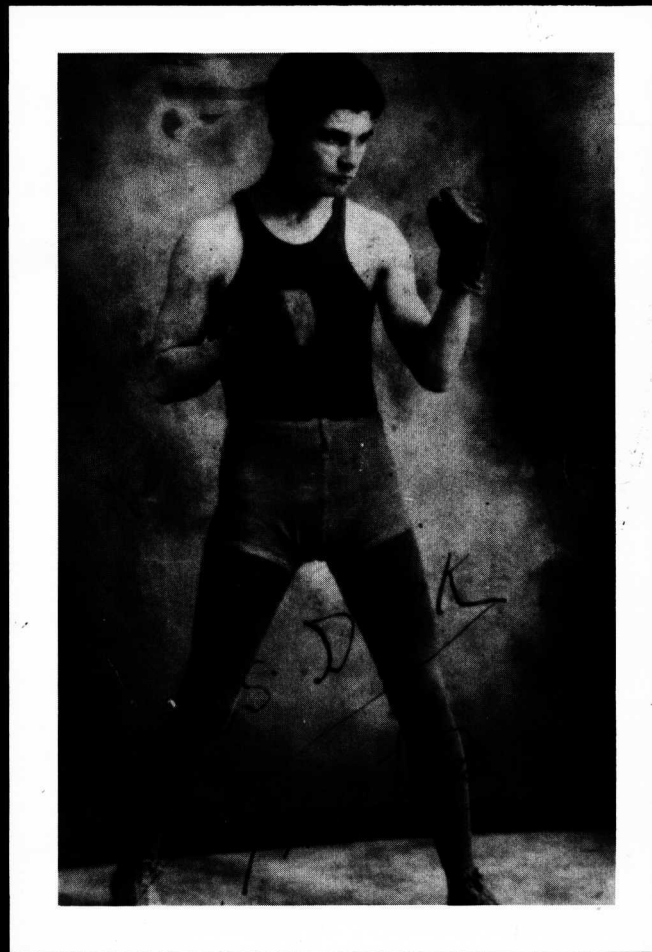


THIN AIR

THE RIGHT KIND OF
TROUBLE



1996 Short Story Contest Winner: Patricia Lawrence

\$4.95

Plus Stories from Brian Edwards and Chris Bell

THIN AIR

THE RIGHT KIND OF
TROUBLE

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IN THIS ISSUE

trou•ble *n.* **1.** A state of distress, affliction, danger, or need: *in trouble with the police.* **2.** An effort, especially one that causes inconvenience or bother: *went to a lot of trouble to find this.* **3.** The conflict or tension that drives a story: *near death experience, eg.* (See Brian Evenson's "WATER AND ANGELS.")

—**trou•bler** *n.* **1.** An agitator; a trouble maker (See Craig Rullman's "MOLE," Sean Brendan-Brown's "EVERY LAST SOB & THEN SOME," JoLee Gibbon's "PATCHWORK," David Axelrod's "A LAST QUESTION FROM HOBO LAKE")

—**trou•ble•shoot•er** *n.* **1.** A worker whose job it is to find sources of trouble; to find troublemakers: *let's interrogate the troublemaker* (See Interviews with National Book Award Winner THOM JONES, Bestselling author/scientist/professor ALAN LIGHTMAN and ersatz art work by Managing Editor, TODD PETERSEN).

—**trou•blous** *adj.* **1.** Full of trouble: *the father's journey was troublous* (See Father Clement Procopio's "THE OLANCHO EXPERIENCE PT. II,"). **2.** Uneasy (See Patricia Lawrence's "WITCHCRAFT," [winner of 1996 Short Story Contest].

—**the•right•kind•of•trou•ble** *n.* (See THIN AIR) © The gentleman gracing our cover is none other than CACTUS DICK, a.k.a. JOSEPH BAILEY, circa 1927. Part Scot, part Texan, Dick did a bit of everything: he was a desert-dwelling fighter, a railroad-hopping hobo, a pool shark, shot at a dance near Flagstaff, a soldier, and is best known for the barber-shop he ran in Cottonwood, Arizona, from 1949 until 1974. Though Dick's haircuts were rumored to be excellent, the barbershop's main attraction was its unparalleled storytelling; it was the kind of place you would go, crawling on your hands and knees through prickly pear and ocotillo, whether you needed a shave or not, just to hear a good yarn.

Mole

Craig Rullman

They were pushing cattle to their summer range south of the Owyhee River when Conly first noticed the gigantic mole on Jake's neck. It was large enough to be spotted from a great distance, unusually large in fact, and Conly wondered why, after all this time together in the outback, he had never seen it before. He rode some distance behind Jake, their horses stepping carefully in the rimrock, eyeing the mole furiously, as though its sudden appearance in the desert set all that he knew about people and the world on its side.

They rode all morning, loose-herding the cattle eastward over hummocks of foxtail and sage, down draws made dangerous by sharp volcanic rock and rattle-snakes and badger holes. Conly, without making it too obvious, stayed close to Jake, and stole glances at the mole at every opportunity. When Jake suddenly broke wide to ring in a bolting calf, Conly sat his horse and thought he could see the growth bouncing on the old buckaroo's neck. Perhaps he did not see it, perhaps he only wanted to see it, he couldn't be sure. But as he sat with his forearms crossed on the horn and his mount shaking his head against the flies, Conly knew what he must do.

When they broke for lunch and sat in the high grass eating, Conly did not look at Jake. He listened to the talk, the quiet comparisons of each buckaroo's morning ride, and when he was finished he lay back in the grass and stared at the blue sky. After a while Jake stood up and walked away from the camp, and Conly, after giving Jake some time, rose slowly and followed him toward the river.

As he walked down toward the river and the cottonwoods, Conly could see Jake's hat above the tall green grass. He cut a wide circle and walked around until he was standing modestly at Jake's side. He stood staring out at the cottonwoods and the river and the desert beyond.

"Go somewhere else," Jake said, squatting in the grass.

Conly did not answer. He put his hands on his hips.

"Go on, give me some privacy."

"That's quite a mole," Conly said, still staring out at the river.

"What?"

"Your mole. That's really somethin'."

He rode some distance behind Jake . . . eyeing the mole furiously, as though its sudden appearance in the desert set all that he knew about people and the world on its side.



"What's the matter with you?" There was a hint of fear in Jake's voice.

"Your mole, Jake. I can't get it out of my head."

Jake stood up now and adjusted his pants and tightened his belt. He stood staring at Conly.

"I'll give you fifty dollars for it," Conly said suddenly, turning to face Jake for the first time.

This made Jake consider. He lost the puzzled expression he'd been wearing and Conly could see his mind working.

"Fifty?"

"Fifty dollars."

"Alright."

They walked back to camp.

That night they tied Jake down with piggin string. Conly took a red hot Huerter's knife and sliced off the mole, then cauterized the wound. When it was over Jake sat up on his backside and winced and rubbed his neck. The other buckaroos sat quietly around the fire, smoking rolled cigarettes and relaxing. Conly took the bloody black pupae in his fingers and tossed it into the fire. ■

Water and Angels

Brian Evenson

Before swimming out to die, he remembered having learned as a child that one should not kill oneself through drowning, for angels were afraid of water. When, at fourteen, he slit his wrists and his mother found him slumped over the tin bathing trough, the blood swirling out of him, the first thing she had said was, "Thank God you did not try to drown yourself." She proceeded to tell him how if he died by drowning angels would not come for his soul and the soul would decay with his bones on the floor of the sea. Vasquez told her that angels would not come for his soul anyway. "Stupid boy," she said. "You would think looking at you that you know nothing," and after she had bandaged both his wrists, she struck him about the ears to beat some sense into him.

The water was cold over his bare feet as he stood naked. An old man, he thought, was never meant to be naked. I will stand here naked, he thought, until my feet are used to the cold, and then I will move in a little more, stop, move in a little more, until the water is over my head. Then that will be the end. My beard will cling to the surface for a minute then sink slowly down, sodden with water, dragging down with me.

Vasquez imagined that was what his father's beard had done. When Vasquez was eighteen, before having had met Pasolini for the second and final time, his father had come to tell him he was planning to die that day. His father removed his wedding ring, swallowed it. Together they had walked down to the dock, his father climbing into the narrow canoe and paddling out into the river, the water slowly spinning the boat, drifting it downstream. His father waved once then rocked the boat back and forth until it capsized, his father vanishing, striking back to the surface once, briefly, to wave a second time.

Returning home, he told his mother there had been an accident, that her husband was dead. She crossed herself, tracing the lateral backward, but seemed calm enough.

"How," she said. "The factory?"

"A boat," said Vasquez. "Drowned."

The mention of water made her claw her hands at heaven and scream. Vasquez left the house.

He had puzzled over the suicide of his father, wondering why he had chosen to kill himself by water. Why he had wanted to punish his wife, Vasquez did not know: They seemed as happy as any couple he had known, only striking each other on holy days.

He remembered what his father had told him about man. "Man," he had said, "is a fish. He came from the sea. He will return someday to the sea."

"Man came from God," his mother would answer. "The sea has nothing to do with man."

He believed his mother, because it was his mother who struck him about the ears, demanding belief, while his father did not strike him. But as he waded out to sea, he knew his father to have been right. He had suspected as much for many months. Lying in bed, surrounded by tiny axes and waiting patiently for death, he had heard swelling up in his consciousness the sound of the sea, the roaring of the waves. It kept increasing until the walls were shaking, heart beating faster than ever before, even faster than it had with Pasolini and Amparo.

He got out of bed, making his bones move again, walking naked out of his house, naked through the streets of Labaise. The children taunted him, and threw pebbles at his withers. People who knew him walked beside him and tried to persuade him to return to his home, but he would not turn aside.

"I am going to the sea," he would say, and walk on.

"At least put some trousers on," they said.

But Vasquez knew that if he turned back he would never make it to the sea.

After his father's death, Vasquez' mother took his place in the factory, sewing beads together in strings as his father had done. Vasquez gave her the money he earned from his woodcarvings when she asked for it. She worked in the factory during the day, in the evening walking down to the docks. She paddled out in the canoe, diving from it into the river, looking for her husband, diving until well after dark, never finding the body.

"I must find the body," she said, "or I shall have to be alone in heaven."

He told her that Catholics had no such notion of heaven. She told him to

shut up, that she could still strike him whenever he was asking for it.

One day his mother did not come to the factory. The narrow boat was found spinning in circles, halfway to Cascan. The factory workers dragged the river with nets but the only body to be found was a heap of sodden flesh within the stomach of which they found a ring. The townspeople gave the ring to Vasquez, buried the body. He did not attend the funeral. Later, he dug up his father's body, carried it out to the docks, dumped it back into the river, dropping the ring after it.

The water was cold and lapping against his waist. His privates floated idle and numb in the water. Vasquez could see them, white and distorted. Beneath his beard, he felt with his hands the scars where he had tried to cut out the red blotch of a birthmark. He had

His father waved once then rocked the boat back and forth until it capsized, his father vanishing, striking back to the surface once, briefly, to wave a second time.

cut at it until it was nothing but blood, yet the birthmark would not disappear. It returned, crosshatched in pale lines, an aberration. He grew a beard to cover it.

When he had sliced open his birthmark, his Uncle Traba, an artist, had become enthusiastic. He had taken photographs of the wound and had begun a portrait of it, making Vasquez sit in a chair with his head tilted back. He told Vasquez that the series would be called "Construction with Blood Birthmark," but when Traba had said "It just needs a few more cuts," and had flicked out his stiletto, Vasquez' mother had put a stop to art.

When Vasquez was sixteen and the birthmark incident was forgotten, he

spent several months working as Traba's apprentice. Traba was an accident artist, using as his medium blood and flesh. Whenever there was an accident, the police telephoned Traba, and he and Vasquez would run together through the wide streets of Labaise until they reached the spot. Traba spread the blood about with brushes and a trowel, moved the arms and legs of the body about whether the victim was living or dead, straightening the remains of a collar, propping a mouth open with toothpicks. If Traba thought it necessary, the police looked the other way as he lopped off a finger or ear. He took pictures, did quick sketches and perhaps, depending on how large the crowd was, did a painting on the scene as the police held the crowd back.

The inside of Traba's house was papered with the photographs he had taken. Traba peered at them for hours, with an old brass-encased magnifying glass, elucidating the details to Vasquez. Vasquez tried to seem interested.

When Vasquez had been working with him two months, Traba trusted him enough to show him his masterpiece, a stuffed work kept in a locked room. The name of the piece was "Lupe Varga: an accident in bed." Her hips were locked open, her eyes rolled up towards heaven.

Vasquez asked Traba why he did not exhibit her.

"In Labaise?" Traba said. "Heathens!"

Vasquez stopped working for his Uncle Traba, turned to his woodcarving. Soon Traba had packed up Lupe and his photographs and had left for the Capitol, where he would find artistic success and shake hands with the President of the Republic.

This water is very cold, Vasquez thought. He was up to his neck, moving his arms back and forth, hands as oar blades. He tipped his head so that the

birthmark, already covered by beard, would be engulfed by water. I am wearing clothes, he thought, the water is my clothes. He stood, looking out at the sea, the current tugging at him. I will strike out and swim as far as I can, he thought. And I will stop swimming.

He had expected the water to be warm, like a body, like Pasolini's body. When Pasolini had first come, Vasquez had been but a boy. The dark Mercedes had stopped in the dust of the town square, on the cobblestones. Vasquez had been playing with the other boys. The others had run away, but Vasquez had stayed, looking at himself in the dark mirrored windows, watching the driver walk toward the store. The window that served as his mirror moved down humming until he saw a bald man, face gaunt, wearing black glasses. Vasquez saw his reflection in the man's glasses. The man smiled, the window slid back up. Vasquez left the square, went home.

That night there was a knock on his door. It was the driver of the Mercedes, holding crumpled in both hands his hat. His mother went outside with the driver and, when she came back, told Vasquez that there was a man outside waiting for him. Vasquez' father slowly folded up his paper and left the room. "Who?" Vasquez asked. She would not meet his eyes. "Father?" he said. When there was no answer he went, climbing into the back of the car where Pasolini was friendly, and gave him sweets, and took off his glasses to show Vasquez his whiteblue eyes, and asked his name, and held his hand and tickled him, and touched him gently where he perhaps should not have, as he admitted himself, in the end making Vasquez cry.

"Every man," Pasolini whispered in his ear in a calm and steady voice, "is both a man and a woman. But woman," he said, "every woman is two women."

He left Vasquez in front of his house at dawn, giving him a book called "Stanislov Rublinolikovisitchi Badinovski: the Art of Wood-Cutting," along with a tiny axe. He lay on the lawn, the book on his chest, until his father came, and gathered him, and carried him into the house.

He kept the axe and the book hidden, burying them behind the garden, but he knew where they were and at last dug them up. The book explained how to carve in the Russian style, using an axe to hack free the shapes trapped in the wood. He learned to carve roughly from it, slowly mastering the finer points and developing techniques of his own. By the time he was eighteen, he was exporting carvings to the Capitol, faces mostly, to be sold to tourists as antique native work. He was supporting himself, away from his mother, having moved into a small house where he could be alone. All the faces he carved seemed to him Pasolini.

Vasquez thought, I am in the water. I am ready to swim out. I will swim out and I will not come back.

But he did not swim out. Rather he thought about the girl.

After the death of his father there had been a girl, the only one, the sole exception. She wandered into town one day and knocked on his door. He had fed her, let her sleep on his floor. She stayed with him for a week, watching his work, watching him cut away the dead wood, he ranting as he cut.

"Why do you scream so?" she asked. He did not answer.

"Why do you yell?" she said.

"I don't know," he lied.

He asked her name but she would not tell him. After the first week she crept into his bed, and they slept one behind the other for half the year. Vasquez told her what Pasolini had said about women. She laughed.

"It is true," he said.

"No," she said. "Nothing is true."

He told her about his father, his father's death, about his mother's search for the body, about angels and their fear of water. She always laughed, but he could not stop telling her and would tell her more until there was nothing left to tell. She sat with him as he carved wood, her finger tracing the moving curve of his back. He noticed that the faces he was carving no longer resembled Pasolini. They looked like someone he had never known. He asked her to marry him. He asked her so many times that at last she agreed, saying that first she must go to the South to tell her people, that she must tell them alone. The next day she left, leaving as she had come, without money, with only the clothes she wore. He watched her leave. Twice she turned and waved, and then he could no longer see her. She never returned.

Soon his carvings were Pasolini again, and he knew again the axe. He did not forget her, but he remembered Pasolini more and more.

When Pasolini finally returned, Vasquez was nearing middle age. He came in a small, battered car full of bullet holes which he drove himself. There were sores over his body and his head was liver-spotted and lumpy. When he embraced him, Vasquez could distinctly feel the bones underneath Pasolini's skins. Vasquez drove the car off the dock into the water, swimming back to shore. He hid Pasolini in his room, Pasolini a pale and small child lost in the blankets.

He showed Pasolini the things he made with the axe. Pasolini stroked them and said, "I only wanted to die here with you."

It was almost true, and perhaps Pasolini himself believed it. Pasolini took off his trousers and revealed the

sores that were his insides pushing their way out, but Vasquez touched him all the same. They held one another and talked until Pasolini, too tired to talk, slowly drifted off, died.

The day after the death, government men came in a truck. They took Pasolini's corpse and sewed it into a canvas bag and threw it into the back of the truck. They dredged the river and fished out the car, along with mud and weeds and the scattered remains of a male skeleton. In the car's trunk they found another body, fishwhite and full of bullets, and a briefcase containing 20,000 shares of Swiss stock.

He poked through the weeds, looking for a ring. When he tried to throw the skeleton back into the water, one of the government men split his forehead with his rifle butt, kicking him as he lay on the ground until he stopped moving. He lay in the mud until it was dark, then got to his knees, pushing the skeleton back into the water, crawling back to his house.

It is time to swim out, Vasquez thought. What if angels are not afraid of water? What if there are no angels? If there are none, he thought, all the better.

He thought about Amparo and about how he had done for Amparo what Pasolini had done for him. He wondered if Amparo wanted to see him again. He remember the days of teaching Amparo with the axes, of teaching heavy strokes and light quick strokes, of explaining how axes could carve only men. And the day when Amparo had left Labaise, striking out on his own.

"When I am dying," Vasquez had told Amparo, "I will remember you and I will come to you."

Amparo said nothing.

"When I am dying—" Vasquez had started again.

"—Yes, yes," said Amparo. "So be it."

Vasquez had hacked for himself a coffin from a single piece of Redwood

imported from North America, hacking a face in the lid. The face did not look like Vasquez' face. The face was Pasolini's. He had planned to be buried in the coffin, but they could bury it empty. It was all the same. They could bury his axes in it along with the faulty wooden faces which he had carved when the girl had lived with him. He had saved all the faces, burying them under the house, all of them except a dozen or two which he had used at the end of one winter when he had no more firewood. He had thrown them into the fire and had watched the faces burn and split, warming his hand over them.

He thought of his father's body that had tried twice to escape the sea. His body perhaps would attempt the same. It was possible that the government men had thrown the brilliant Pasolini into the sea. And the girl, perhaps she had drowned as well. He would meet them all, bereft of faces, without angels. He stood in the water and looked out over the surface. He struck out and swam as far as he could, waved twice to no one, and sunk. ■

Witchcraft

Patricia Lawrence

1996 Prix de la Rarefier

My father retired early, moved to Palm Desert and began to take his meals seriously. This afternoon he produced a pad of paper from the pool cleaners and listed the possibilities. Dolores, my father's girlfriend, and I collected our drinks from the living room and followed him to the kitchen table. Chinese, he wrote. Mexican. Seafood. In the *desert*, he said, heaven help me, and scratched it. Mexican? La Cantina? How many votes? Mexican? Dolores and I wouldn't vote. It's your birthday, we told him, you decide. He threw his arms over his head, upsetting the lamp hanging above the table. He yelled, "No no no. This is a democracy." I leaned back and watched the lamp swing above our heads, until Dolores' hand reached high and stilled it. She looked to me and winked; then she looked at my father and nodded, "The gals want Mexican."

Before giving up, my father's girlfriends try to get to him through me. Or, think the secret maybe lies in my mother, his former wife. After margaritas and before dinner at La Cantina, Dolores believes she'll accompany me to the powder room. She smiles at me, pats his leg under the table, *we girls won't be long*.

Inside, she pulls some perfume from her purse. "Do you wear fragrance?" she says.

I shake my head, know from experience that she might buy me whatever fragrance I say. Or buy it for herself.

My father hates fragrance.

Through peach light she teases her thin hair, looks at herself with new interest, and asks me, "Your mother wear fragrance?"

"Yeah," I say, and look away. This is painful for both of us.

So I tell her. "Chanel Number Five."

She squeezes both my hands and looks me straight on. "I want to have the mariachis sing Happy Birthday for him."

I say, "What?"

"Mariachis—a surprise! Something special."

It's always a shock, a new person's face. In cities when I ask for directions I rarely remember what I'm told. Some part of me wonders why this moving face is only a foot or so from mine. "Actually—"

"What?"

"Hang on," I say. "I'm trying to think," I say. "You know what?"

"Hmm?"

"It's just, now that I think about it, he gets anxiety attacks on his birthdays. Let's not remind him."

Dolores isn't listening. She smiles to me and goes off to find our waitress.

When I join my father at the table, he smiles. "Chicken enchiladas with green chile sauce."

He closes his menu. He's wearing a shirt that Dolores bought him, obscenely olive near a face I always saw in obvious blue, dad blue. Behind him, women in long skirts carrying trays of food criss cross one another. They move their hips around corners, swerve through the customers.

"So how's my kid?"

"I'm well," I say.

"Job? Men?"

"Maybe. Kim Higgins is trying to get me one through her uncle, set design stuff. Doug and I are dating again. Remember Doug?"

"The swimmer."

"The lawyer."

"Lawyer." He winks and looks around for the waitress. "How's your foot?"

I grin. "My foot's fine, Daddy. My foot's great." His way of asking, how are you really. Not the mechanics, but are you happy? It started when I was a kid. Because everything was fine. School's fine. History's fine. *Fine!* he grabbed my shoe and wiggled it, *then how's your foot?*

"Good to be back? Miss world-traveler?"

"Yeah," I tell him.

They know much about me when they meet me. Every time I visit my father, which now is two nights a year, a woman comes at me from behind the door my father opens. I haven't heard of her yet. She's so eager to know me. Much about me. Eager to know. So much.

Dolores spreads her napkin in her lap. "I want to hear *everything* about your trip."

"It was amazing."

"Amazing," she follows, nodding. "What were the people like?"

"They were generous. One family took me into their home and made me this incredible dinner."

"That tells the whole story, doesn't it Jim?" Dolores says.

"Hmph?"

"The dinner they made Karen."

My father seems puzzled. He has a tortilla chip in his hand. I fold the hem of the tablecloth under itself and run my fingers along its soft, frayed edge.

"On her trip! How warm they were. How generous."

"Oh yes yes."

Dolores shakes her head and leans close to me. "Tell me. Was it hard, being alone that long?"

"Actually not."

"But you must get lonely sometimes," she says.

I watch my father wave an empty chip basket at our waitress. He places his hands on either side of his mouth and mimes a stage shout to the woman, "*Guacamole!*" He turns to me. "It's fresh here—you'll love it." He refills our glasses.

I nod. Take my drink in my hand and swallow several times hard. I put the glass down and grin.

My father has not followed the conversation. He says, "Would you not give anything to be her? Young. Free like that?"

Dolores uses a halved straw to draw circles in her margarita. She tilts her head, watches the straw in her drink, considering. "No, no. I don't believe my twenties were worth it. My thirties yes. Twenties, too much fear. I was so busy trying to make sure my life happened to me. Too afraid to enjoy it."

"God it's exciting," my father says.

Dolores and I smile and blink at each other, and I have to feel grateful for

music that grows louder in our area of the restaurant. For the things to look at. Dolores points overhead to a piñata of a burro; I smile and point to the wall near our table. Paintings of red chili ristras. Beyond the restaurant window are the desert mountains, where the sun is setting.

Dolores asks about my hair, do I color it? I shake my head no. Then I nod slightly, to tell her *continue? why do you ask?* But the mariachis begin the chorus, and Dolores throws her arms up, and we lean back in our chairs. And then we lean forward to sip from our drinks. I lean back in my chair, warmed. Dolores does the same and smiles to me. I smile back and reach for my drink, think to myself I'm handling the situation artfully, and for a moment wonder if my artfulness should embarrass me.

But Dolores becomes theatrically frustrated. She motions just a sec to my father and walks over to my chair. She kneels.

"The shine," she says. Then she gathers her skirt in her lap and repositions herself as if she plans to stay for awhile. She gestures above my head to a beam of sunlight, "I was just noticing all the highlights this sun gives your hair."

I touch my hair.

"You don't color it or use lemon juice at all, in the sunshine?"

"No." She looks disappointed.

"Well, when I was a kid I did." As she laughs she leans closer.

I hear my father order another pitcher of margaritas for the table.

Dolores tells me that when she was a teenager she used to pour Coca Cola on her body to get tan.

I say, "You're kidding."

"God we'd get dark. *Brown as berries.*"

I look down at the skin on her arm, catch myself when I see how wrinkled it is. Then I look up too fast.

"Hmm," I say. I drink from my glass, crunch on a little ice the blender missed. "Maybe I'll have to try that."

"Oh I don't know." She touches my cheek with her finger. "Your skin is fair. It's pretty. I'd hate to see you fry up."

"Look, food," I say.

Appetizers have arrived, and my father has already started eating the taquitos.

"Oh you." Dolores returns to her seat and pats him playfully. "Eating before the ladies are seated."

My father has quite a lot of food in his mouth and raises his eyebrows out of guilt or in an effort to swallow all he has put into his mouth.

But the women are getting older, and maybe they're more afraid. Or my father more difficult. Or maybe it's that I'm getting older and look or seem more like my father. Perhaps each of them thinks my father and I are equally thick. That we couldn't catch a hint if she smacked us. Perhaps she feels that she alone is perceptive, intuitive, senses all and is in quiet possession of the eternal wisdom that is woman. I'm a woman too, but with slanted eyes and dull gaze of my father, I must seem unfeeling to her. I know this feeling.

The mariachis come to sing. *Feliz Cumpleaños.* "Fine, fine," my father says. Then, "Fine! Thank you!" and hands them a five and they sing some more. "Thank you that will be enough! I'm having an anxiety attack. Please get the fuck away from me." He pulls the candle out of his birthday treat. Look at him. He sucks down his free *flan* in one-two bites. Stands up, grabs his coat and looks to me, "Let's blast."

In the car, Dolores flips down the sun guard for a mirror. Then there are lipstick and liners. She starts with mascara, but the ride is too jerky; she puts

the lid back on and screws it shut. Finally, a squirt of something strong on her neck.

My father, "Good God! A French whorehouse!" I laugh. My father, with buttons, opens every window.

"Jim, I don't know one single other person who doesn't like something special done on a birthday."

He says something breathy. Something that sounds like "snot music."

"Excusez-moi?" says Dolores. She zips her bag and drops it next to her.

He threw his arms over his head, upsetting the lamp hanging above the table. He yelled, "No no no. This is a Democracy."

"IT'S NOT MUSIC!" He yells this out the window, and we roll on in the dark. Palm trees like nerve explosions flanking the road, and lights, travelling faster, faster.

An intersection where he nearly plows a young woman with shopping bags. He brakes and she pounds the hood of the car with her fist and screams, "Jesus! Learn to drive, old man!"

I scoot to the center of the back seat and perch over the front seat like I did as a kid.

I say, "Dad? Do you want me to drive?"

Dolores says no dear, we're all a little pooched.

"Maybe," I say, "why don't we walk around the mall. We could get some ice cream or something."

"Sweet-life?" Dolores asks him. "Do you want an ice cream cone?"

"No," he says, and the car is in motion again.

"He's the birthday boy." She laughs,

of all things. "It's his big day! He gets to decide."

My father races the car to take the next few stoplights and Dolores swoons, yelling like a teenager, "Take me dancin'!" She throws her arms over her head.

It's out before I can stop it, but I want to end this. "Do you even dance, Dad?"

"Sure he does!" Dolores says. "He's a real good dancer. We took ballroom dancing lessons at the club."

"One!" my father says.

"Okay, okay," she says. She laughs, incredibly. "One!"

I want to tell her that even if she gets him on the dance floor he can make her sorry. Tell her I dragged him to the father/daughter scout camping trip. Tell her I was sound asleep in my sleeping bag when he put me in the backseat of the car. Tell her, next day I woke up in my own bed. I went downstairs and watched a few cartoons. Poured cereal into a bowl before I realized something. Hey wasn't I camping? We were supposed to be camping! Hey! Hey dad!

"I don't think he really knows how to dance," I say.

"Sure he does!" She tousles his hair.

Antique dealers in the area make a mint off retirees who move to the desert with a lifetime of beautiful, collected furniture. Old woods and heirlooms get sold off cheap when their owners fall in love with a fresh start, with the cream couches and Native American pillows, rugs, the pottery. And the mirrors that cover living room walls, a resale tip—making it a brighter room, a bigger room. At my father's house I watch myself stand, sit, nibble from a bridge mix. My father holds his glass to the mirror to toast his reflection, and mine.

Dolores sees me and my father, sprawled on the two couches that connect in a V. She comes towards us,

hesitating before she joins my father.

When I was a girl and this happened, I believed the woman was, simply, his friend. Wouldn't be appropriate to join him. Actually, he always takes the smaller couch when there's company. I think he prefers to sit alone.

She looks from him, to me, and smiles. Then she laughs a little and says, "Daddy's girl." She decides to lift my father's feet, and joins him.

I'm drunk but find myself embarrassed laying down.

I wouldn't mind it, being compared to my father, if the comparison was ever made with love—but it only comes from the throats of women he's hurt. I sit up, scoot to the center of the couch. It's quiet; I imagine we all wait for Dolores to speak.

She moves his feet from her lap and stands. My father asks, "What are you doing?"

"What do *you* think I'm doing, mister grumpy birthday boy?"

"So long as it's not that Frank crap."

"Oh Jesus Jim, it's Sinatra! Ol' Blue Eyes." She looks to me for help, and I smile.

"It's my stereo," he says.

Dolores laughs. "It's my tape."

Even I say, "Dad." Reach for a single nut and eat it quickly.

He sighs and spreads out on the couch.

Dolores plays the tape and approaches my father, and lifts his feet again. She sits back down. "It's on *low*," she says. "See?" Her voice, by hook or by crook, she will enjoy this.

Dolores crosses her feet on the coffee table and we watch the little Hermes chains on her sandals as she taps them together.

Eventually they are broken. They leave him. What is unfair is that when they do go they are gone. And my father

is like a clumsy giant with a broken doll. A trip to LA to visit me then. I take him to Touchdown! the sports bar, and we drink beer from mugs and watch the Keno dots fall. What did he do wrong? There are times he's asked me, and I've protected him for so long there will always be that need to protect him. *I do what I can, but he feels so fragile to me!* "Did you care about her?" Slowly, he nods. Then gently, hmm, like I just thought it up, "Do you think she knew that?" He doesn't know.

Dolores runs the hall to his bedroom. Then she runs back to the living room. "Karen, come here." I follow the path of desert rose carpet and find the bedroom lit dimly by the light of the bathroom.

She searches the drawers, and when she is done with each drawer she closes it carefully.

She turns to me with a face that says I am going to level with you.

She's not sure, she says, of what all he has told me already, about her, her and him, but they met last month at a cocktail party at the club.

"And! I just might have the top here, I was wearing that night!" She rummages through her drawers. "*Ta but ta dah!* Here it is." She holds it against her chest.

"Pretty," I say. It's black and shimmers, soft.

She shows me the back; it's a V-back, deep. She turns to the mirror, "He-well, he liked it." She smiles to her reflection.

"Of course he did," I say.

He thought her back the prettiest at the whole party.

I don't know what to say besides, "Well put it on."

Dolores smiles. "Help me with the buttons. They're teeny."

Her open blouse. The waving air of silk removed from a warm body and the soft oils down her spine. And there's the

tag on her beige bra, sticking out from underneath its straps. I can still see it now. *Liver spots between her breasts, skin in folds.*

I button the tiny buttons of her top. Done, I pull back and stand there.

"So how do I look," she says.

"Good," I say.

In the dim light she smooths her skirt over her hips and sucks in her stomach.

She turns to view her profile in the mirror. Which song should she come out on?

On the bed there must be fifteen pillows, cream, desert rose, that pale green. Everything in the house is exactly three years new. I flop on the bed. I don't know, I tell her. "Do whatever you want."

She sighs. She takes a comb in her hand and teases her hair, considers her reflection, and teases again. I watch her until she tells me to go back out. Go out there and talk to him. "Act like nothing's up."

My father still lays on the couch, hands crossed, at peace on his stomach.

"Hey Dad," I say.

He opens his eyes. "How's my kid?"

"Fine."

He lifts his head a little. "Oh yeah?" he says. "Oh yeah?" He nudges me with the toe of his shoe. "Then how's your foot?"

"Fine."

He chuckles, tells me I cheat, feet can't be fine. They have to be something else! He taps me with his shoe. "You know? That's not the game, kid!"

I seat myself on the other couch. He makes a goofy face and waves to our reflection. I smile, and he chuckles. We sit and wait together, silent.

Dolores enters at "Witchcraft," at the first beat, I knew she would. *Those fingers in my hair.* One hand's on her hip and the other holds her skirt, arms sway to the music. *That sly come hither stare* She smiles, swaying, lifts her skirt now

and then to watch her feet move. *That strips my conscience bare* I see that she has put heels on. Dancing shoes. She sings quietly, just enough for it to sound nice. She turns half way and her back is lovely, strong, and she spins away before my father can get too used to seeing it. She has a scarf around her neck. She unties it, lets it trail behind her as she moves. The scarf flows, bouyant. She holds one end of the scarf and throws the other to my father, allowing it to fall on his face. *And I got no defense for it* He handles the scarf and laughs a little. *The heat is too intense for it* She pulls on her side, and his eyes are patient, but they let go the scarf. She grabs the falling end with her free hand and continues the dance, always moving, spins broad and smooth circles. With the scarf she approaches him; here she gives him all of it. He laughs a little. *What good would common sense for it do.* He folds the scarf in half, in quarters, and he hands it back to her. *Not tonight.* At this she smiles and dances away. No complaints; there is music playing—she has other choices. She holds up an invisible man who dances with her. Dolores seems to enjoy herself. She looks to me, and I see that she's smiling.

She doesn't ask me: it's not like that.

I get up. I join her, I hold her, and can feel her, holding me. We move around the room; it's late and the room spins and spins, and there is the mirror, reflecting us. *It's such an ancient pitch, but one I wouldn't switch, because there's no nicer witch than you.*

And as this happens, my father, he's pretending he's sleeping. ■

Patchwork

JoLee Gibbons

I.

My great-grandmother caught fire when she was thirteen popping corn, wearing a long cotton gown, her hair loose to the waist. She rolled across the smooth plank floor in this quilt until the fire blossomed only from her hair. That burned away.

Finger the circling diamonds. Slate, flame, the scorched-brown middle, Star of Bethlehem. A legacy I don't belong to, star and cross and chalice, but this quilt is mine. Squint to blur the deep greens, leaves among diagonal petals. Bring the outside in. Make a picnic on the bedroom floor. Imagine the voice speaking out of a past that's gone, fields and clean water, bare feet that know the feel of stones and clay, brief toeprints in silver frost. "Deep green of the creek in town where children swam naked in daylight, and the rest swam naked at night." It's just a story. "Moss made a landscape to lie on."

To lie on, to make a landscape. Low green water. What do we have in common? Our hair, since hers must have grown back. And picnicking in the cold, loving the feel of naked bodies coming together through something like water. I am supposing her. Laying on the pleasures that I find like many blankets to keep her presence warm. Rub those feet, their thin bones and pale covering of flesh. I plant rye grass outside to get through winter, fill woven Easter baskets, imagine munching. Inside I spread the quilts she made and overlap this landscape of diamond, honeycomb, postage stamp squares, long tulips. Find another story here: "Once, when all people ate grass, we were innocent and walked swinging our dull chewing heads side to side. Side by side. Down river banks and into cool water up to our hipbones. Holding one another." My new lie and lay of things.

In March

JoLee Gibbons

II.

The winter I was nine, things froze.
It was an ice storm. At the dam, the children's fishpond
turned dark and solid-looking. Did sunfish, bream
know how to breathe beneath that foreign ice?
At home the live oak's branches cracked open deep
with unaccustomed weight. I remember: Peel the ice
from leaves, look at the threads of vein, and eat it.
The air seemed thin and new, the scent of broken pine
flooding my lungs until I thought they'd burst with green
and ice-furred needles and the sounds of creaking trees.

Lakes just don't freeze in Alabama. Water in a bucket,
and my father gauges cold by crust or solid ice
in the shaded birdbath. Make a nest of moss.
Unfurl quilts into a landscape of stories for the telling.
Do not lose these times, I tell myself. They have not been woven
into anything warm. What will sustain us when deep winter comes?

That winter, in the back room, we made beds on the floor.
No power or water. We twisted newsprint, brought in fallen branches
to dry and serve as kindling. They seemed woodsy wild
beneath the sawn gray logs from the carport pile.
The quilts glowed in fire light, blues never before seeming so soft as seen
against the blue slate hearth. Move back, my parents said.
Into the safer shadows. And behind my eyes the snow
gleamed white, blue shadows, began to melt, and then the sound of
icicles falling, a music of the North I'd never heard before.

III.

Make a bed on the floor. Straight sheets
curved by small flowers. See the arc of flame.
Diamonds circle out and out. A story for each row.
Tell it slowly, in a house without electric heat, wrapped
together in quilts, flesh finding flesh. And in the beginning. . .
it was warm and good. These things are for keeping close.
Roll into a ball. Make biscuits of myself. Hair growing long again.
An artificial log makes brilliant flames, some green,
but you can't eat from it. That winter we made
brown-crust marshmallows, and burned our mouths,
learned to breathe under layers of wool. Find another now,
and under quilts, comfort skin with skin to keep the cold
from eating lonely bones.

I wanted suddenly to steal
the neighbors' oriental rug
hanging, burgundy richness heavy, on the line
next door. I wanted to pick beans
in a field, row by row, crows circling overhead.
Snap off the ends, chew the strings,
beak pieces into a black iron pot. I wanted
a thunderstorm. Something would have to happen
or she'd say goodbye, say she was
fearing her death. I tried to remember
any Lucille Ball routine. But she said, "I feel
really alone, wet paper, ink running down,
a pretty bad poem, and I just don't know."
We drank Coca-Colas in the bright rain.
I said, "When it rains and the sun
keeps shining, that means
the devil's beating his wife."
She said, "I don't believe in hell."

Adventures of a Missionary Priest

Father Clement Procopio

THE PACIFIC COAST EXPERIENCE

In March of 1948 I went for the first time to celebrate the Patronal Feast of Pasaco, the furthest town from the parish center of Jutiapa in Guatemala. The trip was made by jeep, going some seventy miles to Guatemala City, mostly on dirt road, and leaving the next morning from the city to Pasaco through the Southern Province or "Departamento of Esquintla," where the road ended. As yet the Pacific Coast Highway had not been built. The trip alone was an adventure. From Esquintla one had to go through many dirt roads and farms to reach Pasaco.

The festival lasted three days, after which I decided to explore the furthest limits of our parish jurisdiction along the coastal areas. I figured on spending about three more days out there.

Since March is a dry month, most of the dirt roads in that area were passable by jeep, and the rivers were shallow. After leaving Pasaco I drove to the farthest coastal village along the sea shore, La Barita. All residences were bamboo huts. I carried small catechisms with me hoping to distribute them, but to no avail. Nobody out there could read or write. My purpose was to stay overnight at each place so as to give instructions and celebrate Mass in the morning. The people received me kindly, and cooperated.

Returning from La Barita, I stopped at the village of Garita Chapina, also along the ocean. There they had a little bamboo church where many gathered for the Rosary in the evening and also to hear the Word of God. That evening there were also lots of mosquitoes that came to the Rosary. One young man decided to do us a favor by lighting a fire around the church, then immediately putting it out to blow the smoke toward the church, hoping to smoke out the mosquitoes. Instead he smoked out all of us.

The bamboo church didn't appeal to me, and I tactfully tried to get them to build a little better church in the future without hurting their feelings. I pretended I wanted it in a different place. Well, the next time I visited them, I saw the same bamboo church moved across the road and everybody beaming, thinking they had fulfilled my wishes. I thanked them.



Continuing on my journey, I came to the village of Salamar, a place I would visit quite often in the future, but mostly on horseback. It was a place of hardened cowboys, but open to my visits. There was no church there. I said Mass in a shaded area out in the open.

The next morning, after Mass, as I was about to continue my trip, the jeep wouldn't start. The battery was dead. There was no way of charging it or replacing it in any of those coastal villages.

Then I discovered that the strong wind that came up the night before had blown down telegraph posts in some areas, which meant we were cut off from any communication. I couldn't communicate with Father Cyril Morisco at the parish center to tell him what had happened. The fact that I had with me my sacristan and three small altar boys didn't make me feel any better. The people tried to be as helpful as possible. In fact, several men tied their lassos to the jeep and began pulling on horseback while I steered.

We went quite a way until we came across a man with a pair of oxen coming from his farm. He reluctantly lent us the oxen to continue pulling the jeep. Luckily, my sacristan, who owned oxen himself, knew how to handle them. But they had worked all day and were tired.

We went as far as we could and stopped to rest just before evening. I remembered we had just passed a small house and returned to ask if we could stay there for the night. They readily agreed, and that night I slept on a hammock in the kitchen while the others slept on the dirt floor. Not much later, however, the chickens in the kitchen began pecking at me from underneath the hammock until I finally got up and

went outside to sleep in the jeep. That didn't help very much because then the mosquitoes took over.

Early the next morning we hitched up the oxen and continued on our day-long journey until we reached a wide shallow river. Towards evening, we tried to cross the river, which had a sandy bottom. It seemed like we were going to make it, but the wheels of the jeep kept sinking deeper into the sand until the oxen could pull no longer, stopping at about twenty

**Some Sundays there were gun battles
in the streets or, for
variety, group machete fights
called "buchinchas."**

feet short of the opposite shore. We unhitched the oxen and left them at the place indicated by the owner. Some men crossing the river on horseback tried to help but to no avail. However, they told me they were on their way to town where a family they knew owned trucks, and offered to give them a message from me, which I quickly jotted down on a piece of scrap paper.

Evening set in, and as I was trying to figure out where to spend the night, a messenger arrived from a nearby ranch house that we had passed just before crossing the river, asking us to spend the night there. As we were entering their place, one of the dogs bit me on the arm just before the owners came out. They apologized and immediately attended the wound. Then they invited us to dinner and gave us a place to sleep. The wound eventually healed.

At four a.m., I heard the sound of a truck motor on the other side of the river.

They had received my message and came to charge the battery of the jeep. Apparently they thought it better to take the battery back with them and charge it at their place. Later in the morning, after breakfast, they returned and I met them in the river. Their truck chain was not long enough to reach the jeep, and so they decided instead to lend me the truck battery, tying it to the jeep so that it could start on its own power. That worked. Putting the jeep in four-wheel-drive, I was able to bring it closer to the shore but not all the way, as the wheels kept sinking deeper. However, it was enough for the chain to reach the jeep. We transferred the battery back to the truck and they finally pulled the jeep out of the river and all the way to their ranch.

While my battery was being charged, we enjoyed a delicious meal. Afterwards, they put the battery back into the jeep with a warning that it wasn't fully charged, and therefore, once started, the motor must in no way go out lest it wouldn't start again. They showed me a shorter route to Jutiapa by way of Chiquimulilla, a narrow dirt road that led to the Departamento of Santa Rosa where the main road crossed to Jutiapa.

When we finally arrived, dusty and dirty, after three weeks on the road, people looked at us stunned. A rumor had gone around that I ran away. Grateful to God that all of us were in fairly good condition, I apologized to Father Cyril, who had no notion of what could have happened nor why I couldn't communicate all that time.

THE OLANCHO EXPERIENCE

Olancho had its exciting side. In fact, it was the equivalent of the Wild Woolly West that could outdo any Western movie. Stronger than Tequila was an alcoholic beverage called "guaro" or "agua ardiente," which drove

men to near insanity. In a drunken state, men would ride into town and shoot up the place. Many a time we would fall flat on the ground or on the floor to avoid the bullets.

Murders were common. Some Sundays there were gun battles in the streets or, for variety, group machete fights called "buchinchas." The comandante, a sort of sheriff, had his hands full chasing after criminals, gun in hand. Ordinarily he would never catch them, nor would any of his hand-picked men catch anybody. When it came to chasing a criminal, his men always lined up behind him.

I recall how a drunk came riding into town once, and fired several shots at the comandante's door, daring him to come out. No one came out. Then the man rode horse-and-all into somebody's house. Indignant, I approached the mayor, asking him to do something about it. The frightened mayor said he couldn't do anything because that man had committed too many crimes.

As the man rode out of the house, I went up to him and told him to leave town because the police were on their way up from the city to make arrests. Every once in a while the police were sent to the rural areas to look for contraband, and it was rumored that they were on the way. He heeded me and left immediately. A few days later, I went to celebrate Mass at the nearby village of Regadillo. A man came out of his house to greet me very respectfully and to take care of my horse as I dismounted. Then he invited the people to Mass. It was the same man who had "committed too many crimes."

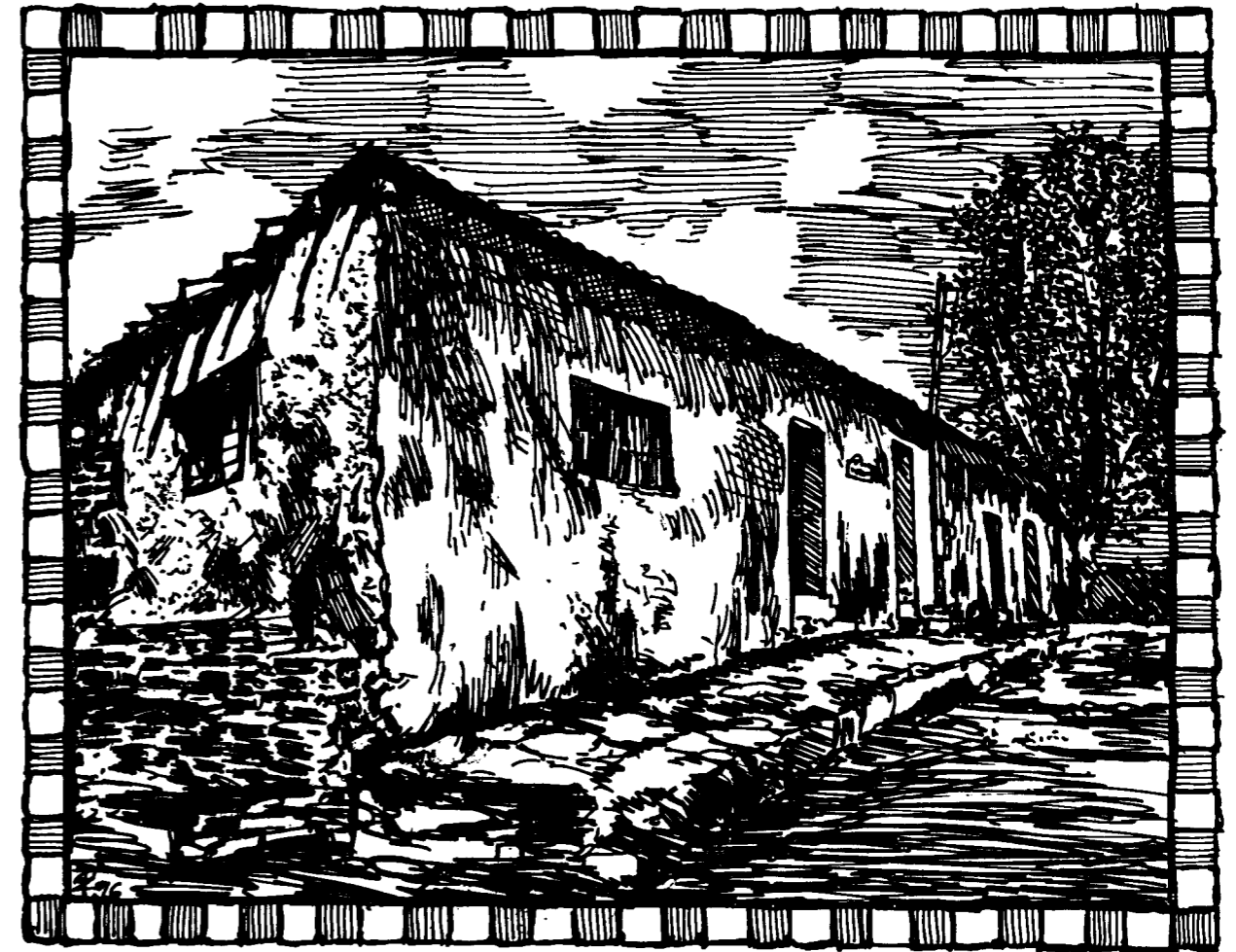
Next door to me in San Francisco de la Paz was the telegraph office run by a quiet peaceful man about the size of Big John. He handled all the mail and telegrams. Once in a while the telegraphist would go on a binge that would last from ten to fifteen days, during which

time we were cut off from all communication with the outside world. I was told that after a few drinks, he would go to a card game at somebody's house to gamble. After losing, he would try to gun down the winner, who from that moment on was his mortal enemy.

On one occasion, as I looked out into the plaza from my house, I saw Big John sitting in the middle of the plaza in his underwear, crying like a baby. He was surrounded by the comandante and his six men with rifles pointed at his head, ordering him to get up. Big John wouldn't budge an inch. Perhaps he couldn't move at that stage, nor could anybody seem to be able to lift him up. It

came to an impasse until a friend of the telegraphist broke through the circle of riflemen and gradually talked him into going home. With due assistance, he was finally taken.

When sober several days later, the telegraphist politely asked me an unexpected question: "Father, what are you doing here in the wilderness?" A good question, I thought, wondering myself what I was doing there after twelve long years of study in the seminary. But isn't that the lot of the missionary, "a voice crying in the wilderness," and even of the Church in general? ■



A Last Question at Hobo Lake

David Axelrod

An austere loneliness gouged from a mountain's flank,
your lake, when I crested the ridge above, filled

to its brim with gold—early morning sun,
glittering over an opaque surface of waves.

But as I climbed down, somebody stole those coins,
and now the barren tarn has filled up again,

this time with fog I saw from the pass, fog
rolling east across the tundra, ominous

and swift as a god on an errand to earth, arriving
in gusts of flurries and moldering stench of autumn.

Whatever you were—criminal, vagrant, holy
man—you'd know about this, having endured it

a thousand times before you died, leaving
only a fire ring that's thick now with grass

and a cabin crumbled to a mound of ocher dust:
was the thief whose desire was so great, ever

as eager to remain here long as your lifetime,
foraging the darkness that followed in his wake?

Owning Nothing At All

David Axelrod

All the length of the river, the air is redolent
with pollen, heat, dampness, and light,
so I can almost dismiss the access roads
that branch like vivisected capillaries
across bunchgrass hills, yellow now
with balsamroot and couse. O, sure,
I can almost dismiss the luxury houses
being built at the ends of these steep roads
on every bluff above the river, owning
"an executive view." I admit it,
such conspicuous wealth makes me feel
inadequate, as though good fortune
excluded somebody essential—*me!*
And if that's you up there, watching
from your glass room, I hope my envy blows
a ray of sunshine up your fat arse.
I'm down here not entirely against my will.
It's April, after all, not the cruelest month,
though perhaps the most delirious with lovers
paired and courting along lush riverbanks—
geese, herons, eagles, tanagers, ospreys,
males and females, each ready to share
a place on the nest, to sit still, intent,
and eager to begin again the task of remaking
a calamitous world. The nests they build,
woven from whatever slough they find—
grass, twigs, pine needles, lichen—
costs them nothing coming or going,
and soon the nests are empty anyway,
as my hands are empty, as this canyon, river,
these hills, forests, and fields, this month
of flowering trees, and the many months ahead
of arctic-long days and wild fruit ripening,
are ultimately empty, given away, free
to everyone, and owned by nobody at all,
no matter who asserts his title, quit-claim or deed.

Untitled

Henry H. Roth

Early morning
light is grilling the wrecked buildings
and broken streets. A crowd assembles.
Moaning traffic floats past the dignified man
hosing his car.

The vehicle is maimed beyond salvation.
Doors won't open; windows are holes. One
side of a door has folded into the frame.
The man sponges and polishes. No one
snickers.

Three times he gently attends the fallen
Chevy. By mid-afternoon its body outdazzles
the renegade sun.

Every Last SOB & Then Some

Sean Brendan-Brown

I drank Guenoc Zinfandel
at a corner table under
the coat rack; wet mink,
possum, and civet leavened

an air already moist & narcotic.
Stupefied people stumbled from
the urinals throwing names over
their shoulders. "She hurt him,"
someone said. "With her steak
knives & Mach II champagne corks
there wasn't much left of him but ties
and gold buttons. And he *enjoyed*
hurting—he was a walking role for Lost
SOB—he raked in kudos."

My hand slid into grime and graffiti;
I heard weeping from the stall behind
then the two men flanking me
switched to Vikings and Giants.

Talk about the obsession of *collecting* . . .
some old man talked and my eyes closed
until a woman rattled our hidden table,
her suede purse bumped my face & I
imagined a perfect, uncorrected breast,
heavy and low-slung. She kissed my lips,
spoke my name but who was she?
I should know, I should learn my own Time
as I've studied great & pointless Past—
too dense to speak, so dense; impossible.

3rd-Party Clutter

Sean Brendan-Brown

Always someone behind your phone-voice calling for bread, drink, a station identification; lady this is no way to run an affair—I can't save you from anything, I don't like the way you pull out your gloves, when we're finished, and a cough drop wrapper & shopping list flutters from your pocket: butter, burger, milk, peas. And the three photos you've allowed me to take—shells the textured gray of shade—outside the play you wrote *Where The Orchard Is Apocalypse And The Harvest Ash* you grin arms around the director and lead, both nice fags, we all lost money, the critics killed you, the sun ringed with dirt, the sky soot-thorned, the bunny-world blown away with its vitamin factories & feel-better clinics. The gloomheads were right but they don't cheer. —Did you see god? —No, only its shadow, its alias, its hurricane *apellido*—father's mother's father . . . you can weigh this script, count its pages, it goes on & on and on—christ, don't *read* it—I knew the truth Day 1, the lost rent, food, alcohol, accumulation of clothes.

Interview

Alan Lightman

*As a child, Alan Lightman built rockets and wrote poetry. Now, as an esteemed writer, scientist, and professor, he is one of the rare individuals who lives and thrives in at least two worlds. His eleven books have seated him among the most distinguished and diverse authors in America, with *Origins* winning the Association of American Publishers 1990 Award as the Best Book in Physical Science, while his novel, *Einstein's Dreams*, became a spectacular bestseller. Lightman is Burchard Professor of Science and Writing, and senior lecturer in Physics, at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. His new book of essays, *Dance for Two* (Pantheon), features some of his best work, showcasing his genius for bringing scientific and humanistic concerns into supernatural harmony. As in much of Lightman's work, the pieces in *Dance for Two* are as literary as they are scientific, as magical as they are enlightening. He recently discussed his new book and other topics with Editor-in-Chief William Tyree.*

How did you arrive at the title, *Dance for Two*?

The first essay in the book is "Pas De Deux," and the title refers to the ballerina on one side and nature on the other, which in a way reflects the theme of all my writing—the human versus nature, the intuitive versus the rational, or the artistic versus the scientific. I was thinking about titling the book "Pas De Deux," but I thought that maybe there wouldn't be enough people who would know the French, so we just translated it as *Dance for Two*, which also makes for a nice title.

It's a fantastic title. Tell me about the new essays in *Dance for Two*.

One of them is called "Progress." It discusses the way our concept of progress has changed since the industrial revolution, where we first associated progress with *human* progress, the betterment for social conditions for humans, in which science and technology were a means to an end. Over the next couple of centuries, the notion of progress slowly changed in a way in which the human concerns—the fact that improving the human condition was the end—became lost, and the science and technology, especially technology, became an end in itself rather than a means to another end. Progress eventually has become simply a wheel that turns faster, a car that has greater horsepower, a computer disc that has more memory. The technology itself has been assumed to constitute progress. Have we lost the human concern that we originally had?

The other new piece is called "Seasons," which is autobiographical. It discusses political events in my senior year in college, such as being exposed to the first national lottery for the draft since World War II and all of the uncertainties that imposed on a college senior, to

emotional and psychological events such as trying to work my way through a senior thesis and a thesis advisor. In all of these events, I painfully became aware that the life of certainty that I had lived up to that point was really an illusion, and the world was far less certain than I thought it was, both in terms of the surrounding world, such as the draft, the Vietnam War, as well as the uncertainty of a career in science. I think every science student feels that science offers a view of the world which is clearer, simpler. All questions have answers and so forth. The essay really deals with an awakening or a realization that the world in all different forms is much less certain than a young scientist would think.

**Alan Lightman on progress:
[It] has become simply a wheel
that turns faster, a car that has
greater horsepower, a computer
disc that has more memory. the
technology itself has been
assumed to constitute progress.**

You occasionally use historical figures as characters: Albert Einstein in *Einstein's Dreams*, Thomas Edison in *A Modern Day Yankee in a Connecticut Court*, and even your own great-grandfather, Papa Joe, in *Time Travel and Papa Joe's Pipe*. What motivates you to use a real person in a fictional sense?

Usually in fiction, except for very experimental fiction, you're trying to make readers feel like they're really in a certain time and place. You are trying to evoke reality. Certain references to the culture, to actual people who represent the culture are appropriate in evoking the immediacy and reality of a time and a place. That's one reason why writers

will occasionally use real people in their novels. In "A Modern Day Yankee in a Connecticut Court," I used Edison for a couple of reasons. One is because I wanted to have the Modern Day Yankee who goes back to the 19th century be questioned by someone of undoubtable scientific authority. I could've created an imaginary person, but I already had someone, a real historical character, who would've served the purpose very well, Thomas Edison. The other thing is that using Edison allowed me to inject additional humor into the piece. Although I think the piece has a serious message to it, it's also something in which I've tried to be light and humorous, and Edison, although he serves as a foil, representing the unquestioned author-

ity in technical matters at that time, is also kind of a humorous character in himself. I exaggerate some of Edison's idiosyncrasies to make him more funny.

But even when you use historical figures in a fictional piece, there would seem to be an added sense of responsibility regarding the public's perception of the character.

That's a very good point. It's something that all fiction writers have to confront when they use historical bits in their novels. Whether we're talking about actual historical characters or actual places, some of the problems confronted are the same. Namely the reader already has a certain amount of inherited, prior understanding of what this place is, of who this character is. My opinion is that you don't want to say something about a historical character that clearly violates the facts, because this will strike up a dissonance, sometimes a resentment on the part of the reader, and you don't want to do that. For instance, we know that Thomas Edison was a barrel-chested man. If we described him as

skinny as a rake, then that would upset the reader, or the reader would be confused. If you described Albert Einstein as a very organized man who knew where every paper clip was, that would upset the reader as well, because the reader has a certain image of Einstein as being disheveled and so forth. So you have to accommodate the facts: On the other hand, you can be trapped by the facts. If you know too much about the historical characters, and you feel like you have to be faithful to every single thing that they did or they were, you don't have any room as a writer for creativity.

So my compromise in all of this when I use historical figures is to have them make only cameo appearances. I always try to know why I use historical figures, what purpose they're serving me, and not to have them on-stage for too long. Otherwise, I start having to deal with and portray all of the factual stuff that's known about them, and I start finding myself hemmed in and trapped without any direction to move in. If you have someone come on for a relatively short time, you can be faithful to what's known about them, but not let them dominate that section of your book. It also leaves you room to speculate about things that are not known about them. Take *Einstein's Dreams* for example. There's very little known about Albert Einstein's dreams. I think he reported two or three of them, and other than that, there's very little known about them. I took great literary license with that in concocting, imagining all of these dreams, which don't really contradict anything that is known about the man, and yet left me range for imagination. And the few places in which Einstein actually appeared in the book, I was more or less faithful to the factual Einstein. But the dreams allowed me to create a whole additional Einstein, an inner Einstein. That is my creation. It doesn't violate things that the reader knows about Einstein, but it adds a possible speculative inner Einstein to the outer Einstein that people know.

You mentioned the Einstein image. Generally speaking, people outside the scientific community know relatively little about Einstein's work, yet the image grows. In recent years, Einstein seems to be getting a lot of celebrity-style press. Paul Carter's biography *The Private Lives of Albert Einstein* was unflattering, then Walter Matthau played a lovable, grandfatherly Einstein in the fictional film *IQ*. I've got a poster of Einstein on my refrigerator with the quote, "Gravity Cannot Be Held Responsible for People Falling In Love." Ultimately, where do you see the Einstein image heading?

Well, to add to your list of things, one of his unpublished papers, written in his own hand, is being auctioned, and is expected to sell for about five million dollars.

Wow.

Yes. But as far as Einstein's image goes, I think that there has been a great deal of mythology about Einstein that extends far beyond his scientific contributions. He's become a mythic figure in the culture—he stands for raw brain power. People say you don't have to be an Einstein to know blank, just like you don't have to be a rocket scientist to know blank. The creation of that mythology has something to do with the time that Einstein became visible to the public in 1919, with the solar eclipse and the bending of starlight by the sun which was observed and was predicted by his theory of general relativity. That was put over all the newspapers and all over the world and overnight he became a world figure. I think one of the reasons he became so popular so quickly was that the world was exhausted after World War I and was looking for some sign, some positive emblem of humanity. Having lost humanity in the terrible war, here was this man who was humble, had a humble appear-

Interview

Thom Jones

ance. And yet, even though people didn't understand the details of what he'd done, they realized that he had done something great. He was a pure thinker; he wasn't tainted by political aspirations; he wasn't a politician; he was a pure scientist. He was doing things that had no technological or practical application. He wasn't out to make money. He had just discovered some truth about nature. He had overthrown Newton's great theory about gravity. This was a pure mind. The noblest and best that humanity could achieve. That had a lot to do with building the Einstein legend. In the future, probably the mythology, this sort of celebrity aura that surrounds him, will melt away to some extent. More and more people will know what he actually did in science as there are more books written about him. There's going to be a PBS television program coming out in the next year, a two part series that deals with his work, as well as his life. I think that gradually over time, as more and more films and good books are written about his work, he will become known by the public more for what he actually did rather than just as a celebrity.

You were once quoted as saying you admire the fiction of Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and "writers whose writing distorts reality to see reality more clearly." The stylistics in *Einstein's Dreams* seem to be much like that of magical realism. Was that a conscious choice?

That book certainly has some elements of magical realism; there's no question about that. But I don't think there are many writers who set out to write in a certain tradition. A writer is influenced by many other writers, and I've been influenced by dozens of writers before me. I've always had a certain fondness for writers like Marquez, who do distort reality to some extent to convey it more clearly. As a scientist, I certainly was informed with ideas in physics that relate to

time, and that certainly affected the way I wrote about the book. But I was really interested in exploring human behavior just like the other magical realists, and was using time as a literary device. Another similarity between that book and certain books of the magical realists is that those books convey a foreign culture to us. Marquez conveys the culture of Latin America with its belief that spirits and ghosts are constantly populating the world. Salman Rushdie conveys the Indian mentality, the strong belief in storytelling and stories. And to many people, the world of science is just as foreign a culture as a foreign country. So I see that book, and my other books as well, as trying to convey that foreign culture of science, in a literary way, to a literary mind.

Do you foresee yourself as always conveying the culture of science with your writing, at least to some degree, or do you see yourself as someday doing something that's a departure from that?

I don't really have a grand plan for the future. I don't know what book I'm going to be writing after the next book, but I do believe that all my books will have something to do with science, at least in a very general way, maybe even as a starting point. Every writer has something special that makes his or her writing unique. Certainly all the writers that I admire. I think every writer has a source, a starting point deep within him, that becomes who he is. You have to find that source. You can't pretend like you're somebody else. A lot of what a writer needs to do is find that source, and I believe that my source is science in the very broadest sense. I have been very privileged to have lived in two worlds, to have lived in the world of science and to have lived outside of that world. ■

Thom Jones has shot onto the American literary scene as if from a cannon. His notoriety has gained the sort of lore that is most often reserved for new film or rock stars.

For the decade leading up to his sudden success, Jones worked anonymously as a janitor in the Pacific Northwest. Before that, he had been, among other things, an ad-writer. Except for some science fiction stories many years ago, he had not had his work published before 1992.

In that year, however, prompted by the television coverage of the Persian Gulf War, Jones wrote a story for a friend he had lost in Vietnam. He titled the story "The Pugilist at Rest" after the ancient Roman statue of the same name. The New Yorker wisely swiped the story up, as did Best American Short Stories, 1992, and Prize Stories: The O. Henry Awards, 1992. It was this story that introduced me—and a nation of readers—to Thom Jones, and it is a story one does not quickly, if ever, forget.

After the publication of "The Pugilist at Rest," Thom Jones' writing career blossomed like a time-elapsing rhododendron. In short order, he had a collection of stories out by the same title, The Pugilist at Rest (Little, Brown and Company), which was the 1993 runner-up for the National Book Award. His follow-up collection, Cold Snap (Little, Brown and Company), was published in 1995.

The stories in these two collections—and this is undoubtedly the reason for his sudden success—feature a truly new, fresh, and honest voice. Rare is the writer who comes along and draws no quick comparisons, but it is difficult to read Thom Jones and think of anyone who writes similarly.

Thom Jones suffers from sugar diabetes and epilepsy, and these facets of his life figure into his stories as much as boxing, Nietzsche, ad-writing, and Vietnam (which, as a young Marine, he was forced to sit the war out due to a head injury received in a military boxing match). Jones writes of people who often find themselves in intense situations—outsiders, many of them, who are on the edge of break-down, or who have already broken down.

"I don't think happy people make good fiction writers," Jones has said, and his is perhaps a key to the truth with which he handles a character like Ad Magic in "A White Horse" (The Pugilist at Rest)—a man who has, once again (we are led to believe this is

**Thom Jones on Cormac McCarthy:
... reading all of his work at once
was like drinking thirty gallons
of chocolate milk.
Afterwards, you're sort of like,
Ah, I've had enough. I'm full.**

typical behavior for Mr. Magic), booked a flight abroad and found himself in foreign environs, unsure of where or who he is. You get the feeling that if Jones hasn't experienced this urgency in exactly the same way, then Ad Magic's predicament is perhaps a metaphor for emotions that Jones knows very well. Or there is Walter Blaine in "Superman, My Son," (Cold Snap) who is at the low tide of his manic-depressive cycle, facing the demons that mothers everywhere try to convince their children do not exist. Jones' ease with this type of character is clear; he knows these people and, it seems, he knows these demons.

During our conversation, Jones is candid about his views. It is easy to decipher from his tone the quality about him that makes his writing so singular, the quality that distinguishes a Thom Jones story from the stories of all other prominent writers. He is unabashed in his critiques of literature and other arts, in sizing up of this work or that. He is without concern for what people might think of Thom Jones. He is simply happy to be writing. And concerning his writing, he tells me that a novel and a screenplay are both in the works.

Originally from Aurora, Illinois, Jones has moved around since the years of his midwestern youth. He has traveled all over the world and is currently a visiting professor at The Iowa Writer's Workshop. Normally, he and his wife Sally live in western Washington, where she works as a librarian—at the same high school, in fact, where Jones was a janitor for eleven years. "I cleaned that library for years," Jones tells me. "They're very proud of me around there." But, as Jones explains in the contributor notes of the Best American Short Stories, 1995, (his latest in a consecutive run on the popular series): "I ain't no janitor no more." Nothing was ever more true.

Where do you start with a novel or short story? Do you begin with an idea for a

character, or with an image or a plot?

It's funny. I just start with a line. Then I write another line and another line. And it's usually based on something that really happened. But when I hear the line—say maybe I've heard it three years ago, or maybe it's been an hour—there's a point where I must then immediately go to the computer or I'll lose it. I'm invariably surprised at what happens. And that's why it's fun to write it; I want to find out what's going to happen. The characters, they have their own agenda.

So they just sort of take over, as some writers suggest?

Yeah. And I don't think most writers would say something like that. Some writers plot or write idea-driven stories. A lot of writers know the ending before they begin. I've heard it all ways except for my own and I used to get weirded out because I thought, *I'm not like any of those people. I don't do any of those things.*

Which of your published stories have you revised the most?

The one that took the longest time was "Dynamite Hands," even though it looks fairly simple and straightforward, and has a straightforward plot. A lot of the stuff in there got cut. Some of the best material in the original story is not in the final version.

That's a tough thing to do.

Yes. But you have to do it. A lot of my students, for instance, don't want to do that. I figure you're not really throwing it away. You've got it for later or whatever. If you have to write one hundred pages to get two that work, then that's part of the idea.

You were always a reader?

Yes. Books took me away from Aurora, Illinois. W. Somerset Maugham was the first person who did this for me. I thought the whole world was like Aurora, Illinois. I read his South Seas tales, and I thought, *Man, I'd like to go there.* I used to have a globe and I'd look at it and wonder: *What would it be like here? What would it be like there?* I traveled to American Samoa to the place where Maugham wrote the short story "Rain." It took me two days to find it. Nobody there knew where it was. I couldn't believe it. And when I finally found it, I was let down.

Why?

It was a house—converted into a market now, but it had been a hotel once. Whenever anybody who was somewhat genteel came they would stay at this particular place. I think he was stuck there for six weeks and it was just raining. Sailors apparently slept in some vile whorehouse or something.

How have places—the Northwest, maybe, or the Midwest—affected you as a writer?

I don't know. I used to love travel. It sounds kind of corny, but the Midwest feels nice now. The architecture here is solid. There are great old buildings, great old churches. They're very solid-looking. They've got sidewalks and brick streets. Everything is safe. This atmosphere gives you the illusion that everything is safe. They've been here for years. In the Northwest all the buildings are like new. Of course, maybe not so much in parts of Seattle. But new architecture is shit architecture. All it is is four walls and some windows and a door. Nobody has taken any care in building them. We live in an older house now (in Iowa City) and I love it. It's like a real house. I can't feel anything in those new buildings. I like walking in old neighborhoods. It makes me feel all right. I remember back as a kid just walking around,

looking at stuff, walking at night, just thinking about things. Back in Washington, the place isn't laid out. They don't have any logic to the streets. Here you can fly across town easily. There it's like Saigon, with one fucking road.

Who are some of the artists you admire? Writers, but especially others: musicians, painters, poets.

Well, painting. I don't know much. I like Gauguin. I dug Andy Warhol's stuff. Cezanne. Edward Hopper. Whatever. You can feed off that. You can read poetry and feed off that too. You can ready poetry and steal a mood or a tone. I mean it's not stealing, but poets are very good to read for compressed moods. And cinema has influenced me a lot. Anything. Something's always there if you look and listen. You just need to tune in. But art helps you transcend the normal thing. A typical thing that a writer will say: you'll ask them what kind of music they like, and they'll say, "Well of course Mozart, Brahms." What the fuck? Give me a fucking break. I'm listening to the Doors. I can dig Brahms. I can dig that. I know all that shit. But I'm not going to go around and tell you that I'm reading Nabokov and listening to Mozart. Give me a fucking break. Forget it. It'll be a cold day in hell before that happens. Fucking *Moby Dick*. Somebody ought to update the dialogue in that motherfucker, you know. It's great and all that but the dialogue sucks big time.

What's a good movie you've seen recently?

I saw *Twelve Monkeys*. I mean Brad Pitt—any teenager could have done that. That was some big deal? He made Bruce Willis look like a member of the Royal Shakespearean. All my students were saying, "You've got to see this movie." They go in for that. It's because they're twenty-five years old. They've got a completely different world

view. I just saw *Fargo* and loved it.

What did you think of *Pulp Fiction*?

I liked it a lot. But you're looking at a master scene—and that can make a movie. It's sort of like, the movie's okay, and then you've got John Travolta doing that dance—you know that twist number with Uma Thurman—that suddenly accelerates the velocity of the movie. Otherwise there were things that were borderline silly. I mean there were some good scenes. The dialogue on the cheeseburger.

**Thom Jones on *Twelve Monkeys*:
I saw [it]. I mean Brad Pitt—any teenager could have done that. That was some big deal? He made Bruce Willis look like a member of the Royal Shakespearean**

Take a movie like *Reservoir Dogs*. It starts out with these criminals. Very good actors. And these guys really look like criminals. You believe it. You know whoever wrote this script, the opening scene in the coffee shop, he thinks he's being funny. He isn't. It's not funny. There's nothing funny about it. You're watching it and you know he *thinks* it's funny, but it's just not. What you're watching is these guys who are such good actors.

What are you reading now?

The last thing I read was Larry Brown.

Which book?

We did *Big Bad Love* in seminar. Whenever I pick up anything he's written, I'll look at a

line, and suddenly I'll read the whole book again. I can't help it. I think the guy's got so much power. Larry Brown is the only writer who really frightens me in the sense that I'm dumbstruck with awe in the face of his language.

What do you think of the other American writers who are winning awards these days? What do you think of, say, Cormac McCarthy?

Oh, Cormac. I had never read Cormac McCarthy until about two years ago. Somebody sent me *Suttree*, which is one of those books you never forget, a reading experience like none other. Then I read virtually everything he had written. The one even more frightening than *Suttree*, the one about the bounty hunter—*Blood Meridian*—I was blown away. I read it twice. Then I read *Suttree* again. Then I went through the whole body of work. Some of his books are a little tamer—*All The Pretty Horses*.

There's the "A" list and the "B" list.

Which was your favorite?

Suttree. His least important book is better than most people's best work. Cormac is totally great. But reading all of his work at once was like drinking thirty gallons of chocolate milk. Afterwards, you're sort of like, *Ah, I've had enough. I'm full*. I was kind of reeling. He's great—a great writer.

Have you read Michael Ondaatje?

Oh yeah, I remember the Billy the Kid book and I loved the Buddy Bolden thing, *Coming Through Slaughter*. *The English Patient*, when the guy is defusing the bombs, is great. I taught that book in seminar. My students talk about him a lot. He's very well regarded.

How do you feel about the Iowa Workshop?

I went through here as a student in 1970. I studied with William Price Fox. And there were quite a few others here. Carver was here. Cheever was here. John Irving. Frederick Exley.

Did you study with those people as well?

No, but except for Irving, I hung out with them. I studied with Fox and Richard Yates. Sally and I spent almost four years here. After she finished her degree, I got a job in Chicago as an ad-writer. And then I no longer had any desire to write in a big way. I sold some sci-fi stories, but got tired of that quickly. I was always thinking I would like to write a novel. At various times, I would write a novel. I probably wrote four novels. I *did* write four novels. Two of them I didn't even send out. I've looked at them occasionally. There's good stuff in them, but they were practice.

Would you characterize the Workshop's atmosphere as hyper-competitive?

No. When I was here it was. There was a lot of insecurity. There still is that. But the workshops are very productive. The system works. The thing that happens for most students is that they learn to sustain their ability to write once they graduate. They find you don't need a teacher or you don't need a support group to write. You can go out and write on your own. I think that when you make the commitment to come here, you've made the commitment to be a writer. You work with good writers while you're here, but after you leave, it's up to you. If you persevere, you're going to make it. I really believe that. Someone who perseveres is going to make it every time. A lot of the talented writers don't make it because they're lazy. They get out and think, *This is hard*.

This is too much. I quit.

Getting back to craft, how do themes work their ways into your stories?

They do. I don't try to impose them. They just surface.

And how does that happen?

When I'm writing, I see that part of the work addresses theme. I don't try to underscore it. It's usually there in faith. You just sort of know. I was writing a whole shitload of stories in a hurry at some point, and somebody asked me how to define a short story. I thought, *I can't explain this. I can't tell you what a short story is. I don't even know, when here I am writing them*.

You can read John Gardner for textbook explanations. People tell stories. You go to a bar or something and people tell them. That's all we want to do is tell stories. And what makes a good story? I watch a lot of my students. They'll write a story that's stilted and not working. And then I'll see them later in the bar after class and they're telling the funniest damn story. And I say, "Why don't you just write what you just said instead of this other thing?" They're trying to use symbolism. Whenever you try to do that consciously, you're planning it, and you fuck it up royally. That's part of learning.

My writers sell, though. I was going to make a list because they're getting to be kind of ridiculous. Some have sold books. Some have won prizes or published in the slicks. *New Yorker, Playboy, GQ*.

Pretty much everywhere you look there's someone from Iowa selling.

My students sell. What I'm saying is that they come up with a story that's ninety-eight percent there. How do you close the gap, make it tight? The last two percent—that's a big fucking percentage. This one I just did for *GQ*, I spent a month closing the gap. I

Stalking James Joyce

Book Reviews by
Jimmy Tyrrell

didn't expect I was going to have trouble with that story. But I just couldn't get it right.

That's what students do. They come in with a story that's pretty damn good. But they're ready to give up. It's real easy to get discouraged. They're workshopping some first draft of a new piece. And I'll say, "Wait a minute, what about this other thing? You almost had it." I say, "Wait a minute, wait a minute. Let's do one right." And I'll line edit for them. And then they'll say, "Oh, I see." Then they finish it, send it off and maybe it sells. And they walk around like they're cross-eyed, delirious with joy. And I feel even better than they do. It's more fun than when I sell my own.

Speaking of young writers, do you have tales of your emergence as a writer?

I wrote my first short story when I was nineteen, and *The Atlantic* almost took it. The second story I wrote is in the first collection—the story called "Wipeout." I remember thinking, *this is so easy*. The magazines I had sent them to had asked me in both cases for fairly minor rewrites, but I couldn't do them. I just didn't have the skills.

Do you work a lot with magazine editors on revising your stories these days?

Some editors will take a piece as you give it to them. I recently made my first *GQ* sell—that's how they're going to do it, as given. And I thought, *if nobody else is going to intervene, I'm going to really have to do all the picky stuff myself*. But at the *New Yorker*, Deborah Garrison is my editor. We've done quite a few stories together. She'll say, "Thom, this part's good and this part's bad." Then I'll know what to do. And we'll go back and forth. But she's really a good editor.

Do you prefer it that way?

Well, it's so easy. But no, your instincts

improve. You become better at it. In the beginning, I'd show my friends what I did. They'd say, "I like this part," or "I don't like that part." And I'd say, "I was kind of uneasy about that myself. I'm glad you said that. I'm going to get rid of it." And now I don't really need to do that. I pretty much know. A lot of students feel that's cheating. They think they're supposed to do it all by themselves. I've had editors tell me, "You wouldn't believe so and so famous writer. Editors have to hold them up, carry them." But writers don't want to admit it. They'll say, "Every fucking semi-colon is mine."

How many personal readers do you have read a piece?

I have two. Neither of them have gone to college, but they're the best. I just trust their judgment a lot.

My first agent, Candida Donadio, was the best reader in the world. If I hadn't known her, it wouldn't have worked. She was just so patient, so kind. I was able to stay grounded, find my center. Things would have ruined me otherwise. A lot of times a writer can't handle sudden success. Like when Buster Douglas won the heavyweight title. He just couldn't carry the title psychologically. Ali could handle it. Certain people can't. Douglas fought a brilliant fight [against Mike Tyson] but he just couldn't *be* the heavyweight champion of the world. That's not to discredit him. And writers too—they'll get too much money and they'll become self-destructive. They'll start chasing women, they'll start drinking. All those things will finish a writer. But five hours a day, seven days a week, and you can't go wrong.

I still feel like my best writing hasn't happened. Not nearly. I'm still hungry. I really want to write. That's what I'm here to do and I love to do it. As a matter of fact, a lot of people get annoyed by it. I want to work. And I also realize what an honor it is to be able to publish, to have readers. ■

Roddy Doyle
Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha (Penguin), 282 pp.

William Trevor
Felicia's Journey (Viking), 213 pp.

Danny Morrison
West Belfast (Roberts Rinehart), 249 pp.

To be a contemporary Irish writer—Catholic or Protestant, urban or provincial, comic or tragic—is to be endlessly cursed with comparisons to the venerable Master, James Joyce. Frequently, the comparison reads like the opening sequence of a Kung-Fu flick: ambitious upstart journeys to the Shaolin Temple to confront the Old One:

MASTER: I see you're using a new style. Where did you learn it?

UPSTART: Old fool, I learned it from you!

MASTER: I've forgotten. We'll see how well you've learned.

And so it goes. If Joycean visitations are a curse, one can well imagine Doyle's response: "Ach, they're bloody afflictions." Yet Doyle bears the scrutiny better than anyone writing in Ireland today. Doyle, the most contemporary of contemporary Irish writers, is also the best known. Two of his novels, *The Commitments* and *The Snapper* were made into successful films, and the third book of the informally titled "Barrytown Trilogy," *The Van*, was shortlisted for the Booker Prize.

Comparable in prestige to the National Book Award in America (with the notable exception that candidates for the Booker Prize actually sell books and make money), Doyle was finally awarded the Booker Prize in 1995 for his latest novel, *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha*.

Set once again in Barrytown, Dublin circa 1966, *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha* is a masterful novel, perfectly evoking the end of childhood. Here is Joyce's Dublin, captured in the language of the streets. Paddy Clarke, the ten-year old protagonist, is a street-smart Dubliner that makes Holden Caulfield look comparatively juvenile.

The novel is not subdivided into chapters, nor are the episodes labeled, numbered, or organized in any fashion. To do so would antagonize Doyle's purpose: to describe the last gasps of childishness. As the reader recklessly tumbles through the rather brief episodes with, dare I say it, childlike abandon, the point is intuitively derived

at. There is no clear introduction to the responsibilities of the adult world. Despite our collective desire to ritualize the experience where girl becomes woman and boy

Critics have commented that Doyle's work would be very sad indeed, tragic even, if they weren't so comic, so in tune with the hilarious wit and speech of the Irish culture. Although *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha* is at times extremely funny, Doyle doesn't go for the joke, or use humor as a device to redeem his characters. If laughter is a testament to the resilience of the imagination, Doyle is quick to point out that such laughter is usually at someone else's expense. Paddy Clarke learns what it's like to become that someone else, and the experience of becoming the other is like the sound of taps at a military funeral: hollow and achingly sad.

William Trevor's latest novel, *Felicia's Journey*, links the tale of one woman's journey with the man who conspires to end it. Felicia leaves her native Ireland in search of Johnny "I Hardly Knew Ye" Lysaght, a boy she was involved with in her hometown who leaves her, unbeknownst to Felicia, to go soldiering in England. Left with an unrealistic view of Johnny's intentions and a phony address, Felicia embarks on a search for her Johnny. In the classic "more sinned against than sinning" mold, Felicia makes a miserable go at it, each step leading her closer to the insidious Mr. Hilditch.

If the reader sees in Felicia an unlikely hero, armed with noble intentions, but lacking the means to carry them out, then

Hilditch seems a potential victim, whose flight from her family in Ireland makes her deliciously anonymous to English authorities. The plot takes a sinister turn when

Hilditch pretends to assist Felicia in her fruitless search, all the while scheming to get Felicia inside his enormous, gothically-appointed house.

Felicia is not the first woman to fall prey to Hilditch. Initially, brief allusions to Sharon, Bobbi, Gayle, Elsie, and Jakki, women from Hilditch's past, serve as goulsh imitations of the fate Hilditch has put in store for Felicia. These glimpses further the plot, but fail to adequately clarify Hilditch's perversity, or reveal the manner in which these women met their last end. For answers to these questions the reader must tirelessly delve even deeper into Hilditch's memory, all the way back to his relationship with his mother.

Trevor's reputation as a master of understatement ups the ante in Felicia's journey. Readers familiar with Trevor, who frequently locates the center of the story in the obsessive memory of his characters, will be surprised by all this movement, by the eerie series of events that bring Felicia and Hilditch inevitably together. Trevor's use of the present tense serves to keep things moving: Felicia seeks Johnny, Hilditch seeks Felicia, but these pursuits are set to the diabolical beat of the skeletal rattlings of Hilditch's memory, and here the story begins to bog down.

As chilling portraits of serial killers go, Mr. Hilditch is, by American standards, a wuss. His corpulent form, mannered obesity, and incessant whining make him an improbable villain. To borrow a pun from the Master, the reader proves not so easily "Freuden-ed" by the root of all his unconscionable behavior. By incorporating genre elements into the story (point-of-view-of-the-killer-thriller), Trevor misleads the reader into thinking that the narrative will, for once, be resolved through Hilditch's repressed past. In the end, however, the true villain in *Felicia's Journey* is Trevor, for creating a hero so naively unsympathetic.

Compared to Trevor and Doyle, Danny

Morrison is the least known to American audiences, and until he writes more novels, he's likely to stay that way. Yet *West Belfast*, Morrison's first novel, is the most ambitious of the works presented here.

West Belfast, which spans nearly a decade (1963-1971), is surely an autobiographical novel, as its author, like the protagonist, was interred at Long Kesh prison as the result of IRA involvement.

The novel begins with a scene of solidarity among children from differing neighborhoods. Although the narrative quickly jumps forward, ultimately we are given glimpses of all of them and how their lives are shaped by the installation of British soldiers in their beloved Belfast.

Morrison tries his hand at a range of styles and devices, thus inviting the easy comparisons to early Joyce. Indeed, the novel ends in much the same way *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* concludes: with journal entries. Perhaps the most eloquent and moving of these stylistic experiments is the episode in which stream-of-consciousness is employed to describe what an IRA rifleman is thinking and feeling as he stalks an unwitting British Soldier. Eerily beautiful, the passage might be more accurately described as "stream-of-conscience" as the assassin attempts to justify his actions.

What makes this autobiographical record so compelling is that Morrison fulfills the Irish toast: "May you live in interesting times." Morrison strives to recreate events as he remembers them, in spite of the obvious bias, and the reader is rewarded with a minimum of moralizing. In fact, Morrison consciously avoids demonizing the soldiers. The IRA rifleman realizes that the soldier he is about to kill probably doesn't even want to be there, and criticizes him for not having the courage to be somewhere else. Then he shoots him. What would the Master think? ■



becomes man, such ceremonies are not only removed from experience and therefore redundant, they are typically dangerously out of touch.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS:

past, present, and forthcoming

Meet **David Axelrod**: the author of *Jerusalem of Grass* (Ahsahta), a fantastic collection of poems, and a limited-edition chapbook, *The Kingdom at Hand* (Ice River). He is the former winner of the Carolyn Kizer Poetry Prize, and is a recent recipient of a fellowship from Literary Arts to complete a new collection of poems, *Earthbound*....An interview with literary heavyweight **Rick Bass** is forthcoming in *Thin Air*....Renegade author (and all-around classy gent) **Charles Bowden's** last piece in *Thin Air*, "Just Say The Word: The Place We Live" is currently nominated for a Pushcart Prize....Check out reigning title champ **Sean Brendan-Brown** ("Every Last SOB & Then Some") in *Prism International*, *Fuel*, *The Siren*, *Windsor Review*, and *The Anathema Review*. We look forward to seeing more of him....Award-winning poet **James Cervantes**, who appeared in the maiden issue of *Thin Air*, is currently co-editing *Contemporary Arizona* with poet Leilani Wright....We goofed when we listed **Stephen Dixon's** massive anthology, *The Stories of Stephen Dixon*, as being published by Simon and Schuster; actually, the collection is published by Henry Holt, and we apologize for any inconvenience our error caused. Since appearing in *Thin Air* last year, Dixon has several new things brewing: *Man on Stage: Playstories* (Hijinx Press) will be published in Fall '96, and *Gould: A Novel in Two Novels* is due to be published by Henry Holt in February, 1997. In addition, Dixon is working on a new collection of interconnected stories called *Here and Then: The Gould Stories*. "Fritz," a story from the collection, is forthcoming in *Thin Air*....Former NEA and HELM fellowship recipient **Brian Evenson's** stories have appeared in *The Quarterly*, *Mississippi Review*, and *Story Quarterly*. He is the author of two fantastic collections, *One Thick Black Cord* (Pyx), and *Altmann's Tongue* (Knopf). Evenson holds a joint Ph.D in Critical Theory and English Literature, and teaches at Oklahoma State University....Right Kind of Trouble All-American **Patricia Lawrence** packs a solid uppercut, and is the winner of our 1996 Short Story Contest with "Witchcraft." Her story "The Pledge" won third prize in the *Playboy* 1996 Fiction Contest. Lawrence is a UCLA graduate, and is currently attending the Iowa Writers' Workshop.... **Father Clement Procopio** was born in 1919, one of eight Italian immigrant children. After twelve years of Seminary, he went to Central America in 1945, spending twenty years there as a Missionary. His extraordinary autobiographical pieces, "The Olancho Experience Pt. II" and "The Pacific Coast Experience," are excerpts from a larger work titled *Adventures of a Missionary Priest*....Super-prolific New York City author **Henry H. Roth** has most recently appeared in *Partisan Review*, *Massachusetts Review*, *Confrontation*, and *Beloit Fiction Journal*. This is his second appearance in *Thin Air*....Our intelligence agents report that **Craig Rullman** (Welterweight, 23-1-1) has left his post in Nevada, "sixty-one miles of neglected dirt road from the nearest telephone," to become (zoinks!) a Marine. His current whereabouts are classified, but his story "Touch and Go," which appeared in *Thin Air*, is currently nominated for a Pushcart Prize....MFA student **JoLee Williams** lives in Tuscaloosa County, Alabama, with her husband Jim and their daughter, Rebecca. She writes, "In my life and art, a sense of place and time is essential. I strengthen this sense by homemaking, antiques, and nurturing my family, especially through my breastfeeding relationship with Rebecca." ■

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