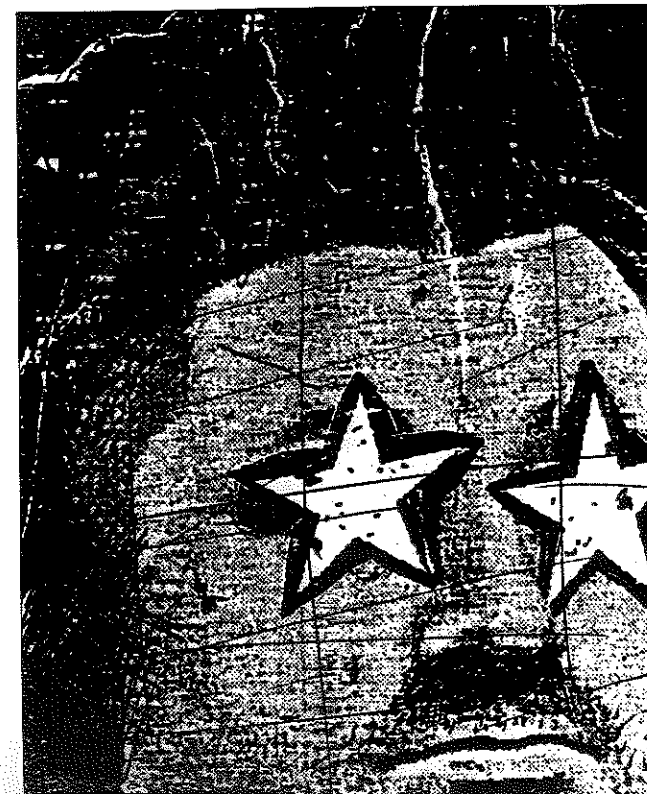
The Lamb's true character became most evident around midnight, when Manhattan's equatorial roar had faded to a dull grinding hum, and the neighborhood's streets came alive with the cheerful rattle of semi-automatic weaponry, when dazed doctors tended to the endless stream of patients arriving at the ER, and skeleton-covered the inpatient floors, resolving one incredible emergency after another unencumbered by the annoyance of nurses, techs, aides and so on, and where they perfected the art of night-flying the ICU without the landmarks of reliable lab results. The Lamb's laboratories, questionable at best, sputtered to a halt once the last supervisor signed out at eleven-fifteen, and other support services quickly followed suit.

Over two or three years moonlighting at The Lamb, delivering an average of fifteen babies per Saturday, Jay had gotten to know the dozen or so other other MDs who also took that regular shift. All day, they'd be scattered through the echoey, drafty, marble-floored wards, running past each other on their way to or from the ER or the operating rooms. When pizza hour came, anywhere between midnight and two a.m., they were universally beeped to X 2222, the ER's number, and for the next forty-five minutes, all Lamb patients were on their own. Dumped in the chapel (where most recently a single human foot, in Reebok, had been discovered in the confessional) would be a stack of pizza boxes, a case of lukewarm soda, and a bag of plastic silverware that melted the instant it touched hot cheese.

There was Rogers, an internist who'd trained with Jay at Manhattan Medical Center, and Longhin, a neurologist who had the pleasure of declaring brain death for that part of the world, and Kilmer the psychiatrist who took care of would-be suicides and O.D.s. And six or eight others—including Tomas and Lili Cambok, radiologist and pediatrician respectively, a married couple who were moonlighting at The Lamb to pay off med school loans. Lili he'd known for years. At first she'd been a fearful third-year med student—stringy-haired, always in jeans, five earrings in her right ear--clumsy with forceps and sutures, unable to do the simplest delivery, always bursting into tears. Later, he'd encountered her during her residency years, after she found her vocation. She'd been transformed entirely,

STEPPING OFF

A Story by Jeff Minerd



OSIE L. JOHNSON, JR.

I thought things couldn't get any worse for The Samuel Coleman Quartet when my bassist, Bart Scribs, decided to take a little break from reality—not to mention rhythm and harmony—right there on the job.

We were at Sweeny's Restaurant, up on the dais, squeezed in between the potted palms, and sleep-walking through Ellington's "In A Mellow Tone." My elbows throbbed, but I did my best to lay down a steady swing rhythm. Bart's walking bass line kept in step and Rudy improvised on the keys, doing all right, but playing kind of fluttery, his phrases zigging and zagging the way a butterfly does in the air. Lionel had just finished the same old sax solo he always played on that tune, so he laid out, listening with closed eyes and snapping his fingers. Waiters in tuxedos glided between the tables, stirring up tired candle flames. The diners murmured low. As Rudy finished, I nodded to Bart to take a couple choruses. "In A Mellow Tone" was the one tune I let him solo on each night.

One minute he played as usual: smiling, arms wrapped around that upright bass like it was a big-hipped woman he was love-squeezing from behind; the glow from Sweeny's chandelier reflecting off that pudding-smooth head of his; notes like sweet talk. And the next minute his face contorted and his hands clawed up and down the neck trying to find the best spot to choke the life out of the thing. That poor bass howled and screeched and moaned. Rudy and I dropped out. Heads turned. Waiters bumped into each other. Sweeny himself hurried over, scowling and jerking a finger across his neck.

Shouting at Bart didn't do any good. His bass was plugged into a small amplifier behind him, turned up loud. I had to lean over my drums and whack his arm with a stick to get his attention. "We're out," I mouthed, and hit my cymbals, making them sizzle while Rudy banged and held a final chord and Lionel threw in an ending lick. Bart's hands fell away from the strings, twitched at his sides with tremors that darted down from his shoulders. He closed his eyes and leaned against the bass. I was coming out from behind my drum kit to see if he was all right when Sweeny grabbed me by the cuff of my tux.

"What the hell was that?" he said.

Sweeny was one of those top-forty-listening, trendy-ass kids who wanted jazz in his place because he thought it was "classy." I told him that's what he'd heard: jazz, which he'd hired us to play.

"Listen," he said. "Any more of that avante-garde stuff and you're out of here, understand?"

"Well, boss," I shrugged. "We do what we got to do; you do what you got to do."

"I'm warning," he pointed a finger at me, then hustled off to kiss up to his offended customers. I called a break.

The bartender smirked as he set out a double scotch for Lionel, a 7-Up for Rudy, and beers for Bart and me. Bart climbed up onto a stool and hunched over his beer, squeezing the bottle with his thick hands like he was trying to cool them down. His twitching settled to a tic in his right shoulder. Lionel downed half his scotch in one gulp and sputtered, "What kind of fucked-up mess was that?"

"Lionel," I held up a hand. "I'll handle this."

Rudy cleared his throat with his smoker's cough. "I've heard guys play outside the key," he said, his voice fading in and out the way it did like some raspy pump-organ with tired feet at the pedals, "but that was like outside the known universe. That was a brave bit of spatial exploration."

"Bart," I asked, "what happened?"

He swallowed some beer. Set the bottle down. Picked at the label. When he answered, he seemed to be talking to the green glass. "I couldn't help it. Sorry."

We were quiet for a minute, until Lionel, who was on his fourth or fifth double scotch of the night, let loose with a sharp laugh. "Sorry? SORRY? You bet your ass that shit was sorry. Sorriest solo I heard in a long time."

Bart cocked his head to look at Lionel through one narrowed eye. "What's *your* excuse?"

Lionel set down his drink. "Huh?"

Bart leaned closer. "Every night you try, Lionel, don't you? Every night you think, if I just have more to drink, I can make that leap. But every night you chicken out. You're nothing but a shallow, cliché-blowing bastard."

Lionel's quick with the hard words and I thought for sure Bart was going to get some back. But Lionel only folded his arms and stared down into his drink, because he knew what Bart said was true. I knew it too, but I didn't *know* I knew it until Bart laid it out there.

See, when you're improvising you have to leave your mind with all its planning and worrying behind and let something deeper take over. It's scary, like stepping off a window ledge and hoping you can walk on air, but when you do it and suddenly you're *walking* out there, you find music that says something true, music no one's ever heard or will hear again, not just a bunch of copped licks all strung together. Lionel hadn't stepped off in years. Sometimes he'd get close: his phrases made us tighten the groove, expecting something, but he'd back away, play his old, safe lines.

Lionel stared down into that scotch like a man watching river water from a bridge. He's so skinny his tux looks like it's on a hanger even when he's wearing it, and right then he seemed even scrawnier than usual.

I said, "That's enough, both of you." Bart shrugged and went back to picking the label off his bottle. Lionel downed his drink and ordered another with a weak wave. Rudy blew cigarette smoke out his nose and watched the bubbles rise in his 7-Up.

I rubbed an elbow, but it only made the ache spread to my knees. I had that light-headed, shaky-cranky feeling that meant I needed my insulin. "I want you all back out there and ready to go in five minutes."

In Sweeny's bathroom, as I took the insulin needle out of my thigh, I noticed something that burned me: some kid had written the name of a Rock and Roll group on my stall wall. I used this silver pen I keep on me to scratch the name out. I know it's silly, an old man messing with bathroom graffiti, but you don't know what Rock and Roll did to me and my band.

See, The Samuel Coleman Quartet was once so close to the big time we could have spit and hit it from where we stood. We'd put out an album on a small label back in the 'fifties, and the critics called us "spectacular" and "up and coming." Our agent booked us at every major club across the country. Rumor had it that Columbia Records—Miles Davis's label—was eyeballing us, so I carried that silver pen everywhere I went; if some Columbia exec approached me with a contract, that baby was going to be signed on the spot.

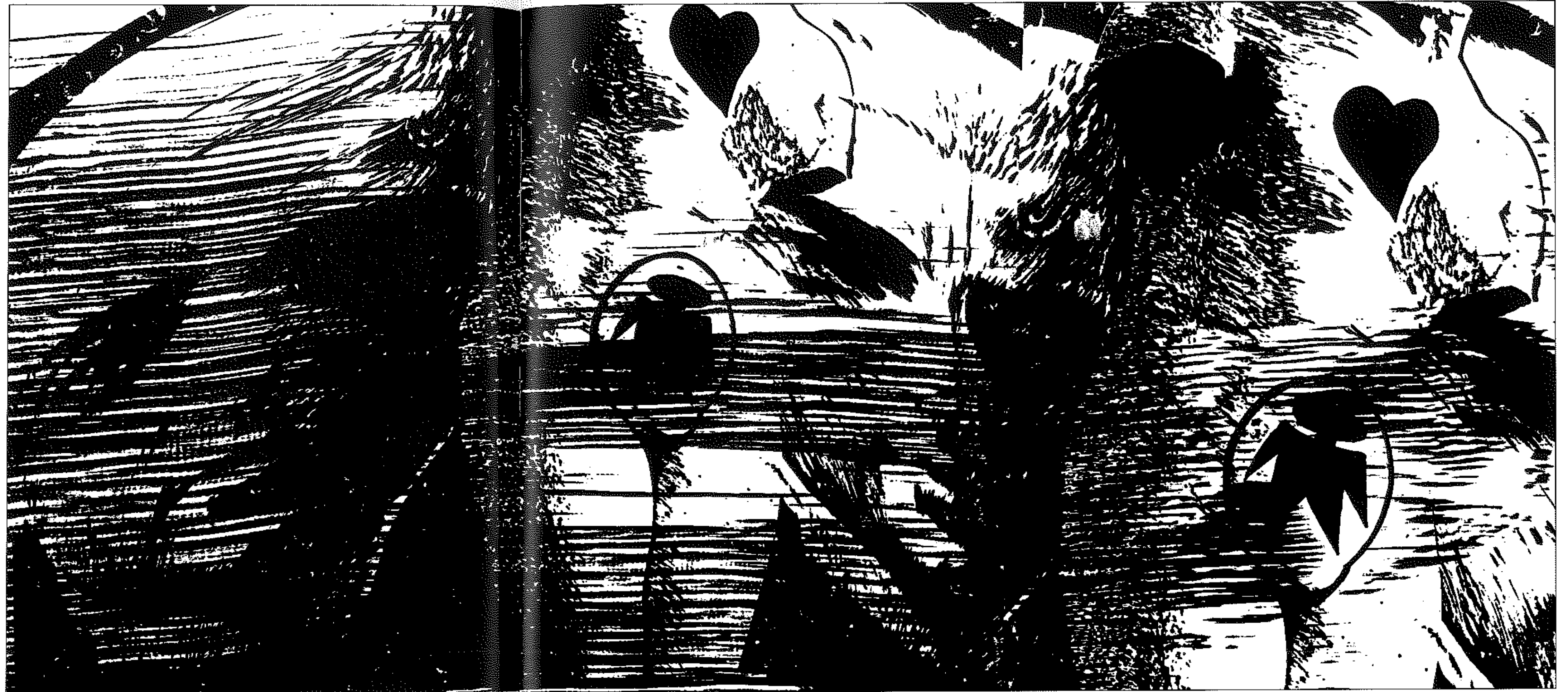
Then Rock and Roll overran the country like some kind of epidemic. Bunch of makeup-wearing, flashy-pants assholes who couldn't even play blues right, and everyone acting like their music was the most momentous thing since Jesus Christ came down. The record companies cut back—I mean way back—on their jazz titles and left a lot of artists, including good old Sammy C and his band, out in the cold. We lost our label. We lost our agent. We lost all our good bookings. We watched our album disappear from record stores. Finally, we started doing gigs like Sweeny's. My men took it hard.

Rudy got himself hooked on reefer. Every gig he showed up with eyes so glassy I could skate on them, and his tux reeking of the stuff. He plunked his big ass down in front of Sweeny's house piano and didn't even care it was out of tune. Had been for years. Rudy used to take the chords of any old standard and substitute fresh ones, and play them in lush voicings until it was like you were hearing that song for the first time. But at Sweeny's he was so high and the piano so flat sometimes it sounded like he was on a different song than the rest of us. Plus he lost his place improvising; he'd be flailing away because he was about five-and-a-half measures behind, and I'd have to signal to Lionel to step in and bail him out.

You already know some about Lionel. I'll tell you more: somewhere back in the late 'sixties, the man stopped polishing his horn. That axe used to be a bright brass-gold, and if you could put a color to

SWIMMING

A Story by Emily Meier



OSIE L. JOHNSON, JR.

In the frozen winter of his illness, as his cancer spread and he began to die, Edward's pale eyes shone a luminous brown. Stilled in her private weather, Nora looked at herself, at her own eyes puffy with elephant skin. Ridgy. Gray. She pulled at her face, looked to see if her teeth had moved in their bones.

Six years earlier she had married Edward. Quietly. Simply. He was steady—the absorbed face she saw when she looked through the glass windows of her office and realized she was thirty-four: past the optimum window for marriage, past the years of ready, casual relationships. She wanted a home. A husband to touch in sleep. A child.

On their wedding trip to Spain, she had tried not to think whether she was in love, though certainly she thought she could love Edward. She loved easily: she loved her cat, she'd loved teachers, she loved her friends. But in Sevilla, city of a thousand wedding dresses, while Edward walked the winding streets of the Jewish Quarter, guidebook in hand, one eye alerted to dog shit, Nora's mind wandered to daydreams of passionate Moors. When motor scooters rocketed by, she held her ground and Edward pressed his back against buildings. In restaurants he was solicitous, over-solicitous. As formal as the Spanish waiters in their black tuxedos, he chose dishes for her until she put her spoon into the *sopa de castellana* and its raw egg yolk flooded her bowl. She ordered for herself then, and Edward, without comment, withdrew a distance into himself as though something more fragile than the egg had broken. Nora, for the first time, thought she had married selfishly.

There was sex but no child. As careful in lovemaking as he was at his work editing math-crammed economics texts, Edward never failed to make her come. But he had a studiedness to his movements, a certain roteness that made Nora feel she might read along: *For variety, manipulate clitoris with opposite hand while trailing lead hand between breasts. In beginning thrusts, set a slow pace much like a two-beat kick in swimming.* More than a marriage, she had entered a depression, she thought, though she kept the secret, guiltily praising Edward's kindness until it was legendary with her father: "A little stuffy, we thought at first, but he's been real good to our Nora."

And always no child. Never a child. No flutter of hope but the clock-beat regularity of each month's small stain of red death. Eventually, reluctantly, they had consulted doctors. Nora had been tested and prodded, laparascoped and advised she could be optimistic. Edward, on his third visit, was routed abruptly to an oncologist. A pancreatic cancer, they were told. Certainly fatal. Probably fast.

When he could no longer talk, Edward caught at her clothes, looked at her with the urgency of speech. Nora brought him his laptop, placed his hands on the keys as though he were an autistic child to uncode.

Nothing. Staring eyes.

She offered him soup. Wrapped him in goosedown comforters and cashmere mufflers that did not scratch. Played the limping Caruso records that had been his father's. Read to him from the *Tales of the Alhambra* which he'd loved from the day she'd bought it in Granada, and which she'd always found stiff and tedious.

"Washington Irving is wrong," she said. "The towers of the Alhambra aren't ruddy at all." She had told Edward this on the Costa del Sol where she'd left the book face down on the sand and watched him swim his even strokes in the cold February sea, said it when he came out of the water to dry off and kissed her readily as though he had gotten used to it. Said it now, though she did not think that he heard her.

In the morning sunlight, she watched him sleep, saw him miss a rattled breath and grow still. She sat quietly, hands in her lap. Thought *what if he's dead, he is dead, is that what it smells like death, his eyelids are cold and that's death.*

She ran. In the kitchen, the fall of her footsteps on cold tile, she listened to see if the water was running. She tore at the drawer, found the phone book, rattled the stunned pages of calling areas and numbers for repairs. She leaned into the wall and dialed "O."

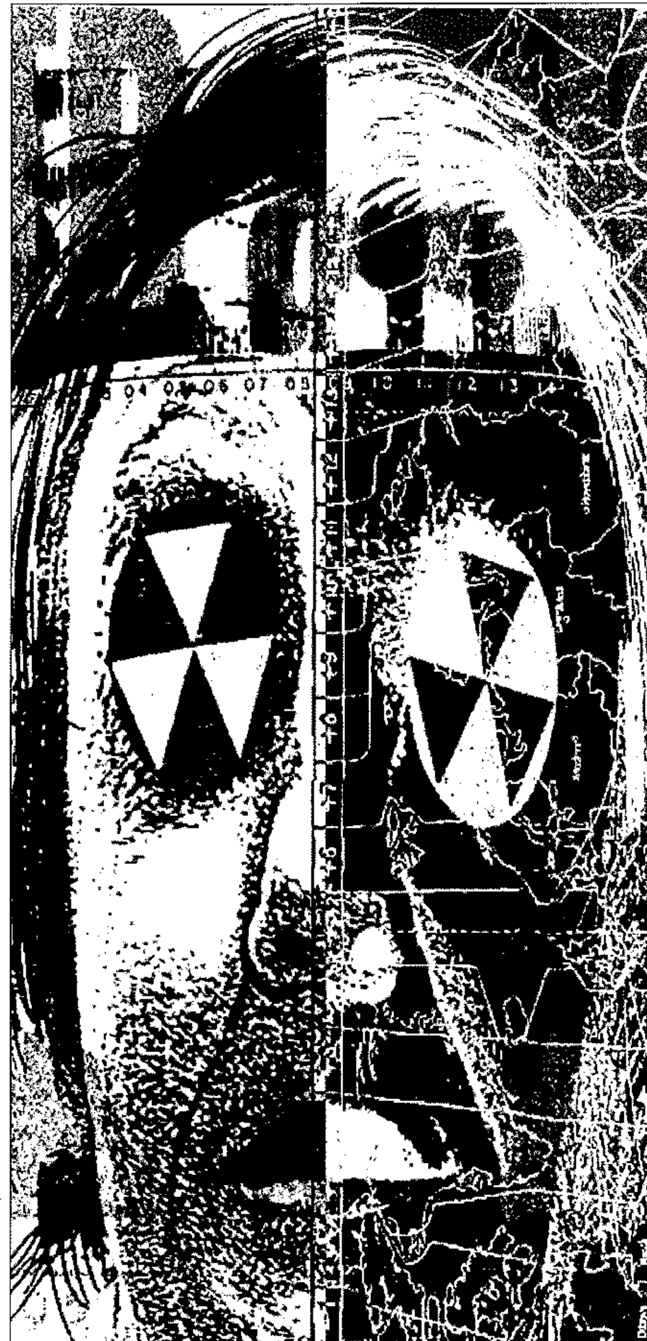
"I think he's dead. My husband." This was her voice. Sound in a bottle. "What should I do? Is there something now I should do?"

A funeral. A cremation. Nora carried light ashes home in a box.

At work she resumed a full schedule, asked that Edward's last project carry his name, selected the type style herself. She dressed carefully. Soft blouses, tailored suits. She brushed her hair sleek and fastened it back in a clip, smoothed her makeup over her cheeks and etched her lips clearly with liner. She kept her in-basket clean, walked with an invisible book on her head.

"Stop doing this," her secretary said. "You're in shock. Scream. Nobody will care if you cry. Everybody would really like it if you did."

On the stairs, her boss stopped her, touched her on the elbow. "Take some time off," he said.



OSIE L. JOHNSON, JR.

Out There, In The Desert

A Story by Eric Rickstad

I hadn't seen Fred in the year since Lydia and I had been married and I'd bought the old service station out on Route 49, so I wasn't expecting him when he showed up at our trailer door one rainy night. His long wet hair hung in his eyes, and a girl I'd never seen before, a girl who wasn't his wife, a girl who had a ruddied, beaming, baby-fat face and was packed into a lime-green tube dress, clung to him as if to let him go meant she'd fall down dead.

"Hey," I said through the screen door.

"Hey, to you," he said. He cocked a thumb at the girl. "This here's Bessie. Bessie, this's Ray. The friend I told you about."

Bessie gave a clumsy curtsey, as if she wasn't used to her high heels.

"Can we come in?" Fred asked.

I glanced at my watch, rubbed my face.

"Sure,"I said. "Sure."

I closed the door behind them. Bessie did a little jig, in place, as if to dry herself.

Fred peered around the trailer, tucked his hair back over his ears. "Got any cigarettes?" he asked.

"Lydia and I quit since we're expecting."

"Expecting?" Fred said.

"A *baby*," Bessie said, jabbing her elbow into Fred's side. "How exciting."

Fred cut his eyes at Bessie and she fell silent.

Exciting was one word.

"Lydia will be home soon," I said. She was at the Squirrel's Nest, filling in a shift. She didn't like working nights anymore, or being called in last minute. I didn't like it either. But the tips were good.

"Hmm," Fred said. He separated himself from Bessie and sat down on the sofa-bed that took up most of the living room. He stretched his arms over the back of the couch and propped his feet up on the coffee table.

Bessie snuggled under his arm.

I sat in the oniy chair, across from them, next to the TV.

"How's the garage?" he asked.

"A gold mine," I said gesturing to the trailer. Straightening up, I said, "It keeps me out of trouble."

The week before Lydia and I'd gotten married I'd asked her what she'd think if I quit my job at Bishop's Ford and bought the garage. "We need sound footing. Bishop's is stable," she'd said.

A few nights later, Fred and I had taken a drive.

"She's got no faith in you," he'd said.

"It's not that."

"Sure. Sure."

When Lydia and I got back from our honeymoon in Kennebunkport, I bought the garage. At the time, I wasn't too business-minded, but I knew I was a good mechanic and figured I'd leam the business end as I went. But it was slow to come: all the taxes and insurance, book keeping, working twelve-hour days, six days a week, scum bag teenage gas attendants robbing me fucking blind. Most days I felt I was in over my head, and I left for home at night, weary and confused, wondering if I might have been better off at Bishop's.

Fred twisted a piece of Bessie's wet red hair around his finger. "Wendy put me out," he said. "This time for good."

I didn't believe it. This was nothing new, her kicking him out. But I didn't want to say that in front of Bessie.

Fred told me he'd taken an apartment out on Snake Mountain; a week ago his landlord had booted him.

"Custom cabinets aren't a big-ticket item these days," he said.

Two years before, Fred had quit Carlisle Construction to make a go of a custom cabinet business. He did excellent work. He didn't use pine or balsa. He didn't make that crap you see at Jim's Unfinished Fumiture Barn. He worked with cherry and oak and walnut. Wood you have to coax into taking shape. Wood that takes patience; a patience he didn't have for much else. The business hadn't taken off.

"I was two months behind in rent," Fred said. He had a jack knife out and was whittling a pencil he'd picked up from the coffee table. "My landlord said we could work out a deal. Said I could make cabinets for his apartments for ten bucks an hour until rent was caught up."

He set down the pencil, folded the knife and tucked it back in his jeans' pocket. He brushed the shavings off his lap onto the floor. Bessie nuzzled on his shoulder, yawning. Her eyelids fluttered like big purple moth wings. "I told him I'd rather sit on my ass all day watching the tube than get paid ten bucks an hour. Ten bucks is a fucking insult is what it is."

"Go back to Carlisle," I said.

"I'm not going back to punching in and out. Yes-sir-ring to some prick who don't know half what I know."

Bessie snored on his shoulder.

"Hey," Fred said. His voice was low; he put his boots on the floor and lifted Bessie's head off his shoulder, rested it on a throw pillow. He sat forward on the edge of the couch. I knew what was coming, but I didn't want to hear it. Whatever he wanted I couldn't afford to extend. But I couldn't refuse it either. I stood up and dug in my back pocket for my wallet, deciding to get it over with before Lydia got back.

"Sit down," he said, and waved his hand at me. "I'm no charity case."

I sat down.

"Me and her," he said. "We need us a place to stay. I need me a place to think."

In high school, Fred and I would drive the roads out toward Buell's Gore and Enosburgh Falls, searching for used cars, junks abandoned in the jungly yards of falling-down houses, their tires flat, windows soaped—*$300 or B.O.* Oldsmobile Cutlass Supremes with rotted floorboards, Impalas with spider-webbed windshields, GTOs and 442s, big decrepit cars with mag wheels and monstrous appetites for leaded gasoline. We fixed them up. Fred was the body man. I was the mechanic. Fred despised how engines were put together one way. How each part had its proper place. He hated that the plugs were jammed in where he couldn't easily slip a socket onto them. He'd rip the skin off his knuckles trying to work a bolt out of a tight spot and kick his tools all over the driveway. He broke a foot once, doing that. We always wanted to fix up two cars, have them running good enough to race across the country to the Pacific. California. Baja, maybe. Stay there until the spirit moved us elsewhere. We did leave, once. We made it as far as western New York before my El Camino threw a rod, and we had to put our cash together, sell Fred's Impala, and take a Greyhound home.

When Lydia came home the sofa-bed was pulled out and Bessie and Fred were asleep. We went outside to talk. The rain had stopped and our breath smoked in the cold damp air. Lydia stooped and rubbed her ankles.

"I don't want him here," she said.

"He's in a bind," I said.

"*He's* in a *bind*," Lydia said. "Imagine that." She'd always thought Wendy could do better. And I guess she was right about that. Wendy and Fred had been together since they were thirteen. Married at seventeen. For the first eight years of his marriage, Fred would call me up to go hit the bars, gallivant, and I was always there, raring to go. More than once, for years, until I'd started seeing Lydia and she'd given me an ultimatum, Fred had been kicked out because of prowling with me. Back then I never gave much thought to Wendy. I figured it was just how things were. Between them. Between Fred and me.

"I didn't know what else to do," I said to Lydia. "I tried to give him some cash."

"Don't you *dare* give him any money."

"He won't be here long."

She wouldn't look me in the eye. She was looking at the window over my shoulder.

"Three days. That's it," she said, and stormed inside and tumed out the light.

Five days passed and Fred and Bessie were still camped out in the living room. Despite Bessie constantly trying to neaten things, Fred's clothes always ended up in a heap next to the TV. Fred had stored his

OSIE L. JOHNSON, JR.

A DISCOURSE ON HISTORY

A Story by Norman Lock

When the Bishop entered my dreams, I had to kill him. Surely you can understand that! Consider how he dogged me through the streets of Mombasa, howling anathemas after me for my "licentiousness." He was referring to my shameless pursuit of Mrs. Willoughby, whose charming house on Prince Albert Street drew me, as it had drawn Kong to her very bed. Mrs. Willoughby fascinated many who found themselves in Africa. It was she who introduced me to her sometime lover, Vladimir Ilich Lenin. The two "Siggies"—Freud and Romberg—were once frequent visitors to Prince Albert Street, as much to view the voluptuous Mrs. Willoughby as to sip champagne cocktails on her veranda. Near the end of his life, Henry James had paid his respects to the lady, contriving to purloin one of her gloves "in remembrance." Mombasa was, in 1911, the place to be when in Africa; and Mrs. Willoughby's was the destination for the cultured and the curious. That Mr. Willoughby was, more often than not, absent from Prince Albert Street supplied a noticeable *frisson* to our visits.

The Bishop took it much amiss. Ever vigilant against breaches of public decency, he would stand by the hour behind the drapery or in the hallway outside Mrs. Willoughby's bedroom with his jaundiced eye screwed to the keyhole. We were constantly tripping over his crosier as we passed to and fro. Leave your crosier in the vestibule umbrella stand! we shouted, and received only curses for our pains.

"I would bar you and your sort from this house, had I the power," he growled. "Unhappily, Kenya is not a theocracy. Were it, I would devise ingenious punishments to chasten you."

The Bishop was a prig, and we told him so at every opportunity, giving him an occasional thumping for emphasis.

"Swine!" he would mutter as he straightened his ecclesiastical high hat knocked askew by our violent attack on his dignity. "Adulterers!"

I remember one afternoon on Prince Albert Street in particular: we were drinking gin slings on Mrs. Willoughby's veranda, watching the sun die among the minarets. To the east the ocean heaved itself up, then flattened with a hiss as the light went out of the sky. I assured Mrs. Willoughby that the sun would rise again, after the usual adjournment—*there* (pointing oceanward); but she was unconvinced, having acquired in Africa a skepticism that a richly varied experience had only confirmed. "Perhaps," she said and sighed, taking my proffered hand. The "Pineapple Rag" drifted through the French windows, pausing on the veranda as if to quicken her mood, then blew beyond the railings and the topiary like a sheet of wind-swept rain to the sea where the crystalline notes fell out of the steadily

thinning music onto the black water. We were talking about the Special Theory of Relativity. Some years earlier, Albert had arrived in Africa, wanting to forget—Meliva, his wife; his carping colleagues at the University of Zürich ("Mister Negatives!" he called them); and the terrible anxieties of four-dimensional existence. I had taken him on safari through the interior to distract him with the flora and fauna of Africa, but it had not been a success.

The music stopped abruptly, and Scott brought a stranger onto the veranda and, after putting a drink in his hand and introducing him as none other than H. G. Wells, went inside to resume his playing. Ragtime had but little time left before war and jazz finished it forever, and Joplin wished to make the most of it.

"What brings you to Mombasa?" I asked Wells, whom I hated on sight because of the sexual energy he radiated in the vicinity of the Object of My Desire, whose amorous gaze now rested on the Great Man.

"Mrs. Willoughby," he answered, lifting her hand to his lips. "Lady, your fame has jumped the ocean—and deservedly so," he said, kissing it (her hand, that is).

She was pleased.

I took him aside and admonished him:

"She is mine."

"Are you a *sultan?*" he asked, scornfully. "Women belong to no one but themselves."

"Suffragette!" I hissed. "Shavian!"

He laughed unpleasantly in my face. I shoved him, and he tripped over his valise. A sheaf of papers spilled across the flagstones of the path that led to the belvedere above the Indian Ocean where, on moonlit nights, I had made love to Mrs. Willoughby (when Mr. Willoughby was away building up the African infrastructure).

"What is that?" I asked, as the wind winnowed the manuscript pages.

"My history!" he cried, playing hopscotch on the tumbling papers, whitely luminous under the moon, in an effort to save them from joining "The Pineapple Rag" scattering, note by note, on the water. "For God's sake, man—can't you help me!"

I helped him, though I hated him. Never let it be said that I did not offer help when help was asked.

"Thank you," he said, as he shut up the papers in his valise.

We were sitting in the belvedere. The lights of an unseen steamer shivered against the blackness. I studied Wells's face in the sidereal light and thought it ordinary.

"I, too, am writing a history," I said. "*A History of the Imagination.*"

"What's in it?"

"Everything that is not in yours," I taunted him.

"Then it's a lie!" he said with a vehemence I thought extreme.

I retaliated:

"Mine is a history of *possibilities* ... of possibilities which, instant by instant, become *impossibilities.*"

"I do not understand you."

"In your history—the official history—the present moment gives way ceaselessly to the past. What *is* becomes what *was*. In mine, what might have been becomes what never was—but 'perhaps' ..." (echoing Mrs. Willoughby's sad conditional) "should have been."

"Fantasist!" he shouted.

"History is impossible *ipso facto*," I answered imperturbably. "It consists entirely in time drained of all possibility of actualization. Only the future is significant, is pregnant with possibility."

I pointed to the steamer which by now had entered the bay.

"The boat will sink, or not—depending," I said. "You write the history that lies in its wake while I write of its possible encounters with the unknown. In this, mine is a history of the future. Like your *Time Machine* or *War of the Worlds.*"

Wells stopped his pacing of the narrow enclosure to shout his indignation at me:

"They are fictions!"

"Really?" I asked, enjoying his discomfiture. "I understood them to be descriptions of realities that have not yet occurred but may, or may not, according to the laws of chance. But they are no less real for all that."

"You're a lunatic!"

"Time is richer than you suppose," I said. "You imagine it as a succession of singular moments like a string of pearls. I see it as ..."—I hunted for a suitable image with which to convey the dizzying complexity of time and settled on the firmament—"as the night sky with its countless stars, each having its own past, present, and future."

He beat the air with his fists in a perfect fury.

"I have not come all this way to listen to your ravings! I've come to seduce Mrs. Willoughby. As I have seen the lady for myself, I know she is not a product of your deranged imagination."

His hands were at my throat.

I shoved him, for a second time that day.

He fell backwards over the railing of the belvedere with nothing but air to sustain him.

I listened: for the sliding gravel of the precipice, for the thud of a body landing on the rocks below, for a splash in case he had managed to clear the steep incline (remembering all the while Moriarty and the Reichenbach Falls). For a long time I listened but heard nothing except Wells's scream, which persists even now.

OSIE L. JOHNSON, JR.

THE BLIND GAMBLER

A Story by Jeffrey Greene

All but forgotten for over seventy years, the life and career of Caspar English, the blind prestidigitator, card-trick artist and itinerant gambler, is the subject of two recently published books. *The Fifty-Two Faces of Caspar English*, a novel by Stuart Call, is a first-person account by his disembodied spirit—as rancorously told to a fraudulent medium in 1930s Los Angeles—of his childhood and early years with the Barnum and Bailey Circus, his rise to international fame that briefly rivaled Houdini's and his fall into obscurity during the First World War, followed by a seedy decline into professional gambling, culminating in his violent death (presumed by the author, since his body was never found) in the catastrophic Okeechobee hurricane of 1928. His astonishing ability to identify playing cards by the sense of touch alone was witnessed and confirmed by Houdini himself in their one encounter in Baltimore in 1911.

The Taste of Aces, The Smell of Kings, by Dr. F.C. Hansen, a medical researcher at Johns Hopkins, attempts to be not only an exhaustive biography and cautionary tale on the wages of American celebrity, but also a study of the phenomena of synesthesia and the brain's capacity to augment other senses when one is deprived. His detailed neuroscientific explanations of English's abilities, such as his famous trick of throwing a card into the audience and then sniffing out its location, are always interesting, if somewhat intimidating to the lay reader. Both books, Hansen's in particular, suffer from the paucity of hard facts available on their subject's life, especially after 1914.

The authors generally agree on the essentials: Caspar English was born blind in London in 1883, the only son of a French-Jewish gem cutter and a schoolmaster's daughter who emigrated to Brooklyn in 1885. Virtually ignored by his father, he became morbidly attached to his mother, who kept the frail, sickly child in almost complete isolation from other children, teaching him every card game she knew using a specially marked deck of playing cards. By the age of eight he could identify each of the fifty-two cards in a fresh deck by touch alone, describing complex sensations of smell and taste that had no analogue in the visual lexicon, since he had never seen a color, a number, or the shape of a suit. Around this time, a ne'er-do-well uncle taught him poker and a few simple coin and card tricks, and by his early teens he was confounding professional magicians and gamblers three times his age.

His father's death in 1900 coincided with his discovery by P.T. Barnum, who was impressed enough to call him a Marvel of Nature and install him among his stable of human oddities. By most accounts a social misfit and a chronic insomniac, English was still living in the same Brooklyn apartment with his mother when she died of pneumonia in 1905. His uncle, who had been earning a precarious living on the fringes of the Irish underworld, offered his services as manager, surrogate father and all-around bad influence, and within two years English left Barnum's employ and struck out on his own, first at private parties and night clubs, and by the height of his career, around 1913, in packed concert halls in the Americas, Europe and Russia. In 1910 he met Ivana Karyakin, a Russian immigrant and former puppeteer, who became his full-time assistant, both on and off-stage, taking the professional name of Saffron. According to Mr. Call and Dr. Hansen, she drowned with him during a poker game at the Glades Hotel in Belle Glade, Florida on the night of September 16, 1928.

It is unfortunate, if not surprising, that in the course of their researches neither author seems to have read *My Cracker Journey*, by Iris Wilkins, published in 1976 by the small Bone Valley Press in Fort Pierce, Florida. Out of print for a number of years, it is an engaging memoir of Ms. Wilkins' childhood in Belle Glade in the 1920s and her later experiences in Cuba during the Batista regime. She describes in harrowing detail the hurricane that killed some two thousand people, the majority of whom were Haitian and Bahamian migrant farm workers. Now eighty-five and living in Annapolis, Maryland, Ms. Wilkins is one of the few people alive to have met Caspar English in the twilight of his career, and her eyewitness account of what was probably his last poker game illuminates a personality that has been both fictionally imagined and scientifically studied, but never fully understood. I quote from the chapter titled "The Dividing Line of my Life":

"September 16, 1928 was a Sunday. Two days

Calley is on my street again, watching. She's leaning against a red Renault, arms folded; sunglasses high on her nose; white scarf wrapped like a khaffiya, covering her hair. The one o'clock sun burns through gray dirty haze. When she looks up at my window, rays shoot off her black metallic lenses. I turn away from the window and pick up the Pentax that's sitting on the floor. The zoom's attached, ready for her; I kneel down and start shooting. She's been stalking me all month; I've already shot six rolls of her looking up, waiting. The photos are in my darkroom, stuffed inside a pile of manila envelopes, evidence in case I go to the police. Two months ago, after I saw the photo ripped in half and knew everything about her and Avery, she started calling me, taunting me about the two of them, hanging up before I could fight her with words. I remember her voice as I look down at her: *Don't forget what you told me, Eve. We know everything you did. We both know you're full of death.*

2. It always happens when I see her like this: the flush of rage, the tingling in my fingers, the dry lonely fear in my throat. I won't be free until tonight, when I know she'll be indoors and I can go uptown in the dark. I can't leave; I can hide in my own place, but I can't get away from her. Every week I find something she left: a pair of lapis earrings, an old pink toe shoe, a slip of paper with my name written over and over: *Eve Farrell Eve Farrell Eve Farrell.* The signature is a strained imitation, not quite mine. In the foyer is the photo she took of me on Mission Street, jumping off the steps of St. Rose of Lima. Avery has never seen it, but it doesn't matter. What matters is the one he ripped, the one she took in my apartment the day after we went to St. Rose. I think of his bedroom, large and cool, the dark oak floor that looked black before dawn. I can't see him there without Calley, her legs over his shoulders, the two of them moving together in some warm invisible sea. The rage comes back again, orange and blind. It slips into my throat and makes me choke on raw air. It's hard to think about food; I'll forget to eat dinner if I don't set the alarm on my watch. I take the photo off the wall and carry it to the window. *Calley*, I whisper. *You took Avery away. You gave him the photo and you showed him my blood.* The Renault's still there. Calley's gone.

Below me, along the street, are rows of brownstone steps, wrought iron fences and gates, cars parked so tight that their bumpers seem to touch. The sidewalk is full of Saturday women: two of them side by side, pushing strollers; two others with black backpacks and turquoise mohawks; a young girl walking three yellow labs. Somewhere up the street is a chorus of giggles. Over on Sixth, a siren starts up. When it stops, I hear more giggling, the clicking of heels. If I toss the photo out the window, it could hit anyone: a woman, a baby, a dog. I imagine the headline in the *Post*: VILLAGE INFANT SLAIN BY FALLING PHOTO. The article will not be kind. *Eve Farrell, the award-*

F-STOPS

A Story by Cori Jones

OSIE L. JOHNSON, JR.

winning photographer who threw the photo out the window, immediately ran down to the street, camera in hand, to shoot the tragic scene. The deadly photo, not one of her own, was taken in December by Calley Moore, who lives with Ms. Farrell's former fiancé. Ms. Moore could not be reached for comment. I turn away from the window and dust the photo with my skirt. With Calley's cheap camera it came out blurred, vague, but my legs stretch as I jump; I look almost tall. No, I won't throw it away, not right now. As I walk toward the foyer I stub my toe against a bump under the Tibetan rug. I bend down and find it. It's perfume, a small spray bottle of Opium: Calley again. When I pull the cap off, it leaks a little on my thumb.

3. I sit in my darkroom, in the old pantry I painted black. The Opium's in my pocket, wrapped in foil. I have tried washing my hands, but the smell won't fade. When I sniff my fingers, she floats up to me like smoke. There are things about her I'm sure of. I'm sure she danced two hours a day. She said it kept her balanced, kept her sane. I'm sure it was Avery she wanted from the start; I know she told him what I said at St. Rose. There were lots of things about herself that she never seemed to get straight, bits of her life that were different at different times. She came from Denver; she came from Des Moines. At nineteen she dropped out of college in her second year at Smith; at eighteen she left home to study ballet in New York. There was something about a divorce, how she was single now and needed a job; something about an inheritance from a husband who died of a rare form of strep. And there was everything she said about the Church. Sometimes she said she'd left it twenty years ago; other times she said she should have been a nun. I see her in her claustrophobic flat on East Third Street, a bare November tree outside her window, the air full of diesel and dead mildewed leaves. We'd been out shopping, walking around; outside Urban Outfitters a man in a turban had stopped us and smiled. "Sisters," he nodded. "You are sisters, yes?" She brought us both tea, sat down on her futon. Her cheeks were still red as she leafed through her copy of my book, glancing at a Chelsea transvestite bloodied in a rape attempt, an eight-legged calf near Chernobyl, a Saudi thief with a bloody stump for a hand. She said she hated my vision but it connected her to something we all had to face. She said my photos kept her up at night, staring out at the street, thinking about damage and pain and how everyone on earth was so terribly alone. I sat on her floor that day and studied her eyes as she told me all this. They were the same brown as mine; in just the right light they were flecked with russet and gold. I looked down at myself, at all the black I was wearing: leggings, hi-top sneakers, silk tunic that I'd cinched with a thick leather belt. I'd made it my color when I was fourteen. I heard girls whispering through all the years of school hallways, Confirmation classes, cafés, college dorms: *Eve always keeps to herself. Weird little Eve.* When I looked up at

OSIE L. JOHNSON, JR.

Siberia

A STORY BY STEVEN BARTHELME

Every eager enquiry elicits exculpatory equivocation, I said, eventually. You tell me, you're the doctor. How would I know. I'm just a child. She was sitting up in the big brown chair trying to get me to tell her what *ememtottot* means. It's totem-totem, she said, right? What? I said. And then I said, Eureka, that's it, and I pretended to grin. Children grin. You bounce your head up and down and smile like a moron. You're a very mature child, Elliott, she said. Memetottot, I said.

I am not a little adult. I am ten. I am a child and I expect to be treated as a child and it's unkind to treat me as if I'm some kind of curio or freak just because they are bored or something. I know what *ememtottot* means and no one else does. It's my word, so what? I expect to be bought ice cream cones and talked to stupid and let alone. I can be interested in Siberia or words that begin with "E" without a lot of attention and consultations.

I don't expect to be put in a cage with a fat lady psychologist. But Nietzsche said, E'er twixt expecting und event ist ecstasy. Nietzsche didn't say that. I just made it up. Every time I say Nietzsche said something, the lady psychologist looks at me, trying to figure out whether I made it up. Many words begin with E. Eviscerate, Echt, Eldritch, Effervesce, Excreta. Ememtottot. No one but me knows that, what *ememtottot* means. The lady psychologist does not know.

Nietzsche is some freak dead guy. I won the spelling bee. First I spelled egregious, and excisable, excalibur, and then mnemonic. I read about Nietzsche in the *World Book*. I play chess. I have an interest in pythons. I am tired of being a special child. I want to chase cars. No, that's wrong, that's dogs.

I don't want to go to a school for the "gifted." Special, gifted, advanced, it all sounds like "freak" to me. They are sending me to this freak school and I'm not adjusting well. I burned myself with a cigarette. Their excuse for locking me in a cage in the basement with a psychologist five days a week. Exculpate Elliott at eventide, excellency. If it's not a cage, why are there bars on the windows?

I was first in class excellence, at my old school. You get a card and that's what it says, First in Class Excellence. In this new school there are much freakier freaks than me; there's an orange kid who looks like Henry Kissinger and a girl who looks like Christiane Amanpour who looks like Mick Jagger. Henry is some professor's kid. Most of the kids in this school are professors' kids or schoolteachers' kids. It makes you wonder. We are all kids whose parents taught them to say "melancholy," and then when they say it, the parents gush and swoon. Give them a dog biscuit. Christiane and I are going to run away together and have sex as soon as we feel like it. Erumpent erotogenesis.

I don't think that reading the dictionary is so strange for a ten year old child, and I am a child. Lots of us do it. There are two kinds of freaks. Freaks who pretend to be normal and freaks who pretend to be freaks. I pretend to be a normal child, but I'm not very good at it. Christiane pretends to be a freak and she is very good at it. You should see her singing "Satisfaction." It is not the freakishness that makes us blue; it's the pretending. You've got to think about it. You're all the time planning, never being. That's why Christiane and I are going to run away. We are going to Siberia. Siberia has been misrepresented, so no one knows about it.

Siberia is a kind of farm with fields and rivers and trees which grow televisions and vines which grow chili cheeseburgers. There's no brown bread in Siberia and no tofu and no yogurt. In Siberia there are no children and no adults and no one is special or gifted or freak. Everyone has their own personal television set and no one can look at anyone else without their permission. But everyone likes everyone else so they always have permission. Dogs and cats in Siberia can talk and make jokes like everyone else. Squirrels, too. There are no fleas there, and no one gets sick and no one gets shot. In Siberia if someone wants something, they find it, just lying around on the ground. It rains a lot in Siberia, I love rain.

Of course none of this is true. The lady psychologist has been to Russia and so she knows and she has told me that Siberia is a vast icy wasteland. That's what she said, "vast icy wasteland." I said, You sound like the *World Book*. I said, Maybe you're wrong.

In Siberia anyone who wants to be invisible can learn how easy as pie. Words have special powers in Siberia that they don't have in Massachusetts or anywhere in the United States.

I said, Did you see that movie, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*? She said, Yep. I swear that's what she said. That made me like her a lot better. I said the psychologists were the bad guys in that movie. She said, Are you going to tell me what *ememtottot* means? She pronounced it wrong, of course. Totem totem? I said. Why don't I believe you? she said. Because I'm lying? I said. Evidence etches Elliott's eyes, I thought.

Anyone who hits a dog or a cat in Siberia is sent home permanently, and Siberian dogs and cats always tell. The principal rivers in Siberia are called the Robert DeNiro and the Michelle Pfeiffer. The two rivers cross at the exact center of Siberia which is where you go in Siberia if you want to fall in love. Of course everybody wants to fall in love so they go there about once a week.

Sometimes Christiane sings "Get Off of My Cloud."

The lady psychologist said, Do you think psychologists are bad guys, Elliott? I said, Oh no, you're here to help me, and she looked at me like I'd just said something about Nietzsche. No, I mean it, I said. Have you ever actually been to *Siberia*, I said; or was it just Russia? I really *am* here to help you, she said. I thought as much, I said.

I love my mother and father even though this school was their stupid idea. Christiane and I will go to the confluence of the Robert DeNiro and the Michelle Pfeiffer every day, when we get to Siberia. We'll fall in love and kiss and sit on the banks and feed the pythons. Siberian pythons leave the dogs and cats and squirrels be; they eat chili cheeseburgers right off the vines, or ice cream. At higher elevations year round Siberian mountains are crowned in ice cream, which falls in place of snow. Anyone who wants to wear a Band-Aid in Siberia can, but no cut is necessary.

The lady psychologist is all right and she is trying to help me; she's just no good at it. She just can't help me. She said, Why do you think psychologists are bad guys? I laughed, I couldn't help it.

It was just a movie, I said. You're doing your best, I said. I mean, you're helping me, I said. Really, you really are. Don't a lot of kids burn themselves and stuff? Do you really think I need help? Maybe I just hate being in this weird school. Maybe when the headmistress tells us how we're special children and she means we're better, it sounds like worse to me. Maybe I won't ever get to be normal, be normal, now that you have started me out this way. I don't want a headmistress; I want a principal. There isn't any Siberia, is there? There is no place to go. If I go to Siberia, Christiane won't be allowed to go with me, will she?

In Siberia the principal mountains are the Diet Coke and Diet Dr Pepper ranges. In Siberia all people are striped, so there is only one race. In Siberia some people are naturally tall but other people get to be tall one day a week so it doesn't matter. You can't tell them apart. People say, I'm taking a tall day today. People say, Let's dance, and beautiful music starts playing from the sky. People say, I don't want to go to bed yet and they don't have to. People say, I'm so sleepy, and lie down wherever they are and fall asleep. People say, I love you Elliott, you're not weird at all. People say, Oh, don't go Elliott, not yet. Stay here with us. People say, Ememtottot, and they disappear. □

That was not what he had around him now, he could see. He should get out of the car. Walk, look around him. Lift leaves to see what was growing underneath. Because African violets were low plants, weren't they? Certainly any he had seen had always been. That meant they would be that much harder to discover.

"Can we stop?" he asked the driver. "Is there anyone around here who knows the place?"

The driver looked at him as if he only understood a small bit of what he was saying. "Many, many plants," he repeated.

"Stop," Thomas commanded, putting his hand out to touch the driver's.

The driver looked over at him, alarmed. Nevertheless, he braked and the car skidded to a stop in the deep dirt of the track. The engine coughed once, then fell silent.

It was near the middle of the day. No breeze ruffled the leaves, and in the absence of the car's forward motion the dust stopped too and began to turn on itself in the air. The place smelled of damp, of flowers, of green spices. The only sound was that of Thomas's heart and the insects droning in the shafts of sunlight that pierced the canopy of leaves.

That was when the foolishness of his idea fell around Thomas like a heavy curtain, blocking out the beauty of the forest.

6. Now was a tricky time for the plantlets. Marie checked the cuttings twice a day to make sure they weren't too humid. It was a mistake to think "Africa" and assume "humid." The map in one of her books put the plantation of Baron von Saint Paul and the Usambara mountains in Tanzania, near the eastern coast of Africa where it's relatively dry. But you could tell from the leaves that her plants didn't have their origins in a swampy jungle, Marie thought as she felt the soil in the propagation tray. African-violet leaves are thick and succulent, like the ones you find on plants who are accustomed to drying out a little. They don't flower well when it gets too hot nor when it is too cold. They like things just right.

She smiled to herself. Just right. Just. Right. What Thomas had always been talking about on the stump. The silly man...

Yes, she had forgiven him. Yes indeed, she could honestly say she had forgiven him. He should thank his lucky stars that she was going to stick by him. That she still had ideas...

The plants were watered, the lights on the timer had just flicked on. She would go into the other room and pour herself a glass of white wine to sip while she read the paper for news of Africa.

7. No, of course it was a lost cause. He had no idea where the *violettes d'usumbura* lived. The driver was tired of stopping here, stopping there, and letting the white man out of the car to stumble around in the undergrowth looking for something or other. Some places there were flowers, other places there weren't. None of them struck him as particularly interesting. After several hours he was ready to give in to the petulant face of the driver, and tell him to head back to Bujumbura.

The sun had slipped down the sky, and the driver was leaning against the Renault with his cap pushed down low on his face to shield his eyes from the slanting rays that filtered through the leaves. He looked half asleep despite the fact that he was nearly standing. Thomas straightened up (how ridiculous he must look) from where he had been searching along the side of a little rivulet. That meant he saw the men before the driver did.

At first glance he thought there were no more than five or six of them, but as the space around the car began to fill up with men slipping out of the forest shadows, Thomas had to guess more: 20, 30, 40 even.

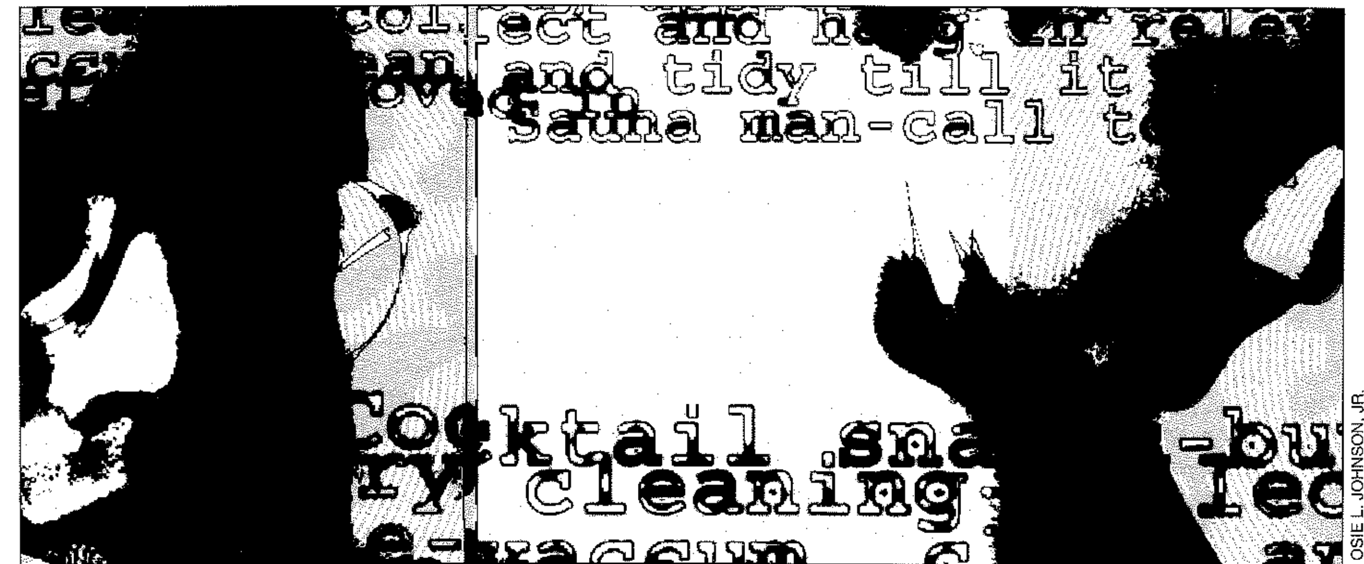
They were dressed in shorts and t-shirts, or else wrapped in a kind of multi-colored sarong. They were handsome to a man. Handsome and terrifying because in place of the spears and the shields which Thomas could imagine their great-grandfathers carrying, they had grenade launchers, Kalashnikovs and machetes. They looked at him as if he were part of the landscape.

And then they looked at the driver, who became aware of their eyes all at once. His body straightened up as if snapped to attention by a whip. He looked around himself, carefully. He tested a smile. He pointed to Thomas.

But the white man was no shelter. The men in front of the group said something in a language that Thomas did not understand. The driver reached in his pocket and pulled out papers. He shuffled through them, then handed one to the man who seemed to be in charge.

Behind, the men with the machetes touched them tenderly. Those with rifles did not move. That was when Thomas realized that what he was involved in was not considered important enough to waste ammunition. That was when Thomas decided they were at least important enough to be shot. He lunged toward the man nearest him.

The driver crossed himself, then moved too. Thomas felt nothing but the impact in his ears of the sound of a discharging rifle. He saw nothing but the driver stepping forward to meet the volley from the rifle. He saw nothing but the blood surging upward from the chest of the man. He saw nothing but the blood blooming in front of his own eyes. He saw nothing but the purple and red blossoms of blood. □



OSIE L. JOHNSON, JR.

The Rabbit's List

A STORY BY CLAIRE ROBSON

I. Toast

Urinating in a glass jar is not on Suzy's agenda this morning.

The morning in question, by the way, is one of those on which God has just serviced the sun and now checks to see how it's working on full power. Its rays highlight the grease marks on Andrew's refrigerator and illuminate the dust motes which wriggle in his spacious kitchen. Early rain has set the world to sparkling. A blustery little wind rattles the kitchen window and startles Suzy, who has possibly been gazing out of it at the disgusting healthiness of the day. Alternatively, she has been gazing into it at the reflection of her mooning face. At any rate, she is doing one of these two things as this story descends upon her like a lowered bell jar, imposing order and importance by the act of display. She turns from the window and walks to the refrigerator.

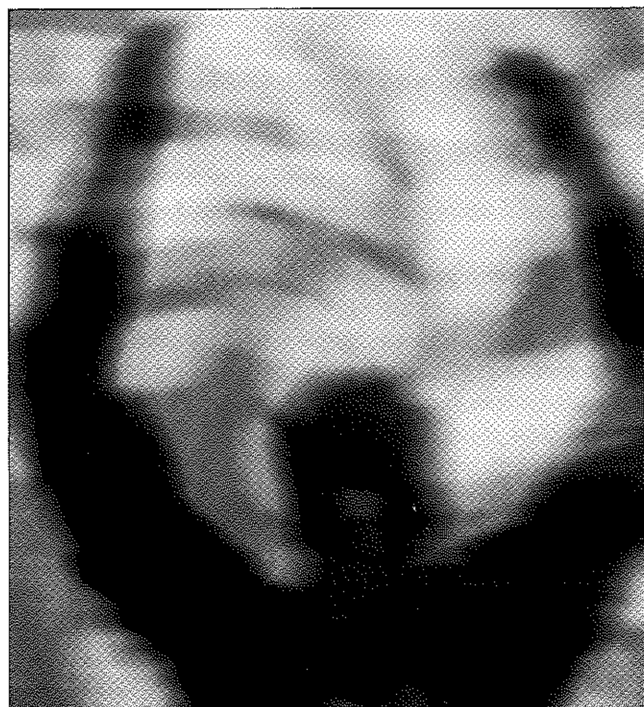
Urinating in a glass jar is not part of her plan. Instead Suzy intends to complete a list of tasks indicated by the plastic magnetic bunny rabbit on the refrigerator. Both the appliance and the bunny rabbit belong to Andrew, Suzy's new lover. The list is Suzy's. Their adjacency is a metaphor for the way in which Suzy and Andrew struggle to cohabit. Andrew tries to lighten up. Suzy attempts to be organized.

Resplendent in a chef's hat, Andrew's cheerful, but bossy, bunny points to Suzy's dutiful, but sardonic, order of business, as follows:

1) Cocktail snacks – buy appropriate quantities of
2) Dry cleaning – collect and hang in relevant closets
3) House – vacuum, clean and tidy till it looks like it used to before I moved in
4) Sauna man – call to arrange service

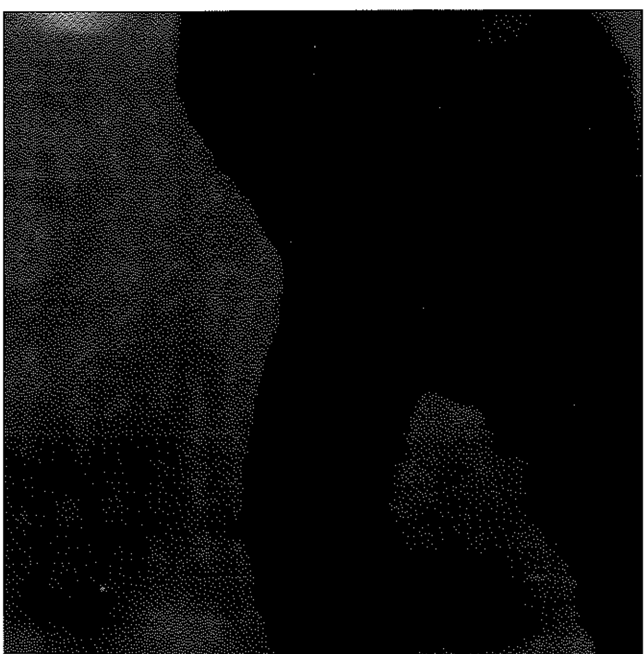
As she examines the list, pushing her lips out into a thoughtful pout, Suzy tells herself that none of these tasks is daunting. Once they are out of the way, she has the whole afternoon to paint, as per their agreement.

Andrew had insisted that he and Suzy achieve a high degree of clarity before she moved into his house. Those were his very words: "a high degree of clarity." His linguistic patterns have commercial derivation. He thrives on the mixed, muscular metaphors employed by executives who want people to work harder and are looking for fresh new ways to say so. Andrew is a fresh, new broom. The grass doesn't grow under his feet. He gets rid of dead wood and never sweeps anything under the carpet. When Andrew scents conflict (if Suzy is becoming angry, say) his words circle warily around her, waiting to pounce on feelings that have strayed from the flock. Often Suzy knows that they are old, weak feelings whose time has come, or diseased or damaged feelings whose limping decrepitude has slowed the whole herd down. Suzy tells herself that Andrew does her a



RESCUE!

a story by michael erard



OSIE L. JOHNSON, JR.

Three junior high girls compose themselves at the edge of the pool in a row, shout One, two, three! and then jump whirling into the water. You call that a cannonball? a junior high boy with pimply legs shrills when they rise in a froth of bubbles and giggles. He promises, THIS is a cannonball!, and then he executes a perfect jump and tucks the legs up and plinks into the water, splashlessly, like a bb shot; but the girls aren't watching.

I'm sitting with my legs dangled in the deep end when a boy pops up near my feet and asks, water streaming from between his teeth, if I knew what happened. I say no. Well, he says, that lady had a heat stroke. I look: she's sagged on a bench on the other side of the fence, and a group of people crowd her. From the pool, bathers watch with full attention, especially when the ambulance and fire truck pull up and the woman disappears from view. Really, I say. Then why the fire truck? The boy shrugs. I guess maybe she started a fire, he says, and drops himself under the water and flicks his tail and away.

Every day in June I am happy to go down to Shipe pool, my neighborhood pool, to see the kids jumping into the water with the yahoo summertime abandon of You jumped this far! No you jumped *this* far! when the dads' coaching hasn't worn on them yet, and the moms are happy to let their kids stay in the water for another hour or two, they'll just run errands and cook dinner and come back and pile the kids all hopalong into the minivan and not care if the seats get wet. Everyone shares the joy, it's infectious, it gets to you more quickly in June, you get in the water or you touch a wet kid or just put your foot in a puddle and you're happy too, it's summertime.

All the moms and dads happy to be off work are letting the damp imprint of their sock elastic fade from their naked ankles, and the water is clear, and the air rings with their soft encouragements to swim or kick or paddle or cough. It's been raining, and the days are not yet hot, so the water is cool; you shiver in it. I can distinguish an individual body through the herd of limbs and heads and breasts and bellies getting wet all at the same time, though every once in a while a baby bursts out of someone's arms, gets thrown up high into the air higher than babies go naturally, but she likes it and giggles open-mouthed giving her two front teeth a big sunning as up and down and up she goes. I see a father telling his son in Chinese to kick, kick, and a mother, in the water, telling her daughter at the top of the ladder, in Spanish, Wait for *mami*, wait for *mami*, and a young man in an Amish-cut beard dragging his life-jacketted son around on a foam tube, while the young mother sits on the curb and has unhitched her shirt and feeds number two, smiling at dad and son.

And so isn't it about having babies, swimming at the neighborhood pool?

I don't care to put my face in the water: I don't like the pressure of water against my eyes, up my nose, on my lips, so I keep my glasses on, even when I swim, and from what I'm then able to see, each pair of bodies contains one human, one ape. A dad walks in with progeny bundled on his arm; he's dark and hairy, she's smooth and pink. Or a babe is perched on a mom, clutching a piece of her shirt, and gaping. Other moms groom each other like chimps. "Yes, a year, yes, she's fourteen months, it goes by so quickly, doesn't it?" says A and B replies, "It sure does," and on they go riffling through the other's hairline.

The dads stand at the edge saying Put your arms back You need to jump out straight. They've raised their sons and daughters as mammals, but in order to swim, the children need to relearn what fishes know. I think to myself, you know, someday, I want to raise sons and daughters of the water who have long slim lines like fishes and who plop in like otters, who like these young mammals can remember without fear that they came from the water and will understand the joy of moving their limbs in the pool's new blue.

We are not fishes after all; we've left our fishhood behind us. We're forever departing our fishhood. We're always like brave African lungfish stalking across the veldt licking each other with vervet tongues to stay moist and alive. And yet we never finally leave; we always return to water because we want to make sure. Of what? That we don't belong there buoyant in the cool water and sputtering with water up the nose and thankful for the air. We go to the pool to reaffirm that yes indeed I am a land creature. I am a social animal. I speak. I can choose to eat; I can even starve myself. Without these reaffirmations, I'm convinced that we'd sink into ourselves. We'd drown in the murk of our solipsisms and preoccupations. So across the veldt we go.

Every day I see at the shallow end of the pool it is pairs of monkeys and humans, land creatures all. At the deep end, the children are autonomous—older boys jumping into the water and girls paddling around, their eyes sleek on the boys; but even their moms come to the side doing what moms do saying come to dinner and their dads doing what dads do which is say Put your arms back you need to jump out straight, and down at the deep end, which is shaded in the late afternoon, it's about training and teaching your babies before you let them go for good. What else could it be?

Because why else would I (who have no children) be aware of moving away from all the bodies in the water, the boys sharking past my legs, the mom paddling backwards and her baby surfing in the wake?

Because why do those young lovers octopus so easily around each other in the shallow end, her arms and legs wrapped around him, her hair wet and sharp down her back? She's in a cotton tank top that flattens wet against her breasts, he's slightly older and blond. She is maybe eighteen. At one point he plows from the edge with strong strokes, sure that she is behind him, but she's doubled under and isn't at the rope; she squirts away too easy, and from the look on his face I'd say that a lot of the time she doesn't meet him halfway, but now she swims to him for more dangling, which makes him happy, a meet-me-at-the-bottom-and-kiss-me kind of happy.

Because how else to interpret the sadness of the black-haired woman in the black bikini—nothing startling, sensible, as sensible as black bikinis can be—who is young and pretty and sitting by herself in the sun? She is sitting next to the mom with a big blue sun tattooed on her back with topless blond babycakes and dad, or boyfriend, also with long blond hair and some Mayan design tattooed to him. Isn't she sad because she doesn't have a baby to coddle in the water? To hug and swirl, who can't swim away? To cool and sweeten in the clear June rainwater? To explain and name things for? To lightly splash with water, on her toes? Then to coax away from dead bugs in the filters? To rub dry with a big towel after shaking the ants and sticks off? To smell in her hair the chlorine for hours after and the promise of more yahoo summertime?

I wave to her; she waves back.

It's June and I want *Rescue!* as the marquee would flash; *Rescue!* in which the loved one is snatched from the certitude of danger back into the incertitude of life; in which you the lover give the loved one a hand, a hold, a platform, a rope, a deck, an island, a continent to stand on; in which you lift her from the reef of her loneliness, brush the surf and seaweed from her, and remind her that she is mammal, and when she stops snorting water she hears your promise that she never has to go back.

Is this spring-fed? a woman asks; no, the man says. Not like other pools in Austin, Shipe is plain old water, tap water, river water, chlorinated twice a day; in June it was fresh and clean water, shiny if water can be shiny, though by July the water has taken on a mature look, a certain thoughtfulness, a well-swimmed dullness as if it has been scuffed and scratched by all the bodies moving through it, a democratic water, a fatigued water; on certain days in August when you dive under and open your eyes, you can hardly see anything for the particulates suspended in front of you like a morning mist.

July afternoon. It is after five o'clock. Dads have joined moms in the shallow end and are walking in the random little circles that adults do when they get in the water