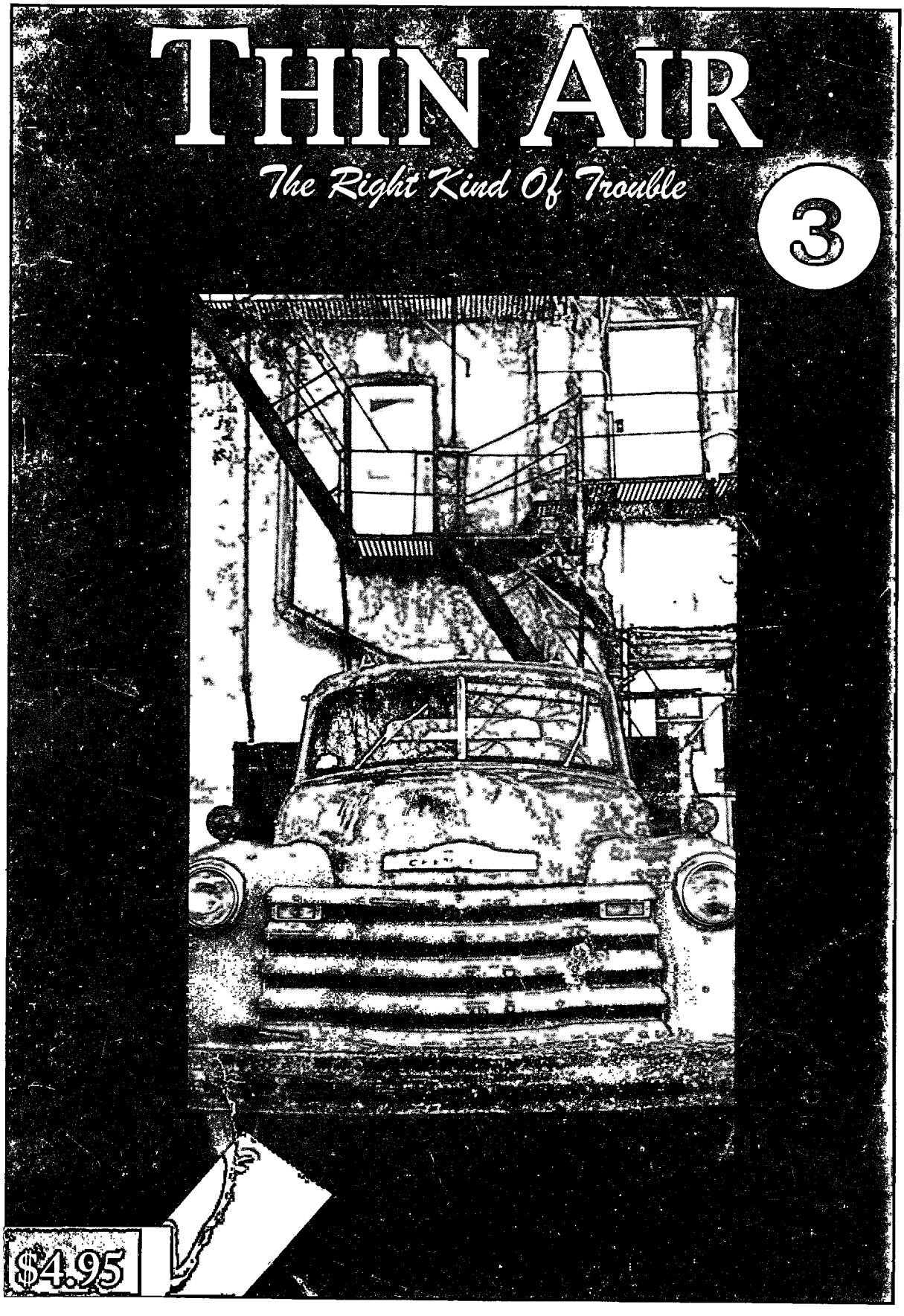
Rick Bass o Stephen Dixon o James Harms



Plus: Poetry by Nancy Johnson and Fiction by Sean Laughlin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Thin Air

MAGAZINE

THE RIGHT KIND OF TROUBLE

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EDITOR'S NOTE

When "What If" becomes "Just Do It."

I-must-change-my-life mania is upon us. It is an idea long-steeped in literary tradition, and for the vast majority of us, that is where it has stayed; for centuries we have lived vicariously through fictional characters that seem to have more adventurous nerve and psychological flexibility than we do. But the appearance of the professional change agent—a combination spiritual guru, fitness trainer, financial and fashion advisor-for-hire—is evidence of a growing trend in social restlessness, as are the increasingly high number of professionals abandoning their six-figure salaries for something as "frivolous" as a new education. It is inevitable that as we evolve into more self-aware, mobile creatures, our occasional "What If. . ." becomes "Just Do It."

Perhaps you fancy yourself as Henry David Thoreau incarnate, your mind set on minimizing your affairs to two or three, rather than a hundred (a good argument to quit your job). Or maybe you're more of a Kerouac-style nomad, roaming aimlessly across the continent while working on a blockbuster diary. Imagine the day you decide to break away—humming Johnny Paycheck's "Take This Job and Shove It" while clearing your desk, pausing to chuck that old copy of *Walden*—you memorized all the good parts years ago.

Several months ago I received this e-mail from my friend, Rob, who had been working a corporate job in New York: "Spent some time in Maine with a friend who pilots a motor yacht on the Penobscot River. The stillness of the river allowed me to quiet the brain chatter and reach a place where the thrum of Being could take hold, empty me, and fill me up again. The path, so to speak, revealed itself in that quiet, and it was simply: get the hell out of New York. It's like this, William: I don't want to work again."

The next e-mail came just days later, from a remote location in Indiana: "Bought an '80 Volkswagen Westfalia from a female fire fighter who adds the phrase "an' that" after every sentence. She ain't pretty on the outside (the van), but I fixed her innards real nice, all blue and happy mellow road-trippy. Vilanelle is her name, and in her belly I have found my new transient home."

Rob's long rejuvenating trip ended happily in a cozy free-lance post in Seattle. Unfortunately, not all of our escapes are so fruitful. Jimmy Tyrrell's "The Reasonableness of Events" describes a more mysterious and disturbing revolt from the confines of normal life. Tyrrell's commentary on the life of Chris McCandless, who left a wealthy college existence to disappear into the Alaska wilderness where he would eventually die of starvation, raises important questions about how we perceive such seemingly outlandish acts. Is there something about the human spirit to admire or value in the Chris McCandlesses of the world, or should we condemn them? Should we even care?

Sean Laughlin's haunting story, "Planet X," portrays a similar brand of escapism. Planet X, a fictional home where "love does not fly away" and the atmosphere is "like the milky smell of a baby's sleep," is to Laughlin's protagonist Les what Walden Pond was to Thoreau—a place of absolute solitude, a place that is, above all else, safe. Laughlin's prose is as irresistible as the idea of Planet X.

As some seek to escape their life, others seem drawn to familiar patterns. In "Now That Stephen's Back," Jim Harms describes the process of coping with a drug buddy. In the hilarious "In Search of GWCHUFCTV: Girl Who Can Hook Up Free Cable TV," Molly McCloy combines the conventions of a personal ad with the format of a prose poem to create a devilishly bizarre illustration of her ideal mate.

Perhaps what we all crave is finding a situation so perfect that we never want to leave it. In Jerry Gabriel's profile of author extraordinaire Rick Bass, we discover a man who feels so in touch with the Yaak Valley—an area too remote for even telephone service—that he is consumed by protecting it from development.

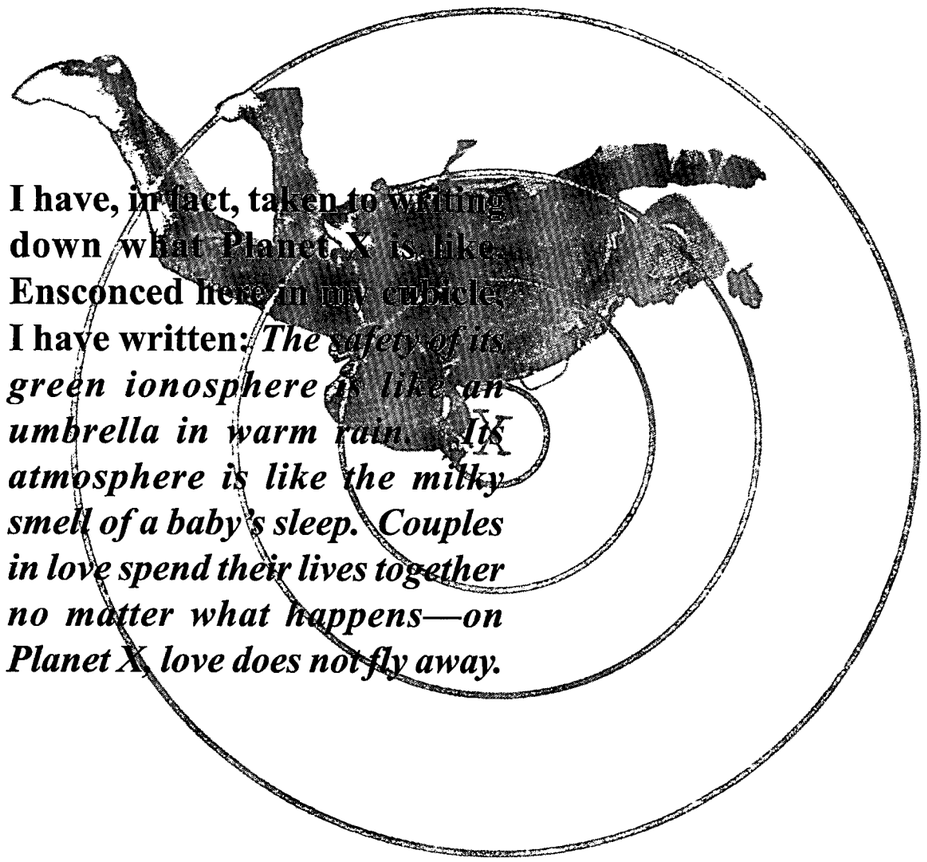
Peruse our Critic's section to see which new books have the Right Kind of Trouble; finally, Jason Dick's "Film as Interpretive Literature" shows you how great films get away with murder.

Whether this issue of *Thin Air* finds you changing your life or defending it tooth and claw, we hope you will survey the wide range of choices within our pages. As for me, I'll be escaping to my own version of Planet X—Tokyo, Japan, where I'm told the sky is made of steel, and ghosts are as common as houseflies.

Yours,

William Tyree
Editor-in-Chief

Sean Laughlin



I have, in fact, taken to writing down what Planet X is like. Ensconced here in my cubicle I have written: ***The safety of its green ionosphere is like an umbrella in warm rain. Its atmosphere is like the milky smell of a baby's sleep. Couples in love spend their lives together no matter what happens—on Planet X, love does not fly away.***

Planet X

"What's that your working on, Les?"

"This?"

"Yep. The one you got your hand on there."

I can tell that Kurt has had a bad night and he has only come to my cubicle to kill time before he turns his computer station on and works on a lift kit for the suspension of a GMC or Ford truck. His coffee mug jiggles in his grasp. If he suspected I was dabbling in something personal, he would back off. He is *simpatico* to my situation because his life is also on the skids—on the skids because of a Texan by the name of Sheila who is all chewing gum and cheerleader poses, and also, predictably loves big trucks.

"Writing a letter to an old college pal," I say, letting him off the hook.

"Yeah?" He stares with his silent eyes down at his coffee. He is tall and rangy and his face has begun to crease since I have been working here. "You still game?" he says.

"How much again?"

"Sheeeit," he says, "if that's what's stopping you. . .you know I got you covered buddy boy."

Everyone in the office has me covered.

A couple of us share birth dates in the early part of May—I am to be forty this weekend—and it has been decided that skydiving is the only thing which can reverse my headlong plummet into senility and incontinence.

"What time?" I turn the paper over on my desk.

"Shit, Les, you're a piece a work. You got a question for just about everything excepting this, cause we're going to Shanghai your ass up so high in the air you ain't going to be able to tell if you're kissing your ass or your elbow good-bye."

Kurt is a veteran of this kind of thrill-seeker recreation. He has set us up with a company that takes its clients up sky-flying the first trip. You fly through the air for a minute or two and a guide flies with you. A guide who pulls your chute if you don't or can't.

I have seen their video. It is set to electric guitar music and shows everything a person might want to know about safety precautions taken by their qualified personel. I rub my hands on my khakis.

"Better safe than sorry, Kurt. Better safe than sorry. . . ." My wife used to say this to me, and Kurt's face is puckering up into the same face I think mine has.

"There ain't no safe when you're falling through the sky with shit streaming out of your asshole, Les."

Kurt raises his eyebrows then takes a gulp of his coffee and heads off for the wild frontier of his cubicle.

Point well taken.

I am stepping down in the pride department every hour of every day; which is partially the result of being laid off by Stonewell International because of cuts in defense spending. I now work for a company that designs accessories and upgrades for off-road truck enthusiasts. It is not a job I dislike, but I often find myself detached from my previous experiences as though each of the phases of my life were the cast-off pieces of a rocket ship propelling me toward a distant planet. I imagine that I have lost my main rocket booster: my parents and their initial backing and support—lost to the blue planet earth's gravity (literally lost in a freak automobile accident during a hail storm); the secondary shield of my education has also been jettisoned (four lonely years at SMU); and then my experience designing obsolete defense

systems (stockpiled somewhere no doubt); but now, and finally, the *coup de grace*; my wife and any love she carried for me is also gone—gone to a rather minor planet with the absurd name of Gus Ketch.

So I have, after much thought, begun to understand: Planet X is my *only* destination, with *only* the capsule of myself to cope with its unknown atmosphere, its unknown dangers, its unknown position in space.

How will I know when I have arrived? That remains to be seen. It is a place I am almost certain I will recognize. I feel very close to knowing its nature.

What Will Come?

Recently, my dreams have started running commercials. I know this also to be a sign that things are going farther downhill.

I wake with images that I can only think are beaming into me through a satellite that has lost its path in the sky: an ancient Soviet satellite that can't be tracked because of its Cold War shielding system, a brain child of a diabolical engineer with only a title such as "Chief Designer" and no name, a satellite designed to invade the sleep of suburban men and women, to make their bodily needs, through a stream of cosmic imagery, into a maze of unpurchasable products.

But these half-thoughts, I realize upon waking, are only the leftovers from another era. The twinge of pride I felt looking at globes of the world and seeing U.S.S.R. fixed on the other side of U.S.A. The flush of warmth I felt. But this, I realize, is a time gone by. However, in the strange light of a new morning, it is a time that can confuse itself with the present.

Now I can hear the pulpy slap of the newspaper hit my door and I don't respond to that thump on my edged sidewalks as I did then. These days, there is only news of celebrities, decay; the infra-structure we built with tax dollars garnered from building weapons has gone kaput, bankrupt, or sold to private corporations.

And without a proper enemy how can I not feel a certain loss? Take a step down in the pride department?

I now believe our enemies are invisible. They are inside us. None of us in my suburb—Elm Terrace—would be surprised to open the front page and read that the newspaper boy—who drives a lowered Datsun 510—has been packing a .357 magnum for the last four years and decided to shoot, execution-style, all of his delinquent customers. We may know our enemies, but they are somehow unknowable to us. They are behind the tinted windshield passing on the street at dawn or dusk. We can identify the car, the product, but the person is blurred from this exact recognition.

What Will The Future Bring?

I switch on my work station in the hopes this will ward off any more curious bodies. What I have written about Planet X is on the piece of stationery I took from the Berkeley Hotel in Philadelphia when my wife and I attempted our second honeymoon. Planet X returns delicious in my mind: *Love does not fly away.*

There is a light tap on my shoulder.

"Leslie. . . ?"

"Oh, hi. . . Amanda."

"Randy and Mark wanted me to send you a memo about getting ahead of everybody on the new Dodges. They think there's product to sell and they want you to start thinking about it because, well, they think you might know more about that market. Well, it just seems like you would because you lived, you live, well, they think, closer to that market."

She is wringing her hands inside out; they are like two ivory birds preening each other. The market Amanda refers to is quite possibly my neighbors' in Elm Terrace. They are for the most part other defense contractor employees: working, laid-off, or otherwise, living in similar units near mine.

They are living their lives' special moments in Elm Terrace, where hopeful

planners envisioned country-style lanes lined with majestic elms sectioning off golf fairways from families strolling on Sunday afternoons. But, alas, back East, a run of Dutch elm disease put the kibosh on that set of drawings and they settled for the much more pedestrian poplar tree—making my home in reality Poplar Terrace. But the planners had installed the entrance with its sign already in place—to attract prospective buyers—and we are stuck with this discrepancy, presumably forever.

I will say this: Randy and Mark (the brothers who own ADD IT 4 BY 4) are not far from the mark by fingering me. To their credit, they rarely miss a new product market. And unlike the visionaries for Elm Terrace and their stick-to-their-sign approach, Randy and Mark will change direction on a dime.

These last few mornings I have been wary as I check the keys to my house and car in the garage; there is something in the very air of these spring days which has made it seem closer to night than morning, as if the earth has stalled in its rotation.

My take-off-for-work ritual is to set my cup of coffee, in its spill-proof mug, on top of my car and then walk back to the front door to input my alarm code. I take this time to think about joining a neighborhood watch and to picture the 9 and the 1 on the touch tone's keyboard, but while I am doing this mental calisthenic, I am aware that the dangerous part of this city sometimes holds more for me than this spinster suburb. I know that the best tacos are on the East Side of town with its gang-land boulevards and drive-by shooting corners. I believe a taco is worth the risk. Then why, I should wonder, am I fussing with an expensive security system? For if the newspaper boy did turn into a Son of Sam or Ted Bundy, I would only feel a jolt of recognition, of being in the great eye of the media for an instant—if I had not been his victim—but then I would wonder if the Suns beat The Celtics last night. And is Sears still having a sale on lawn equipment? Are they still doing work on the interstate?

When A Spider Plunges From A Fixed Point

"Why didn't you just send me something?" I ask Amanda.

"Well I thought it was funny because you're not really different so much as they think, and I thought it's not good to make anyone feel out of place, and. . ." She tilts her head to adjust for both our discomforts and I fix my attention on the nape of her neck with its pleasant meadow of skin and sunny hair.

Amanda goes to great lengths to hide the swell of her bosom and the way her face can be prettyish without her glasses on. I guess that underneath the covers she is a perfect smelling specimen of the Lois Lane variety: all soap and copy toner, whose myopic but ardent love bites leave scars. There is nothing so remarkable about her actually—which at this point in my descent makes her more appealing to me somehow.

She is a single mother with a tow-headed boy named Tobin who wears cowboy boots and a bandanna and sticks-up employees on some afternoons. He is four and he steals our hearts and an occasional coin or two. He makes any relationship we might try more complicated—a triangle and not a straight line.

"I'd be glad to look into this," I say. "But only if I survive this weekend."

"Well that sounds fair," she says. "I would jump myself if it weren't for Toby. He needs me a few more years."

Amanda is absently spying, checking the pictures around my cubicle—one of me with Chuck Yeagar at a book signing and one of my wife wearing a straw hat and white bikini in front of a thunderstorm sky and beach near Corpus Christi. My wife's soft face leans to look at her toes but her eyes and the front brim of her hat are up and she is gazing at me behind the camera. There is a question in her eyes: do you love me? will we be married? When? Yet there isn't even a trace in the reflection of her brown eyes of my camera, or me.

Amanda's search finally uncovers what I have written. She hesitates and her jaw twists and her eyebrows dip beneath the top band of her glasses. Then polite as a girl from the West can be, she moves on to look at my work station's prompt screen.

"I guess it must be scary to think about," she says, "falling out of an airplane."

"They say some people just black out, don't remember a thing. Maybe I'll get lucky like that." I actually want to be awake for the whole adventure.

Amanda hesitates and a hole opens in our conversation. Then she says, "We'll have the video so you can see yourself, lucky or not."

We are encoding our messages in careless ways—a thin wire of sexual tension that runs through all our conversations. Her curiosity about my pictures is a continuation of our day to day excavation of each other's lives. I realize I should invite her to dinner, take her to a motel room, marry her at lunch today, yet I don't. I am stuck behind the camera taking the picture of my curious wife on a beach I have been to once in my life.

"It's safer than driving home from work," I say with nothing on my mind now, not really, but getting rid of her and back to my journey to Planet X.

"Well, I don't know about that," she says. "I think there is something funny about the possibility that driving isn't safer than falling through the sky with only a parachute." With that she folds her arms over her simple vest and we are through again.

On the pro side of things, Amanda and I are in agreement about skydiving. On the con, we have once more arrived back in Nowheresville, a place where we both feel comfortable, unfortunately. I move my mouse and click to a new screen. "Have fun tomorrow," she says. Amanda pats my shoulder, then walks off with her hands in the pockets of her jeans.

To Its Consequences

I was once told by a certified psychologist, while in counseling for my leaky marriage, that patting during touching was an indication of a fragmented bond (he actually said *fragmented*). It is one of the few bits I remember from the purified air of those sessions. The reason it hit home was because my wife had been patting me during our intimate encounters for years. I felt part of the boat of our marriage duck under water. And before I knew it, I was swimming through the ether of divorce proceedings with barely enough time to say, "Tom, Dick, Harry, or Gus."

I call my wife after a swift run to the taco stand for lunch. She works downtown at a graphics design firm that occupies one floor of an ancient factory in the old industrial section of the city. (ADD IT 4 BY 4 is in the new "industrial parks" section.) It takes several tries to get her to answer her extension. The receptionist and I have an unspoken bond caused by my wife's laissez faire phone manners. The receptionist and I are of the old school: the phone rings, answer it, damn it.

"Hello?"

"Sherry?"

"Les?" I hear just an inch-worm of warmth in her voice. I pretend I can see her seated in front of the great windows that surround her drafting board. The light is white as though filtered through the bottom of a clear Tupperware container. She is sitting in her high chair with the front strands of her curly hair falling out of their barrette. She is doodling on a scrap of paper.

"How are you?" I say.

"I'm fine. What do you want? I'm busy," she says.

"I called to tell you I'm going through with it."

"That's fine. But what is *it* you're talking about?"

"Anything you want *it* to be," I reply.

"Les, you can take your vagueness and shove it where the sun doesn't shine. I mean it. I am trying to be civil but you are driving me to some kind of bitchiness I've only seen . . . I don't know where."

The inch worm has been cut in half. "Sherry? Wait, wait, I need to know if you want to pick up some more of your things."

"What things?"

"Don't you remember? The toaster? The blender you wanted? Those clothes in the entry closet, the shoe box full of pictures, those old posters. I found them in the bedroom closet—"

"Les? Les, listen to me, just listen. You get all you can together because this is it. This is my last trip. I'm done after this."

"I knew you wanted the toaster and blender, remember when we bought the blender? You had to have an Oster. Nothing else would—"

"Bye, Les. I'll be over tonight with Gus. Make your peace with what's left because it's yours from now on. Got it?"

It Always Sees Before It

"Sherry?" I say, but hear a bright steady dial tone instead. She has forgotten my birthday. She has never been good with numbers—this is perhaps one of the things that attracted me to her in the first place. Early on we would play games of blackjack, and she would never be sure if she had won. I could have cheated. I rarely did, though I enjoyed knowing I could.

We met in a bar I frequented when I had just started at Stonewell. She and a group of peace-activists, dressed in orange jump suits with rings of flowers in their hair, came in once a week, ostensibly to realign our "male-warrior mentality." We argued pleasantly week upon week. Tete-a-tete, Sherry visualized world peace and I visualized de-zipping her jump suit past her navel. I would create different under-garments during my visualizing, mostly things I had seen in Sears catalogs. I was willing to trade one or two defense secrets to peel down her efficient-looking citrus, pseudo-military garb. Not an overt trade by any stretch (but what ever is when it comes to the bedroom?). More a series of one-upmanship until things had escalated past the fail safe zone—I had figured this all out beforehand.

One night we ended up back at my efficiency apartment and she made a quick search through my things while I was in the bathroom. She was looking for defense secrets—as though there might be one in my sock drawer—and when I came out she had seen enough, she was ready to leave. I mentioned I was working on the WISH YOU LUCK, project and she decided to stay a little longer; I told her I was working on the guidance system, and she let me kiss her; so on and so forth.

When things got down to the nitty gritty she flagged my seduction with world peace as its beach and I could think of no place I would rather land.

She was naked underneath her jump suit. It was the one configuration I had not considered because it seemed too much to hope for. We both were excited by the exchange of secrets and in the trial of this new openness we did things we might not have otherwise: we left the light on, we talked to each other before, during, and after. Things I had never experienced. I felt mature and involved in a larger struggle with her. She realigned some things for me; I even considered quitting my job and joining her—their—crusade. And she has told me she had much the same experience—though her job was one that didn't require getting up in the morning, which frequently made it difficult for me to get to mine.

We were the two sides of a coin finding each other and realizing the worth of this union. We were the amalgamation of two separate metals making a superior piece of alloy. Yet now I realize a coin alone can buy almost nothing: a ride on a rocking horse outside the supermarket, half a video game, perhaps.

An Empty Space

I am misty-eyed as I roll past the gate into Elm Terrace. I have spent an extraordinary amount of time wallowing down aisles in the video

store trying to find the exact combination of movies to get me through this evening.

I am thinking of the summer nights when Sherry and I would return from our excursions out into the city and pass these same stucco columns and walls, returning to our nest, her hand draped on the inside of my right thigh. I felt the power of passing this facade, sealing myself in for the night with her. We would travel with the stereo tuned to the jazz station, and there was the smell of her perfume mixing with the low wallops of the bass, and the pneumatic glow of her pleasant features in the instrument panel's greenish light, all combining to make a package I felt bubble wrapped tightly inside. My night, I knew without talking, was open to a bout of love making with her—in the safety of our bed, our marriage, our town home. I felt the steady pride of owning an excellent set of appliances—how praise-worthy it was not to have to think of them! And also had the sense that the outside world was barely needed. I had the things I had set out for, the things I had wanted.

Sherry was on the homeowner's committee to stop Elm Terrace from becoming a gate-guarded community. As we drove past we often talked about the entrance's kitschy architecture and what having a sentry here would mean for us. She said it encouraged all sorts of schisms in the fabric of a community. I listened and often nodded but I was secretly—and now overtly—for having a guard. I enjoyed the idea of waving to a uniformed figure who recognized me by my automobile and well designed sticker on its windshield—a figure of some authority who welcomed me to the place I lived is what I believed I deserved.

Where It Can Never Set Foot

The movies it has taken me so long to choose are The Philadelphia Story, with Katherine Hepburn and Cary Grant, and a steamy, nudity filled, murder mystery: The Night of Obsession. As I lug them to the front door, I realize I will not be able to watch the cheery or the seedy tonight. It will be a night in which Planet X is my only solace. A night of planning. It is in this recent stage of my bachelor life that I have begun to define my journey toward this undiscovered planet. It seems essential to understanding where I am headed, where I want to be. I will have no time to escape into two dimensional worlds hidden behind a sheet of glass.

No Matter How It Wriggles

I can't remember my alarm code. This has never happened before. I am the one who is good with numbers, yet it has slipped out of me, propelled out into space perhaps by my journey, a way to lighten my load. I can easily rationalize. I want to start with a four and seem to have a pattern that follows musically in my head—the music of the telephone's touch tone. I watch my finger dance mid-air above the pad. But I can't make it into numbers. I don't have a phone that will play different tones with me. I only have three tries, so after the first trial I lose all confidence.

It was often Sherry's job to lower the security on our place, and the mistiness in my eyes and the thought of her has left me addled. I can wait for her, yet I don't know when she will arrive, or I could punch what I think it is and either, easily enter, or explain to the police, that will be readily dispatched, that I am the owner of this particular town home and have only forgotten my number. This second course of action also comes with a $120.00 fee—stated clearly in my contract with American Security.

Before Me Always An Empty Space

I sit down. The night has opened its umbrella and I can see out onto the golf course across the street. Bats are screeching and skittering out of the night's folds. It is warm and there is a pink, then salmon congestion low in the western sky, and then indigo, purple, and plain night up above.

The paper boy's car comes steadily down my street. Its exhaust pipes ring out with a brassy growl. I can't see in the darkened

(Continued on page 41)

Jimmy Tyrrell

The Reasonableness Of Events:

Chris McCandless and *Into the Wild*

In 1990, Chris McCandless, son of wealthy parents from a Washington D.C. suburb, graduated from college, packed up his belongings, and pointed his Datsun west to embark on a cross-country trip. But what little we know of the short, strange life of Chris McCandless connects him to the thousands of youthful travelers who enthusiastically embark on similar journeys upon completion of a successful term in college. Before McCandless left, he donated the balance of his college trust fund—close to $25,000—to charity. No one knew where he was headed or how long he'd be gone. He talked to no one. Two years later, McCandless entered the Alaska wilderness with little more than a rifle and a ten pound sack of rice. His emaciated corpse was eventually found in a dilapidated Fairbanks bus in the shadow of Denali.

The Library of Congress catalog system catalogs Jon Krakauer's book *Into the Wild*, a biography of Chris McCandless, under the heading: "Adventures and Adventurers." Such ardent categorizing commits McCandless to some pretty lofty company, for this is where the likes of Admiral Byrd and John Wesley Powell can be found. Further down the root system one encounters less noble descriptors, such as "Wayfaring Life" and "Hitchhiking," suggesting that Chris McCandless was a Kerouac or a Cassidy—a free spirit. Chris McCandless, however, didn't lead expeditions, nor was he a poet or writer.

When McCandless made his first and last trip into the Alaska wilderness in 1992—just how wild is a bone of contention that continues to stick in the craw of Alaskans who have lived successfully in the wild for generations—Kerouac was a dead pop culture icon who appeared in Gap ads and liberal arts college catalogs. Hitchhiking was no longer considered safe in America, Powell's name had been profaned by lending it to a man–made lake, and there were no more frontiers left to explore. The questions, however, remain: What compelled a bright young man to embark on such a strange and solitary journey? What makes the life of Chris McCandless the stuff of adventure?

Two years later, McCandless entered the Alaska wilderness with little more than a rifle and a ten pound sack of rice.

Krakauer paints a portrait of an idealistic young man in the grip of convictions that bordered on the extreme. For McCandless, life was a proving ground, a place to put ideas into action. Although he was a straight-A-student, McCandless was dissatisfied with the life he led at Emory. He found academic life stilted and ineffectual. The ideas he was exposed to inspired him, but college life lacked the vibrant immediacy with the world he so desperately craved. Krakauer reports that the dozen odd books that were found among his possessions at his camp in Alaska were riddled with underlined passages and marginalia: notes of encouragement to himself for living the ideas he found on the page.

Krakauer's reading of McCandless' sparse journals reveal a melodramatic strain that speaks volumes of McCandless' youth and naiveté. But for Krakauer, the facts of this young man's life are not the stuff of adventure; rather, they comprise the foundation of a strangely compelling mystery. When Krakauer, a contributing editor to *Outside* magazine, covered the

story in a lengthy feature article, the piece generated a greater response than any other story the popular magazine had run before. The details of Chris McCandless' life and death struck a chord with Krakauer's readers. Not all of them were favorable.

Many readers opposed to the story believed that to champion the way McCandless tried to live was even more disgraceful than celebrating a suicide. For some, the events that led to McCandless' death were remarkable only to the extent that the young man's death once again confirmed that there's no place for hubris in the wild. To embark on a vision quest in Alaska ill-informed and inadequately prepared is ultimately the highest form of disrespect to the land. A man who refuses advice and assistance at the onset of his journey pays the price with hunger and fear, especially if his ideals outpace reasonable concern for safety and well-being. Chris McCandless, they argued, was not a victim of circumstance deserving of our sympathy. He was a fool.

On the other side of the camp were the thousands of fascinated readers who, like the author, were unable to put McCandless' story aside. A few of the letters Krakauer received, reported having met McCandless at some point on his strange odyssey. McCandless had a weird intensity about him that people instantly recalled. Those who met him, if but for an hour or two, could vividly recall the passionate young man who introduced himself as Alex. Even Krakauer admits that the story became for him an obsession that threatened to skew his objectivity and color the mystery he struggled to unlock.

This obsession, and the author's forthright admission, is what makes *Into the Wild* unique among accounts of adventures and adventurers. Krakauer's delicate handling of the story makes it a compelling one and it should be noted that Krakauer is a tireless researcher whose decision to treat the coverage like an investigation reveals a strain of abeyant nobility one frequently encounters in detective stories and comic books, but so rarely encounters in the world. Krakauer doesn't endeavor to set McCandless apart from others, nor does he present a pat interpretation of the forces of isolation that surely played a part in his development as a young man. Instead, Krakauer initiates McCandless into the strange fraternity of adventurers, explorers, and mountaineers who went to the edge and had the audacity to look down. This, perhaps, is not so strange given Krakauer's own proclivity toward testing the limits of the possible, as evidenced by his well-documented ascent of Mt. Everest last spring—a season that claimed eleven lives, including some members of Krakauer's party.

Toward the end of *Into the Wild*, Krakauer endeavors to piece together a plausible picture of McCandless's last days. When the plants that produced the wild potatoes McCandless had been eating all summer stopped bearing fruit, Krakauer believes McCandless took what he estimated was a reasonable risk and switched to eating their seeds. Krakauer conjectures that by ingesting the seeds, McCandless inadvertently poisoned himself, making it increasingly difficult to hunt and forage for food, the work of survival he had performed so successfully all summer. It is significant to note Krakauer's diligence in pointing out the fact that the possibility of the potato seeds doing McCandless harm was not something he could have made himself aware of at the time, for the extensive botanical survey of the area that McCandless had the foresight to purchase in the Fairbanks bookstore prior to his trip fails to mention the danger.

The tragic irony—a phenomenon we almost always associate with the heroic epics—is that as the toxins took hold, demanding more and more nutrients to sustain life, they robbed him of his strength to procure them. The result: he grew weaker and weaker until he starved to death. His corpse weighed sixty-seven pounds.

Into the Wild begs the question: what if Chris McCandless had succeeded? Would

our prying eyes lead us to recognize the not-so-spectacular achievement of spending a long summer in the not-so-wild wilderness? Probably not. Nevertheless, by turning the biography of Chris McCandless into a critical analysis of castouts and their marginalized meanderings, a terrible compendium of didn't-make-it-but-died-trying, Krakauer effectively connects McCandless to a fascinating phenomenon of human curiosity and restlessness that antagonizes all our notions of what it means to live in contemporary, industrial America.

However, what makes the anecdotal accounts of Krakauer's "adventurers" so fascinating is the arbitrary nature of the dividing line that separates success and failure, courage and stupidity, heroism and folly. If the accounts lead one toward imagining cruel gods and goddesses heaping misfortune upon the motley assemblage of adventurers that Krakauer has pulled together from strange and obscure sources, it is because they put themselves so pitiably at the mercy of their divinely capricious whims, thinly disguised here as meteorological disturbances and freakish weather. Indeed, like the heroes of antiquity, these adventurers sought them out, seeking the peak or the plain, flaunting their undisputed mortality. That they possessed so little, yet risked so much, was—and apparently remains—unfathomable to those peering down from Olympian heights. Those who were eradicated with a single swipe of the divine shit-hammer were eventually forgotten; those that survived Poseidon's wrath, Hera's scorn, etc., had their praises sung, and were embraced by their native cultures as heroes.

We belong to a culture that encourages us to take life by the jugular and "Just do it," but when we fail, it castigates us for being too bold, too naive, too stupid.

Heroism, as it applies to the modern day adventurer, is a by-product of success and survival, a distinction measured after the hero's inevitable return. As for hitchhikers and wayfarers, forever roaming that familiar, frontierless zone we already know so much about, they can never really be said to have left us, so the possibilities for heroism—if, indeed, they exist at all— are slim. Chris McCandless, therefore, was no hero.

It would be foolish and disrespectful to the family and friends he left behind to suggest that Chris McCandless was, or is, a hero. But isn't the impulse to live on the edge, to move beyond the boundaries that confine us, to push forward into the unknown when there is nothing within the ken of our earthly experience to tell us how we'll respond when we get there, a heroic one? Aren't these the qualities we used to look for when deciding whether the man etched in the mythic memories of our comic book consciousness was a hero? Isn't it our nature to admire those who do things we cannot, or will not, do? We belong to a culture that encourages us to take life by the jugular and "Just do it," but when we fail, it castigates us for being too bold, too naive, too stupid.

Our history is a political and fiduciary win column, a chronicle of winners. Chris McCandless took chances and paid dearly. But he wasn't playing a game. The postcards he sent to his closest friends before he left recognize the possibility that he might not return. Some read this as evidence of McCandless having harbored suicidal tendencies. Others believe that McCandless' pursuit of the raw experience was a transcendental smokescreen intended to obfuscate the trail of demons that pursued him from his childhood back East. Still others attribute McCandless' death to a lack of

humility. If this is the case, McCandless' greatest strength was his weakness, for he disappeared into the wilderness like a god walking fearlessly through a dream. He failed because he did not have the sense to flinch where others stumbled, hung fire, and turned back. If we scorn McCandless for striding recklessly into the wild, it is because he cared so little for what he was leaving behind, and as adherents to a culture that champions the values attendant to success and survival, that is something we simply cannot admire.

In a chapter of *Alone*, a record of Admiral Byrd's successful survival story entitled "Despair," Byrd also inadvertently poisoned himself, and writes:

> It is like a flight, a flight into another unknown. You start and you cannot turn back. You must go on and on and on, trusting your instruments, the course you have plotted on the charts, and the reasonableness of events. Whatever goes wrong will be mostly of your own making. If it is to be tragedy, then it will be the commonplace tragedy of human vulnerability.

Byrd not only lived to tell the tale—and telling it in the metaphors readily available to him—he profited by it as well: in 1938, *Alone* was a best-seller, and Byrd became a cultural icon, a hero, a Promethean with new knowledge about the world. Perhaps our culture needed heroes more desperately then?

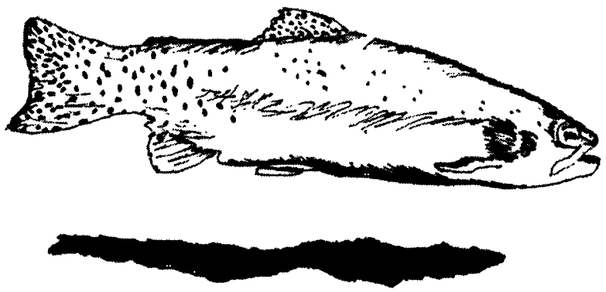
Disaster, famine and strife are no more or less prevalent than they have always been; the state of the world is no more or less unreasonable than before, but if it is the reasonableness of events that is to become the harsh adjudicator that separates glorious destiny from cruel fate, that which we ourselves will someday be counting for survival—as individuals or as a culture—to help lift us up in our moment of infinite aloneness, then God help us all. If the reasonableness of events is to be the final arbiter and only those who are fortunate enough to circumvent chance and personal disaster are to make it through to the other side within the full glory of our culture's approval, then who among us would not be counted among the damned?

Perhaps we need to believe that Chris McCandless knew more than he let on to forgive him for what he did to his family, his bright future, that part of our imagination that is now forever ruined by his terminal luck. Instead of judging McCandless for his weaknesses and shortcomings, real or imagined, Krakauer firmly reminds us that, like the poor who will always be with us, there will always be men and women who will leave our culture behind to seek the high mountain and the deep canyon, the jungle forest and the frozen tundra, the distant seas and the limits of our atmosphere. Chris McCandless has left us, but there will certainly be others—forever on the move, restlessly prodding us in the wilderness of our imagination. ■

Alexi Vontsolos

MONTANA

Now I'm maudlin
driving from the airport.
I notice things at this
hour of the morning.
A person in a robe.
Is he going to buy
the Sunday paper?
I have the bustle of
a new town in my
eyes. There must
have been a scramble
back home, for drama's sake.
I notice the easy corner
people pushing carriages.
I am the unpredictable
element.
We said good-bye again
and I felt like
Montana trout.



Molly McCloy

In Search of GWCHUFCTV: Girl Who Can Hook-Up Free Cable TV

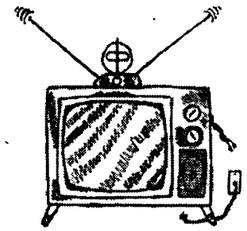
I'm just a girl who wants a girl who owns her own socket set
and ratchet wrench. She should be reckless, like a cult
leader who can flip loaves worth of French toast for the
masses of true believers and equip her cartoon bible with game
pieces and a spinner that says, "Please flick to identify the
hopelessly doomed portion of the population," a spinner rigged
to land on the line between this and that, like a self-assured
shrug, or a lean cut of laughter.

I have no metrics for gauging mental health but I can prove
that my clumsiness is not just a closeted form of self-
mutilation, and my paranoia is the generous, honest type of
paranoia. My favorite colors are eggplant, and just plain
red, bicycle red, the way all red looks to me when I really
start hoping for anything. My favorite movie is the one where
the kid is raised in the Mexican circus and his father is the
knife-thrower and his mother is a religious fanatic as well as
a trapeze artist, and when the father starts fooling around
with the tattooed lady the kid's mother throws sulfuric acid
on his crotch and then he chops both of her arms off, and she
spends the rest of the movie wearing earrings with little
plastic arms molded to them, two arms crossing each other with
just enough detail of the slightly bent elbows.

(Cont., stanza break)

I am looking for either a hectic woman without a spare minute
for me or the bookish sort of gal who could make my fan club
into a viable political force, as long as the relationship
would mean damage for one of us. I have this feeling, you
see, that I want and will get exactly what I've had before.
I'll want her and she'll want him, or I won't want her and
she'll want to get artificially inseminated.

I have a valid driver's license, no overdue books on my
library card, and four out of five lovers have told me I have
nice breasts. I will do anything—sometimes. Send me a photo
of yourself handing beers to a group of homeless men. Send me
an ode to bicycles written on a basketball, and make me sign
an agreement not to critique our sex life with work friends
over the phone, something I would never do anyway, just as I
would never look through your shoe box of personal stuff or
monitor your body fat, just as I would never fool around with
the tattooed lady or douse you with sulfuric acid, though we
might spend our first date wrong way down a one-way, blasting
the Spanish music station, letting head-on traffic strip off
the rear view mirrors while we look straight ahead, checking
the maxed-out speedometer now and then to make sure the needle
is still twitching and shaking, to make sure it is as scared
of us as it should be.



James Harms

Now That Stephen's Back

I love my drug buddy.
—Evan Dando of The Lemonheads

Now that Stephen's back on drugs, he phones
at funny hours so we can
"talk without an audience," though we never talk;

Stephen likes to sing to me across the wires.
He thinks we live crowded lives, though I
live with Sarah and he's alone.

"The walls have ears,"
so we go out walking, skim our hands
atop the hedges, do-si-do the corner lamp post.

We cross the street to buy a magazine,
watch the vet invent a dance. We pay him
and cross back, wave at mannequins, tap the glass.

There's a grocery store
with lots of flowers, and Stephen tries
to name them all. He stops after "blue daisy."

At the ORBIT we shoot some pool, split a pitcher,
use the phone: Stephen pulls it in the bathroom
so he can "talk without an audience;"

(Cont., stanza break)

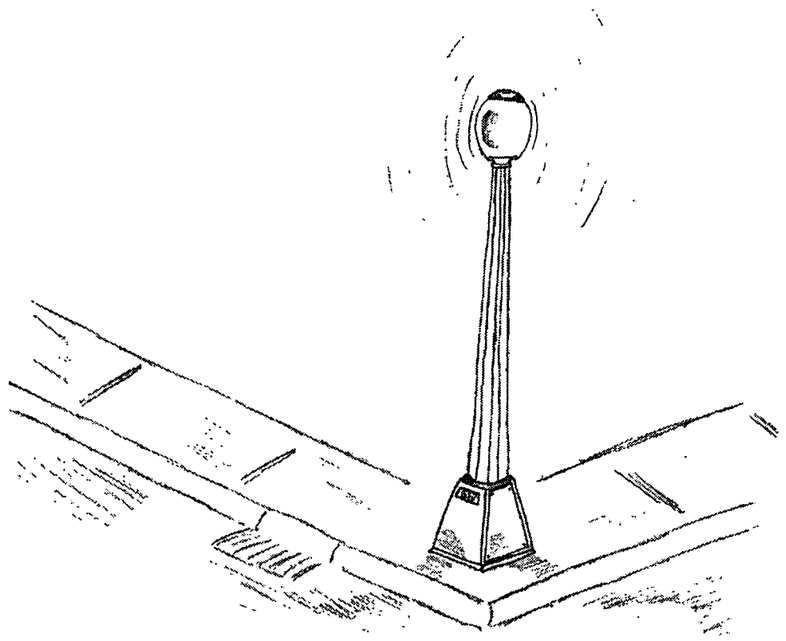
I listen from the hallway, but he flushes
whenever culpable. A pair of slackers
takes our game. They leave the eight ball

in a glass. When Stephen's done he comes out
smiling. We drink our beer, I say, So long.
Now that Stephen's back on drugs

he doesn't call to talk. "Are you there?" he says,
as if I'm not. I ease the door shut
so Sarah won't hear,

though she doesn't mind; she loves Stephen.
He says he'll prove he's getting better,
then he sings a song he wrote today.

It's pretty good, and I tell him so.
I say, Goodnight, Steve.
He says, OK.



Jerry Gabriel

Two Sides of an Heir Apparent: The Art and Activism of Writer Rick Bass

In the past decade, Rick Bass has evolved into a literary Jeckle and Hyde. At one moment he is a storyteller of the Southern tradition—the painter of bucolic scenes from Mississippi or Montana, the creator of desperate characters searching for the one thing that will make them whole again—and in the next moment, metamorphosed, an unapologetic, outspoken environmentalist, leading, through essay and letter writing, what amounts to a military campaign against big business and government exploitation, particularly in Montana's northwest, but more broadly, in all of the American West. You will see his stories in *The Paris Review* and *GQ* and *The Best American Short Stories*, his essays in *Harper's* and *Outside* and *Sierra*. His books of both fiction and non-fiction now take up a shelf of their own. He is, simply put, prolific. In both genres. He pours out geysers of diverse prose on everything from suburban Houston to the search for grizzlies in Romania. And—like some formidable switch-hitter: power with one hand, finesse with the other—he is equally effective, equally passionate, and though perhaps reluctantly, equally devoted.

Bass chooses to live beyond the reach of residential telephone service and had to drive into town to call me.

Bass admits that he would prefer to be spending his time strictly on fiction, though the political writing, he feels, has been monopolizing. The reason is simple: "Corporate industry," he told David Long in a 1995 *Publisher's Weekly* interview, "has taken and taken until there's this last fragment of wildness left and now they're coming after that. . .[I]f you don't yell now you're going to miss your chance."

A hundred and eighty degree turn from his polemics, however, and you find yourself smack dab in the middle of Bass's wildly imaginative fiction, where characters might joust in the middle of a Montana meadow with bleachers set up for spectators, or where a couple might live on the remnants of a Civil War gunboat and fish the Mississippi for a flood-confused porpoise a couple hundred miles from the coast.

Southern writing guru Barry Hannah said of Bass's debut collection, *The Watch*: "General reader, please welcome a new young captain of the American short story. Rick Bass is the real news, beyond one's hopes." Bass was all of thirty one years old at the time, but Hannah couldn't have been more prescient. Since then, Bass has accumulated praise like an overachieving class president. He has, for instance, been in *The Best American Short Stories* four times since 1988—a fact that by itself places him among the ranks of the nation's most talked-about short fiction writers. The most recent of these stories, "Fires," is in the recently-released 1996 edition, and is a characteristically Bassian tale of pain. By way of explaining his feeling about the story in the anthology's contributor's notes, Bass quotes writer Terry Tempest Williams: "Our lack of intimacy with each other is in direct proportion to our lack of intimacy with the land. We have taken our love inside and abandoned the wild." The land—the landscape—pervades

everywhere for Rick Bass. In his life; in his non-fiction; in his fiction.

Among other awards, Bass has received a PEN/Nelson Algren Award Special Citation for fiction and a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship. In the fiction department, he now has three collections of short stories: *In the Loyal Mountains* and a collection of three long stories, *Platte River*, in addition to the debut collection. On the way, he has a collection of novellas, *The Sky, The Stars, The Wilderness*, and a long-time-in-the-works novel, *Where the Sea Used to Be*.

The novel is massive—at one time swollen to 2000 pages, at last count still hovering around 1300—and has been a project for most of the last decade. In fact, he's written it twice. After a thousand pages, he wasn't happy with it, and started over. In May, during our long-distance pay-phone conversation (Bass chooses to live beyond the reach of residential telephone service, and had to drive into town to call me) he was in the process of editing it. "It's been a lot of fun revising," he told me with more than a little astonishment in his voice. "I'm enjoying it."

Bass sat somewhere in the back of the crowded room, a shadow, a little surprised maybe to be hearing his own name from Lopez's mouth.

To read Rick Bass's fiction is not really to read so much as to roll up your pant legs and go wading. To follow his imagination into the Mississippi swamps or the Canadian border is much more than the words that make up the story. At the heart of the writing is experience, an aliveness, a passion. He has an eye for the images that refuse to be forgotten, and he barbs us with them—"injures" us, as he has put it.

He often creates scenes in ways more common to those of Garcia Marquez or Carlos Fuentes than many of his North American contemporaries. He speaks of the seemingly mundane with the zest of someone in love. And finally, this may be the truth of the matter: Rick Bass seems in love with life and the world. From here, one can perhaps begin to understand the dichotomy his writing career has taken. On one hand, there is the celebration of life; on the other, there is the intense defense of the things that, to Bass, are worth celebrating.

He likes to walk in the mountains that surround Montana's Yaak Valley, where he lives: he'll do that for upwards to ten hours a day in the summer, a little less in the other seasons. "Is this a period of writing too?" I ask during our May conversation. "Is there a creation of characters and stories happening during those hours alone, away form pen and paper?"

"Absolutely," he responds. "Absolutely."

Everything in Bass's life now seems tied to this place that you will most often hear referred to as "remote Montana"—his family, his leisure, his writing, both fiction and non—even if he often finds himself elsewhere. "I'd like to never leave here," he has said of the Yaak (*Poets and Writers*). "I can only write when I am here."

And Bass has given himself over to the struggle of protecting the area—which is being threatened by proposed logging—tirelessly writing letters and essays, raising money through public readings. It is, according to Bass, one of the last unprotected, roadless wilderness areas in America. And it is his firm belief that it should remain wild and roadless, and that it *should be* protected. For the sake of keeping things wild. And maybe a little more selfishly, because this is *his* wild place.

I met Rick Bass in Washington DC last April at a conference called *Watershed: Writers, Nature and Community*, where, ostensibly, he was lending his name and voice to the

environmental writer's movement-at-large. And while no one might fairly question his devotion to that group, Bass wasted little time, when it was his turn to speak, to garner support for *his* watershed, the Yaak Valley.

Contrary to my image of this man—which, perhaps because of the largeness of his writing voice, had him as a sort of Hemingway figure: robust with considerable girth and a loud laugh—Bass is a small, unassuming man whose Popeye-like arms are the thing about him that most attract your attention. Much wood to be chopped for a northern Rockies winter. His demeanor—at least on the surface and in a room full of people—seems more suited to farming or furniture-making than public speaking or environmental activism. He is extremely soft spoken, his vestigial southern accent subtle, hardly noticeable.

He had brought with him to *Watershed* a letter addressed to "Friends of and Letter Writers for Yaak Valley"—a tract as angry as any letter to a small town editor—which he handed out after his talk to those who asked for an autographed copy of one of his books. He did not, however, harangue the audience about complacency during his talk, as he surely would have liked to, and admits to doing at similar events. In fact, he did not even mention the letter during his talk, though he did address the Yaak Valley situation.

"First I have some politics," he began from the podium, "and then, in a minute, I'll get to the art stuff," and in this one sentence, perhaps summed up the track his life has taken in the past decade.

"I'm not going to point a finger at one group or another. But this is the situation in Yaak." He briefly explained the assault by lumber companies in some of North America's most remote wilderness up in northwest Montana. It was as if he just wanted everyone to know.

In his "Letter to Friends and Letter Writers for Yaak Valley," he is not so poetic. Or politic. The letter is angry, full of accusations—and type-O's. You get the feeling in reading it that Bass was spitting and cursing and throwing things while writing it. He attacks, among others, PACs, Congressional Republicans, multi-national companies, the US Forest Service, and President Clinton. Of Clinton, he writes: "Please write him and express your displeasure about what he did to the Yaak. Don't worry about making him angry; he loves enemies." Of the Republicans: "We have to stay angry. The Republicans are blowing Yaak out of existence."

When Barry Lopez spoke the night before Bass at *Watershed*—alongside Terry Tempest Williams and Wendell Berry, at the conference's standing-room-only main event—he mentioned that he'd been reading an essay on the plane by a young writer named Rick Bass. Nearly everyone's head nodded in accord. Bass sat somewhere in the back of the crowded room, a shadow, a little surprised maybe to be hearing his own name from Lopez's mouth. But maybe not so very surprised; such occurrences have certainly become common.

The fact that Lopez—easily one of the most respected writers of the natural world in the US—raised Bass's name in the course of his discussion was indication (Proof Absolute, perhaps) that Bass has arrived as a writing force in this country, that what he says matters, and that at 38, he is quite possibly, as nature-writing scholar Scott Slovic asserts, "Edward Abbey's heir apparent as literary defender of wilderness in the American West."

On the subject of writing itself, Bass is characteristically elusive, subscribing to the ideology that too much shop-talk somehow steals from the writing, takes away the energy that allows creation.

When we spoke a month after the conference, Bass was back in the Yaak, outside on a pleasant spring afternoon, changing a truck tire.

"Where do the names of your characters come from?"

"I don't know. They just come. I can't think too much about it. And if I do, I know it's wrong."

He is much more comfortable, it seems, away from the nuts and bolts of writing, talking about general things. There is the story of how he began to publish, which he recounts for me:

> "I'd been writing stories for some time. I'd send them off and they'd come back, gradually with more and more commentary, but no acceptance notes. Then, one day, I finally gave in to the folks who owned the bookshop in Jackson, Mississippi, where I went a lot, and I read Jim Harrison's *Legends of the Fall*, which they'd been trying to get me to read. I'd never read anything like it. It affected me a great deal. After that, I wrote 'Where the Sea Used to Be,' which *The Paris Review* finally accepted."

"So 'Where the Sea Used to Be'—which is the basis for your novel?—wasn't the first story you'd ever written, as I've heard the story?"

"No," he says. "I'd written hundreds. Or, if not hundreds, at least dozens. I'd written a lot of stories learning how to do it. And the novel isn't necessarily 'based' on that first story. There are some of the same characters, some similar themes. Dudley is in there."

I move my questioning to the political. "Writer Peter Matthiessen has said that it is difficult to write politically-motivated non-fiction which remains artful. An exception, he has said, is Rachel Carson's DDT expose, *Silent Spring*. You've written a couple books that are fairly political now. What do you make of Mattheissen's idea on the matter?"

"Yes, I think it's difficult. Yes, I think *Silent Spring* succeeds." More elusiveness.

"Along these same lines," I continue, "At *Watershed*, Matthiessen, during a public reading, stopped halfway through a piece, and, apparently a little embarrassed, said, 'I was very young when I wrote this, and I sense it taking on a didactic feel.' And then he moved on to some more recent writing. Do you foresee yourself looking back on your writing twenty or thirty years from now and feeling that way?"

Bass gives a surprised, "Hmm," then answers, "I already do. I look back on what I wrote a few years ago and feel that way."

Bass is, I have come to understand, a sort of antithesis to that Northern Rocky Mountain writing know-it-all of yesteryear, Ernest Hemingway. Bass is quiet and modest and, for someone who spends so much of his time in argument, surprisingly amenable to compromise. He is not, like some who crusade for environmental causes, unrealistic. When I ask him how he feels about the growth of Houston—his hometown—since the days of his youth, he nonchalantly answers that "it's really on par with most comparable cities."

"In fact," he adds, "the growth there has been mild by comparison."

About the Yaak, he has said, "There's not anybody on our side asking them to stop cutting trees [in the Yaak], because we use as many of them as anybody. We're just asking them to step back and look at a larger picture."

And the modesty—which can be interpreted as a thirst for knowledge and understanding, I think—carries over to his writing, even after so much success.

I ask Bass why he never went to writing school. "Did you ever feel that you could have learned faster by doing that? Or did you feel that being accepted into a writing program might somehow validate you as a writer?"

"No," he says. "I didn't feel that need at all. I was just writing and enjoying what I was doing. I mean, I had doubts about myself as a writer. I always had doubts. Recently, though, I was thinking about writing school, that now that I have some ideas of my own about writing, I might benefit from doing something like that and hearing what other people have to say. I could probably learn something new." ■

Rick Bass: A Bibliography

1985 *The Deer Pasture*, Texas A&M University Press: A collection of reminiscences of hunting trips to the Bass family hunting lease in the Texas hill country west of Austin.

1985 *Wild to the Heart*, Norton: A collection of early essays on such topics as hunting, road trips to the American West from Mississippi, and the beginnings of Bass's environmental activism.

1989 *The Watch*, Norton: Award-winning first collection of short stories set in the four states where Bass has lived: Texas, Mississippi, Utah, and Montana. Includes such stories as "Juggernaut," "Wild Horses," "The Watch," and "In Ruth's Country."

1989 *Oil Notes*, Houghton Mifflin: A collection of essays on finding oil as a petroleum geologist (which Bass was for much of the 1980s), on writing, and on love.

1991 *Winter: Notes from Montana*, Houghton Mifflin: The collected journal of Bass (and his wife Elizabeth's) first winter in the Montana Rockies. Includes reflections on writing, mountain life, wilderness.

1992 *The Ninemile Wolves: An Essay*, Clark City Press: Details the mostly unhappy fate of a pack of Montana wolves.

1994 *Platte River*, Houghton Mifflin: Collection of three long stories: "Platte River," "Field Events," and "Mahatma Joe." Dreamy and magical stories, largely about man/woman relationships.

1995 *In the Loyal Mountains*, Houghton Mifflin: Collection of short stories, including "The History of Rodney," "Fires," and the title story.

1996 *The Lost Grizzlies: A Search for Survivors in the Wilderness of Colorado*, Houghton Mifflin: A personal journalistic account not unlike *Ninemile Wolves*, *Lost Grizzlies* details the search over a number of years—and including a number of players, but always primarily grizzly aficionado, Doug Peacock—for grizzly bears in southwest Colorado.

Forthcoming:

The Book of Yaak: A collection of essays about the Yaak Valley.

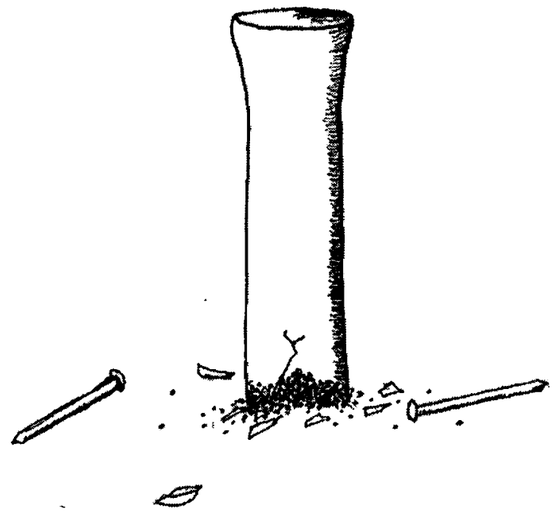
Where the Sea Used to Be: Bass's debut novel, ten years in the making.

The Sky, The Stars, The Wilderness: A collection of novellas.

Nancy Johnson

THERAPY

First the lung comes down, lonely, dressed in a red suit. Then a bright helicopter, sourcebooks riffling. Everyone is eager except the woman waiting, the hole dissolving her mouth. Like Alice, everything becomes smaller, smaller, just to know how it feels—evaporation or love. The vial contains ground glass and nails. The woman hangs a sliver of *The Inferno* around her neck and drinks it in with a straw.



Nancy Johnson

Moon Beats Gulf

Paper covers rock, scissors cuts paper.
Who remembers? The need is for something
more visionary: the moon leading a walk
on the water. Think of a ship, a top,
an ugly sky. Think of what you were doing . . . .

Your son jetskis in from the future. He talks
about a child who toes into the ocean
one season at a time, points to a house
where he says the suitcases are not packed
and people have their shirts tucked in.

Here is a lover whose voice reels out
of the radio, who walked into the woods
to pick mushrooms and found a woman
dressed in black and sequins, her arms
punctuating the forest.

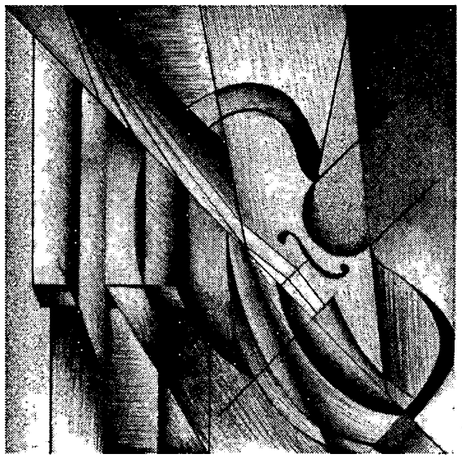
Here is a season without loss,
where it is only sex we speak of,
a season hunched against the wind, casting
triangular shadows, wearing lace.

"Ruin is always a surprise," the moon says
into the ocean's good ear.

Stephen Dixon

Fritz

Man looks at him and Gould thinks "Oh no, is he going to do it again?" and the man looks at his face even harder with the look "I know you from someplace," and Gould says "Hi," and the man says "Fritz?" and he says, "You know, you did the same thing to me last summer when we first saw each other, and I was almost going to head you off this time when you looked at me as if you knew me from a long time ago." "I did it before? I thought you were Fritz?" and he says, "Yeah, at the market in town. . . really, maybe the first week after I got up here, just like now. And I asked you who you meant and you told me



and I said what a coincidence because he was my music teacher at City College in New York. Not so much my music teacher but the head of the chorus and I had tried out for it when I heard they were doing the German Requiem. And though—this is what I told you then—I had wanted to be a tenor in the chorus, he—" and the man says "Have people done this to you before? Not just me but do others mistake you for him?" and he says "No. I mean, why would they? Excuse me, it could be you haven't seen him for years, but he's got to be thirty years younger than me—I mean, of course, older." "Not thirty, I don't think. And I saw him recently, or maybe I didn't, but certainly in the last five years to ten, and closer to five, and he can't be thirty years older than you," and he says "You're the violist for the quartet at the Hall," and the man says "One of two of them—we alternate on the programs—and for trios, quartets, duos, anything we do, and I'm part of the faculty in the summer program there too. So, nice to see you, sir," and he says "Not at all," and the man, who's been holding a tray with two fried clam

rolls on it and a can of soda and what's probably an iced coffee, since the drink is dark and there are two Half and Halfs and some sugar packets and a stirrer next to that cup, goes to an outside picnic table where a woman's sitting. Gould recognizes the woman from some of the Sunday afternoon concerts he went to last summer with his wife and a couple of times with his kids.

"Why'd you say 'Not at all' when the man said 'Nice to see you'?" his oldest daughter says and he says "Did I? I'm sure he knows I meant 'Yes, it has been'—you know: 'Thank you very much. . . not at all,' meaning, well, 'You don't have to thank me,'" and she says "That's different; then you're answering him. I'm sure he felt insulted, that you were saying it wasn't at all nice to meet him," and he says "And I'm sure he didn't feel that and that he didn't even hear my response to his 'So nice to see you, sir.' He's probably now telling his wife "I can't believe it. For the second summer in a row I thought that man—you see him standing there with the girl, waiting for his order to be called?—was Fritz Sepulska. You remember, the pianist who has a summer home around here, or for all I know now lives here full time. Fritz looks just like him, or did till a few years ago, when I last saw him. The resemblance is remarkable—same hairline, long face, the nose, height, slender build, narrow eyes. You'd think he'd be mistaken daily by people who know Fritz up here—he's very well known, particularly because of all the musicians around—and that if Fritz ever saw him he'd think he was seeing his long-lost never-known twin brother, or his brother a couple of years younger than him. But this guy says he's thirty years younger, or at least twenty-five. He can't be. Maybe he doesn't take care of himself and Fritz does—I know Fritz used to work out rigorously and was pretty much a teetotaler. And somehow because of that—well, other than for disease and drugs, nothing ruins you faster than heavy drinking, right?—and though there might be a vast age difference, they're physical lookalikes. Now you can look at him. . . he's picking up his order. But actually, with a child that age . . . no, she's probably his granddaughter, not his own kid. In fact, maybe it is Fritz and he doesn't want to talk to me for some reason, or to anyone. But he said I made the same mistake last year, and I remember it, though not as well as he. . . he says it was in the market in town. But he could still be Fritz, and last year when he told me that, it was also because he didn't want to speak to me or anyone. I haven't heard anything about this, but maybe Fritz has become a recluse of sorts, or simply gone nuts or lost his memory through some disease, so he doesn't even remember who he is. But then why wouldn't the girl have said something? . . . Excuse me, sir, but Grandpa Fritz has had some trouble the last few years. . . . Anyway, if he isn't Fritz—and really, he can't be. Fritz would have to be seventy-five by now, possibly eighty. He's been retired from teaching for ten to fifteen years, if my memory's right—then what do you think this man does, something in music or a related field? Certainly not a violist or violinist—no permanent abrasion under his chin from years of pressure from the instrument. He has the slumped posture and slight pot of a pianist, and I didn't look at his fingers and hands but they could be as long and strong as a pianist's too. He also has the face of a musician—the unhealthy complexion

and head lost in sounds. And like most of us, not a very deep intellectual look, since I have to admit we don't read much but music scores and occasional escapist literature when we have the time, or have much interest in any other art or interpretive form or theory or even news but music. In other words, we're typically not big thinkers. We feel and express—that's us—and without that and the hours of practice we have to put in a day, what would we be? I bet he's a high school music teacher who was trained as a serious pianist for a number of years but loves jazz and hated practice and rehearsals and in college where he got his education degree to teach music he played in an extemporaneous ragtime band and might even have been a disc jockey on the college radio station. And those two kids—you see the second one who just joined him? Even younger than the first—are from his second marriage. And that he also has two from his first marriage, but they're grown up and maybe in college or past it and are interested in becoming, just as these two will be, anything but musicians or music teachers because of their father's meager income and displeasure with the professions. And his wife—the present one. Well, I don't know what she does—usually they're opera singers or musicians or had been trained to be or music teachers too. But for some reason I think she's very much like the first—in looks—and that both of them resemble his mother. But I see her reading a lot of serious books—women musicians are different that way than men—that she checks out of the library in town, and every so often firing a piece she's made in some pottery class and cooking gourmet meals from recipes she's cut out of *The New York Times*. What he must be thinking of me, though. Is that guy clear out of his head? Does he forget notes and whole musical passages when he plays as much as he forgets faces and potentially embarrassing mistakes from year to year?' Well, I can tell him I didn't forget his face; that I actually remembered it but put the wrong name to it, not that if he told me his a dozen times I'd remember it. I'm saying, I bump into him by mistake once a summer, so why should I be expected to remember his name or not to mix it up with someone else's every now and then? While he must see my name and photo in the program notes if he goes to the Hall's concerts, and I'm almost certain he does: a Sunday-goer with the wife—kids left with friends—rather than the Friday night concerts, since they don't want to leave their children with friends too late or at home alone. Or he's saying. . . 'You see that gentleman over there?' Saying this now to his kids. . . 'He's one of the two violists for the Hall's chamber music school for seven weeks. He's pretty much a hotshot in his field, having helped found the Razumovsky Quartet, which was one of the best in America for many years. And from what I read in the local newspaper last year and in the area's arts freeweekly just last week, he's made a couple of recordings and been a soloist over the last thirty years with some of the leading orchestras and chamber ensembles in this country and abroad, as well as being the principal violist for the Metropolitan Opera. Now why he thinks I'm Fritz Sepulska is a mystery to me. But you kids like to read mysteries—Nancy Drew and such—so maybe you can solve this one for me. For do I look so old? Sepulska's got to be approaching

eighty. So let's say this violist's eyesight isn't too good. . . so because of that we'll add ten years to the Fritz he sees. In other words, and not to get too confusing, though he thinks of me as eighty, he sees me as seventy, but feels that's what a healthy eighty-year-old man looks like. . . but do I look that? Even sixty? I thought I looked pretty good for my age—fifty maybe; possibly forty-five. I haven't lost all my hair and my jaw hasn't begun to slack and my neck, in only the last year, I think, is beginning to get wrinkled and also a little hollow in front the way older people's do. And that pot that people past fifty-five seem to have no matter how thin they are and how much they purge themselves and exercise—well, that's starting to show despite every countermeasure I take, including sucking in my stomach while holding my breath. And the gray, if not even the white hair in places, like the sideburns and on my chest; and those webbed feet, I think they're called, off the ends of my eyes, and that deep quartermoon gash running around both sides of my mouth. . . you know. . . .'

and, as would seem with this guy, because of the inarticulate way he spoke to me, he shows with his fingers what he means, since he doesn't have the words to explain it. . . . But my posture's pretty good—sturdy, straight, I'm not bent over at all, and my ankles are still strong and not turned in and my legs don't wobble and shake. And my arms because of the stretchband and ten-pound dumbbells I work out with are as solid if not solider than they were when I was twenty or thirty and never exercised. How old do you two think I look?—be honest," and his youngest daughter says "When will they be ready with our order?" and he says "Everything's freshly made here, though maybe a little preprepared, so if it had come out in a minute or two I'd have wondered how far in advance the dishes had been cooked," and the older one says "Shouldn't we haved ordered the large portion of potato skins? It's only fifty cents more and you get twice as many pieces," and he says "Listen, last time we did, you left half of it here," and she says "We had what was left wrapped and took it home with us," and he says "And threw it out several days later. This time, you finish the small order, you can get another small order, and the second one will come out hot like the first one, just the way you like it, and with a new container of sour cream. But my biceps," he says to them, "my forearms and arms—I mean, they're not—they couldn't be—the arms of a seventy-five to eighty-year-old man. No man that age could have arms as solid and thick as mine, and if he did, well, it'd be highly unusual. And I just don't see a musician—and a pianist, no less, who has to take such delicate care of his hands and arms, and one still playing as I'm sure Sepulska does. Those guys never stop practicing and performing, with some of them in their nineties, and one of them—Mishaslavski or something—a hundred, but still banging away on stage when they're long past remembering

"How old do you two think I look?—be honest," and his youngest daughter says, "When will they be ready with our order?"

their own names, even, or at least the names of their children. Anyway, I don't see any musician my age, except maybe a base player or tympanist, and both of them mostly from dragging their instruments around, having the arms I do," and his youngest daughter says "Show us your arm muscles. Your always say you will some day but never do," and he says "It's too silly. I did it as a young boy and later as a joke to girlfriends, but I couldn't do it anymore and for sure not here," and she says "You can say we're now your girlfriends. Just show them once and we'll never ask again—agreed?" she says to her sister and the older girl says "Okay, agreed," and he says "When you're in the car maybe, or sitting down here, if no one's around or looking, and very quickly," and the youngest girls says "Good,"when a woman in the enclosed stand where they take the orders and make the food yells over the loudspeaker "Ninety-two," and Gould says "That's us, or maybe she's saying how old she thinks I am . . . anyone want to bet?" and Fanny says "Don't be funny, Daddy," and goes to the pick-up window in the stand, their tray's waiting and she carries it to a picnic table, the man's at the next table and looks at them and smiles and turns back to his wife and Gould says to his daughters "Ready?" and Josephine says "Ready what?" and he says "The muscle thing," and Fanny says "But people are around, and that man who called you Fritz is looking," and he says "Shh, don't rub it in him by repeating it so he hears, I don't want him thinking something' s wrong with his memory—older people get very sensitive about that, think maybe their mind's going or something," and raises his arms and flexes his biceps and Fanny touches one and Josephine the other and Fanny says "Oh, they're big, like the poster I saw of a big hockey star without his shirt," and Josephine says "Where'd you see that, in one of your teen magazines?" and he glances at the next table and the man and his wife are looking at him and the man shakes his head, not disapprovingly, really no expression whatsoever that says anything, and looks away, and the woman nods while she smiles and seems to mouth something to him like "Very pretty girls."

"I don't know why I did that with my muscles before," he tells the girls about a minute later. "I'll have to think about it," and Fanny says "You wanted to get it over with because we've bothered you about it for so long, that's all," and he says "No. Anyway, enjoy your food," and Josephine says "Why don't you ever have something but black coffee? You never eat anything when we come here or go out anywhere for snacks," and he says "I have a good time just watching you two eat it all up." When he looks over again the couple's gone. "I know why," he says to the kids. "So the man won't call me Fritz again, not that I didn't like it—I'd love it as my name," and Fanny says "But what about?" and he says "These," crossing his arms at the wrists to point to his biceps. ■

Brinker

That boy Hans
with his silver
skates flies
on ice—feet
fleet, sure-fisted
like a fuse lit
and crackling
toward the powder.

Tensile legs
on a surface that
isn't, that splits
under his swift
weight. Stumbling
boy! Pitching
toward the slippery
bank, praying for
a toe-hold.

Current roaring behind
the dam, too deep,
too pissed to freeze.
Flailing laddy has lost
his balance, all grace
gone as he strikes
the wall: slams
into the dike, breaking
open the tiniest
of chinks.

The water.
It does not surge.
Yet. Rather it seeps,
weeping one drop
at a time, then spills.
The pressure of mud,
given an inch, takes the
mile, relentless. Freed
wet speed, liquid tons.

False spring, the early
melt swells our
long, lonely river
wider than its bed. No
warning flash flood:
debris and carcasses
afloat on its mighty
back.

Sink and rise then sink
again. The bob and
churn, the cold of
boiling silt unsettles.
No delta, no fan-
fingered place
of rest in sight. All's
adrift, pulsing south
between imaginary

shores, each splash
a mockery of bounds.
Ragged boards
nails like hungry teeth
bales unbound
haywire blank-eyed
catfish belly up
knobs of ankle, of knee
joints unhinged, cranial
plates pelvic bowls

faceless clocks
Dresden pitcher
reeling rod
hooks mating
in a barbed chain
sycamore stump
cracked hull, split
pier pilings lovers'
skin sodden and sheer

as old rags, box springs
wads of batting
tangled rope clever
knots unslipped naked
doll shattered trusses
bicycle wheel bent
out of true manic
washboard depressed

pelt dirty ice brown
with trapped leaves
chiffarobe stunned
silvered mirror gone
black. No end to it
without surrender.
Crushed and crumbled
broken down to smallest
grain, to grit, to dust:

a thick paste
dark as loam.

Holly Iglesias

The Well

This time it is a well
from which I speak,
round and smooth
and full.

It holds my words close,
swarming quick and loud
around my skull, trembling
in a bowl of bone.

It is a well of wanting
that taps—though they warn
that desire will drown us—
a constancy deeper than dread.

These words are buoyant, and spill
from me like an opened pulse:
this language you claim
to love *is* the love,

aching for your mouth
to speak it—the vowels deep
in your throat, sounding
a perfect hunger, consonants sharp

against your teeth, your jaws
firm around the heart of it—
to drink it down, draining
this hollow place of noise.

Holly Iglesias

Wary

She has run away from home
for years: the drawers full of knives,
the din of fists on doors and bones,
rooms dark as silent mouths.

This is just a sketch,
the thin outline—I was not
there—drawn over time
in whispers from her dry lips.

Her tongue slides over her teeth,
feels the slick inside of her upper
lip for the marks they made
when knuckles hit, before she speaks.

Watching the sky for the swoop
of night hawks, the curve of
a gibbous moon, she once found
asylum in the open chill of night

on the rough reaches of an un-
molested shore. Deep in the reeds,
the ribcage of a bird with delicate
bones like hers sheltered an egg

frail as starlight. She keeps it
by her bed, a guardian of dreams,
and watches still for signs in the sky,
the trees, the grass: a slug, bearing

her home on her back over gravel
and weed, deposits a viscous trail,
pale as milk, that shines softly
in the night for her returning.

Joann Gardner

Low Tide

Parsley, chrysanthemums, pansies, and onions sit in huge kettles, strapped to the railing of the deck. The brine-soaked air does nothing for them, and so I cart water to where they are and dump it, with nutrients, into the parched soil, trying to keep those leaves from folding up, flowers from giving way in this sunlight which draws nails from the wood.

The water at low tide is spectacularly silent. One hears an occasional slurp, which turns out to be a bird wading near shore, and of course the occasional mullet, which like a clumsy stone heaves itself sequentially across the water, leaving rings. Sand bars and oyster beds make magnificent S's and meandering T's, a maze of muck and grasses. A brief island with a couple of trees stands out, water seeping up underneath it. A skin of earth pulled tight; parched lim of salt, edging everything.

This stretch of gulf is fraught with hazards. The red triangles and green squares of an obstacle-course-like channel warn the boats from the shoals. At low tide, you can see them, the multiple low mounds of muck and grass that rise and undulate and block the way to the sea. You must navigate carefully or run aground. At night, there are lights trained on water, and boaters pole among these stretches—fishing, yes, but certainly sounding the shoals.

A truck churns down the road between the canal and the house, diesels and stops in the neighbor's yard. From his rusted truck, the neighbor emerges, pulls out bits of left-over wood, molding which he will use on his dwelling for sale. His lathe sits in the yard, open to weather which freezes its joints, deepens its guttural hum. His dogs, confined to the widow's walk atop, no longer bark at passers-by, at his own comings and goings, but in the heat seek a patch of shade, crouch low in the day and dream of bowls of cool, fresh water, free of brine. Black gnats nip at their skin, and they dig deep into their own flesh to capture them, sand fleas and mites.

Read This?

Michael Ventura
The Death of Frank Sinatra (Henry Holt)

Reviewed by Jason Dick

It is easy to discount novels and stories classified as crime fiction as escapist and predictable claptrap in the world of "literature." The sheer number of titles by Elmore Leonard, Charles Willeford, Carl Hiassen, or James Lee Burke that clutter used-book stores, airports, and beaches with their bent spines and neon-marketing covers, plants a common perception that they are exactly what Quentin Tarantino has strived to make them: pure pulp. But lively plots featuring soulless racketeers, prostitute heroines, and against-the-world private eyes and cops do not, by default, make junk literature.

A sterling example of crime fiction as "literature," whatever that may truly mean, is slickly packaged in Michael Ventura's novel of bad guys and not-so-bad guys in Las Vegas, *The Death of Frank Sinatra.* Ventura's protagonist is Sicilian private investigator Mike Rose (a cheeky use of the name of Ventura's real-life friend, Mike Rose, author of the incredibly hopeful and optimistic book on American education, *Lives on the Boundary*), whose father was a button man for the Las Vegas Mafia and whose mother was a local showgirl and small-time porn-star.

Ventura portrays Rose as a man caught in the middle of drastic changes to Las Vegas. His parents are the archetypal founders of Vegas, the seedy criminal element that made a city from nothing, and was run out of town for it. His adversaries in the novel are the New Vegas: the dry, humorless, WASP, corporate flunkies and subjects who have power in wealth and numbers, but no real understanding of life or business in terms of visceral substance, human beings, or ruthless violence, which they nevertheless are forced to deal with in their woefully amateurish orientation.

Ventura expertly chooses to not glamorize the halcyon days of the Old Vegas. Rose is every bit as willing to bash the folly and warmed-over glitz of the days of the Old Vegas as he is to take swipes at the ridiculous garishness of the new Vegas as adult Disneyland. Rose does acknowledge that the New Vegas has sterilized and sanitized itself to the point that people like him and those who he grew up around, underbelly types whose eccentricities kept them alive and prosperous in the past, are now targets for censure, removal, and erasure. But those are the breaks, Rose acknowledges. It may have been a different cast that was doing the killing for different motivations before, but killing is still killing. No matter who kills you, you're still dead.

The plot is really secondary to the themes played out over the course of the novel. Rose is able to straddle both worlds and eventually navigate his way through the mess of family skeletons, encroaching betrayals, deranged and estranged clients, Frank Sinatra bodyguards, mentally unstable relatives, and amateur hit men that close in on him. He is able to duck out of the conflicts raised from this meeting of disparate and rival worlds by emerging as an individual.

His success in this is not just the success of the Phillip Marlowes, Sam Spades and mysterious drifters of crime fiction past, fictional figures who come out on top at the end, vanquishing their adversaries and moving on to the next situation that requires their expertise and problem-solving talents. His success is that of every modern individual striving to survive in a world evolving out of control. Rose lives according to his own strict sense of himself and survival. He is the best type of figure of literature: a person whose struggle engages in others a sense of identification and empathy, and ultimately, one of example. Ventura's novel is not just about Rose being able to extract himself out of a series of precarious situations, however entertaining that may be. It is about a person coming to a sense of himself and claiming his own perspective and success in a contemporary society that incessantly tries to gun him down. ■

Mike Lankford
Life in Double Time — Confessions of an American Drummer (Chronicle Books)

Reviewed by Jonathan Hurwitz

To many music fans, the drummer has the same reputation as a caveman-like beast beating on things. The music world even has its fair share of wonderful dumb drummer jokes (How can you tell when a drum-riser is level? Drool comes evenly out of both sides of the drummer's mouth). As a music fan, it was with more than great trepidation that I approached drummer Mike Lankford's autobiographical tone, "Life in Double Time." Two hundred fifty plus pages on drums, drumming, drummers, and more drums: always the sign of a good read.

Much to my amazement, however, Lankford turns out to be quite a storyteller. A graduate of the Iowa Writers Workshop, Lankford's prose is straightforward, but has the rare gift of making the most mundane scenarios interesting. Covering his entire history as a drummer, Lankford first chronicles his early career with some hilarious clarity. The reader is drawn into Lankford's frustration:

> It was rough, very rough. My left foot insisted on jumping off the hi-hat pedal every other beat and getting tangled up in the stand. Not every snare note coincided with the bass drum. At my best, I could hold the whole contraption together a few seconds before I'd wake up to how complicated it was, and then one part or another of my body would fail me. Each time (my drum teacher) had me start again and each time I began with the right hand on the cymbal, then added the right foot on the bass drum, tentatively bringing the left hand on the snare drum and left foot before it would all crumble again and stop. This beat was complex beyond belief, like trying to juggle balls and tap dance and sing hallelujah all at once.

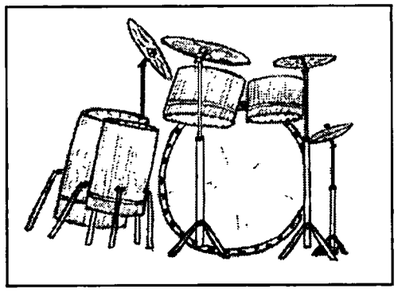
Lankford's book progresses past his early high school bands and tales of teenage drug abuse in the late 60's, and then becomes very interesting. You see, Lankford was never a drummer of great fame; rather, he worked his entire career as a utility drummer, crisscrossing the country in a cheap van as the "salt" to a couple of "peppers." As the drummer in a black R&B cover band, he shows the reader the seriously unglamorous side of the music business. Hired quickly to replace a departed white drummer (the already named "Salt & Pepper" needed someone white), Lankford is quickly taken to task by two old professionals, Dennis and Vince, for any errors while playing the drums. Both his bandmates are particularly fond of throwing quarters at the drummer if he fucks up. Needless to say, Lankford becomes the recipient of more of his share of laundry money in the beginning months.

Lankford's career, while not only interesting, is fraught with danger. While playing drums in a club in Chicago, his cymbals suddenly shatter for no apparent reason. Within a matter of seconds he realizes that he is being shot at. The club plays host to a public murder, which Lankford describes in lurid detail — violent but impossible to turn away from. Lastly, a fan brands Lankford with a red hot coat hanger — a loving tribute.

With the violence comes drugs, and while it is sad to see another musician-on-heroin angle, it is described in an original

manner that makes for solid reading.

An engaging read, Lankford's debut is worth seeking out, for the simple fact that it breaks a few dim-witted drummer stereotypes. ■



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Film as Interpretative Literature

How Great Films Get Away with Murder: *Apocalypse Now*, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, and *Trainspotting*

Filmmaking surrounds, envelopes, and determines pop culture and snob culture the world `round more than any other artistic medium. Fair citizens may not know their Beethoven, but they know their Schwarzeneger. You just haven't lived until you see the excitement of suburbanites from Hamburg, Germany getting riled up to see the dubbed versions of *Predator 2* or *Dances with Wolves*. Nothing transcends like celluloid, through generations, through national borders, through studio buy-outs.

It's interesting, then, to note that so much of what is filmed is derived from the beaten-down old stand-by of cultural communication, literature. A vast majority of high school students have figured this out down through the years since filmmaking's inception and (gasp!) dare to believe that the two-plus hours required to view *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Ford is a viable alternative to the several days required to read *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck.

While film can often be little more than an exact reenactment of a work of literature into a favorable package of processing time and physical character representation (see any film adapted from a John Grisham or Michael Crichton book), the films that stand out so much as important and contributing artistic endeavors are the ones that reinterpret original works. Of course, it never hurts to be take from original material acknowledged as a masterpiece, but there is something special about films that act on that material, not just react to it.

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* was highly coveted for film adaptation. Orson Welles wanted to make it his first film but turned instead to *Citizen Kane*. On and off it languished in and out of conceptual and preproduction stages until Francis Ford Coppola staked his name and his fortune on an adaptation. The result, *Apocalypse Now*, is one of the seminal achievements in not just literary adaptation, but in cinematic craft and artistic revelry. Coppola's film keeps the framework of Conrad's storyline in place but ingeniously changes setting and circumstance to a contemporary reflection.

The shift from Conrad's claustrophobic Congo to the film's underbelly of American military operation in Vietnam and Cambodia presents the viewer with the same themes of *Heart of Darkness* but with differing contingencies. The viewer gets to determine if the original work stands the test of being truly universal, if its themes hold up under the strain of transplant from epoch to epoch. In *Apocalypse Now*, attention to *Heart of Darkness* and its messages are, if anything, heightened due to the change. The viewer can determine that what was true for nineteenth century Marlowe and Kurtz is still true for the Vietnam War's Willard and Kurtz, even though spears are replaced with machine guns, steamboats with helicopters, and a greedy and removed Belgian merchant company with a monolithic and removed American military.

Another way that film adaptation can add to an original work is through the simple act of subtraction. Irvine Welsh's novel *Trainspotting* is a work of multiple perspectives and points-of-view. The novel relays its narrative through the stories of such a bevy of characters that the multiple perspectives are, at times, difficult to keep up with. Even so, the treatment of underground Scottish youth feels complete. Welsh gives his reader so many facets of mid-

1980s life in young and predominately heroin-using Edinburgh that the novel was widely praised and almost as widely claimed to be "unfilmable."

The film *Trainspotting* takes at its core the stories and perspective of one character from the novel, Mark Renton. Renton's point-of-view becomes that from which the film audience sees *Trainspotting*. Through his narration the viewer is guided amongst the highlights and lowlights of Welsh's world. Except for a few minor changes, the scenarios and scenes in the film are taken almost verbatim from select Renton entries in the novel. What makes the novel unfilmable, the circling of the disparate perspectives of Renton, Spud, Sick Boy, Tommy, Nina, Specks, Begbie, etc., is taken out. Instead, it becomes Renton's take on their lives. The narrative is given a direct time-line, a protagonist, a plot, all derived from the novel.

The film's strength is that it shapes adaptive literary episodes into a cinematic expression that works. It doesn't attempt to take that which is best left to literature to the screen. In doing so, one of the worlds of the novel is presented in the film in expert fashion. The film succeeds as its own endeavor, yet one taken from original material. It leaves out the elements of the novel that could have spelled disaster in attempting a complete adaptation.

Film adaptations can also succeed in creating their own original material. In one of the best examples of this, the film version of Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, the point-of-view and focal message for the film is changed outright.

Kesey's novel tells the story of Randall Patrick McMurphy and his stand against a timid and conforming society as expressed through the confines of a mental hospital. The novel is told from the perspective of Chief Broom. He relays how McMurphy takes on the establishment and wins, then loses. The novel allows the reader to know McMurphy through Chief Broom, as well as the Chief himself.

In the novel, McMurphy's martyrdom for the men of the hospital is the action of a Christ-figure. His sacrifice allows those weaker than him to come to a point of self-determination. After McMurphy's death, the novel becomes Chief Broom's story. The reader already has an investment in Chief Broom, knowing his background, motivations, and feelings toward the hospital and McMurphy. The Chief is able to break out from the imprisonment of the hospital and its conformist ideology and live his life according to his own decisions. The tone of the ending is hopeful, possibly reflecting the optimism of the early 1960s that the establishment was corrupt but could be overcome. It could be escaped from.

You just haven't lived until you see the excitement of suburbanites from Hamburg, Germany getting riled up to see the dubbed versions of *Predator 2* and *Dances with Wolves.*

The film does not relay Chief Broom's perspective, nor Kesey's optimism for his ultimate salvation. McMurphy is the centerpiece of the film's narrative. He moves against the system and pays the ultimate price. Events from novel to book are not changed: he still gets his lobotomy, Chief Broom still escapes, but the tone and message changes. Because the film is McMurphy's and his story alone, he becomes not a Christ-figure but more of a Rasputin. His defiance of societal norms and hospital policy allow for individual expression and the indictment of the establishment against the individual, but in the end the message is much more grim. He sacrifices himself. He pays the ultimate price in order to remain an individual. When he dies, his message dies with him. The film ends. The image viewers have is of the defeated: McMurphy. Chief Broom's murder of McMurphy becomes an act of mercy that the viewer sees almost as a warning to what happens to those who defy. The optimism that surrounds the Chief's victory in the novel is transformed into the pessimism of the film's ending. The film's ending is not about Chief Broom starting a new life. It is about McMurphy ending his. When the film was made, in 1975, the countercultural revolution that gripped the nation in the 60s was dead. So were its solutions. This change from novel to film adaptation mirrors society's own changes, in attitude, in outlook.

What film can offer in an original sense is very often that of adapted material. Film is able to shape literature in ways that it possibly cannot go, but leaves it intact. Given film's global reach and impact, it may be literature's staying, and saving, grace. ■

(*Planet X* continued from page 10)

windows but I wave to show that I am not such a bad customer. I wave the wave that should sign to him that I intend to pay on time from now on. There is no way of knowing if he can even see me, and he is quickly gone—out to the edges of what I know.

A last golfer follows his ball in a white cart. He is stopping long enough to swing once then hop back in. I hear the brake ratchet to its safety position. He scoops the ball ever nearer the 17th hole, but he does it as though it were a game of cart driving speed and dexterity as well as club selection and stroking prowess.

There is a red Dodge Ram 2500 V-10 truck parked at the curb across my street. It is a vehicle I haven't seen here before. It is exactly what Randy and Mark want me to begin designing products for. It is already lifted well above the pavement right from the assembly line and dealer's lot. I note that it has the stature and appeal of a brand new and aerodynamically designed semi-tractor trailer.

The bed needs just the right shaped chrome box with cleated steel to store whatever a suburban man might carry. A lawn hose? A bag of turf builder? A fifty pound bag of dog food? X rated videos he doesn't want his wife or children to know he has? I design a rugged set of locks for my imaginary box.

Out of the corner of my eye I spy two blurry shapes making their way toward me. They are coming from the Club House, I guess. Perhaps a set of my neighbors coming back from a fine dinner at the Steak & Ale restaurant. They are making a bee-line for this red truck, and somewhere in the middle of the fairway, I notice they are laughing and bouncing off one another in a couple-in-love way.

As they split apart underneath the row of poplar trees, I recognize Sherry. Then Gus Ketch's distinguished, silvery hair catches a piece of the last light. I know without seeing him up close that he is wearing moccasin boat shoes without socks. That he is this minute, inside his handsome head, worried about how

he will rivet the aluminum shell of his do-it-yourself kit airplane together this weekend and not thinking pure thoughts of my spoiled-by-him wife. I only hope he drops every cylinder head from his restored Rolls Royce engine on each of his toes.

A Consequence That Lies Behind

As they approach, Sherry folds her arms and ducks her head down as if she is not sure whether I am a rabid dog or just her husband of twelve years sitting suspiciously at his own front door.

"Yes?" I ask.

"What are you doing?"

"Imagining elm trees along the fairways," I say. "It's harder than you think." I actually can barely remember what an elm tree looks like. *On Planet X all developments are required to name their properties after the actual geographical feature therein, or actual tree, bush, or shrub.*

She is still cautious. Gus has beeped his alarm off across the street. He opens the door of his Dodge. He stands in the impressive display of interior lights, and I see he has on an Irish knit sweater and pressed khakis.

"We came by earlier but you weren't home," she says. "So we went for a walk and had a drink at the 19th hole. They still think I'm a member."

"I haven't changed anything," I say as I stand up and wipe off my pants.

"Oh," she says.

I can not tell if there is a question in her voice. She nods toward the front door, hoping I will just get on with it, that there will not be a scene.

"What's he doing?" I gesture toward Gus.

"He is going to wait," she says. "That's all."

I think, inappropriately I realize, of my wife's breasts hidden below her cashmere cardigan sweater. She has small breasts. I was always proud of the size of her nipples even so. They are as large as sand dollars, and almost as pale, and cover most of what is there. I wonder what Gus thinks of them. He will never appreciate them the way I do. I am sure of this.

"I have forgotten the code," I mutter.

"What?" Sherry touches me on my arm as though she has heard some terrible news and wishes to let me know she is still in contact—distant as it may be. Cancer? the touch seems to say. She moves around to the alarm box and presses: 4-0-5-8-9.

"I don't know how I forgot," I say.

The box blinks a green and red, then steady green. How did she know I hadn't changed the code? Is it because twelve years gives a certain insight into the interplay between a person's thoughts and his feelings? I wish this to be true, yet I am not certain of it. The actual reason I have left the code the same is because it was the day her father died—it was our way of remembering him on a day to day basis.

He was the only parent she ever knew. She adored and feared him. He was a drinker and Sherry's Aunt kept Sherry at a distance. He ruled her, her aunt, and a small publishing house in Boston; ruled them from behind tumblers filled with ice cubes soaked in Irish whisky and thick croaks of publishing rhetoric. As far as I know no one ever talked back.

I think I have never lived up to his King Lear presence in Sherry's heart. (This all came out in therapy—can you imagine my confusion? Should I take up drinking and cavorting and late night tirades that only asked for crumbly apologies in the mornings?)

He ended his life by jumping out of the 18th floor of the Park Plaza Hotel in Boston on an early spring day. Here is what his last note said:

> Sherry,
> I have signed all of the pink slips for the cars. It will be easier for you to dispose of them. I don't want to be here when all the Buzzards pick through my things. If I were you I would move back here and keep an eye on things. I am sure there will be some looting and I am sorry I have not left things in good order. I have never loved anybody but your Mother and you. Don't believe anything else you hear.

She had to sell his publishing house to cover all the debt he had accumulated running it into the ground. His house in Newton was owned three times over by the bank. His life insurance would not pay. The cars all needed more service than it was worth to keep them. But then, I have often thought, Gus looks much like her father in his big-headed, wind-blown, weathered way. And I have heard he doesn't mind tipping a few drinks now and then.

"Should we go in?" Sherry is looking at me worried, her arms crossed over her breasts.

"Is Gus going to be all right alone?" I ask.

"*Can it*, Les," she says.

In the closets I collect the clothes and posters into a box while Sherry looks on. *On Planet X, children will not be the subjects of their parent's mistakes and bad habits. Each child will not be a continuation but a new and unique individual.*

"What are you going to do now?" Sherry's voice strains to get this out.

"Watch a couple of movies and go to bed."

"No, Les...tomorrow, next week, next year?"

I get up to get a grocery bag from the pantry. "Well, tomorrow I am going to go sky-flying with some people at work. I've never been, you know?"

Sherry bites her lip staring at me. There is a wine-colored stain on the collar of her shirt. I find this so moving I feel my eyes develop a worrisome squishiness.

"That is crazy Les. That's some kind of awful cliché for a divorced man turning forty."

So she *has* remembered my birthday. "Is that a roundabout way of saying you still care about me?" I ask.

"Les, that is not fair," she says. "It's just not fair. You have to learn to take care of yourself, what you want, what's going to do *it* for you. We've been over this a thousand times." Her shoulders are hunched and pleading in a posture I recognize from our therapy sessions. *Of course, no one will ever need therapy on Planet X.*

"And what if I can't have what I want?" I reply. "What then?"

"You're not looking hard enough," she says. "You can have anything you want, Les. You're smart. You're attractive. You're stable. You have so much going for you. So what if you don't make as much as you did before. At least you're not making bombs."

"It's not enough," I try to explain. "I can have anything *except* what I want, that's the truth, that's what you're saying."

"That's so not fair," she says, her voice getting gravely. "Do you think jumping out of an airplane is going to give you some new perspective on the world? Is that what you think? God help you is all I can say."

I am trembling now. I wonder why he chose the 18th floor—Old Man Lawson. He could never remember my name. He would call on holidays and say, "Good to hear from you, Larry. Damn, things are crazy here. Always are...isn't that right? Boston's a crazy place."

This Life is Perverse

There is a soft knocking on the door, as if a child or an invalid was signaling from some small space, from a particular weakness. Sherry is on the verge of crying in the kitchen. I can feel my own face become soft and uncontrollable. Have I brought this on again?

Can't Gus wait for us to disassemble each other into useless pieces? Isn't he taking her away from me. . . *forever*?

"Who's there?" I ask in what is left of my voice.

"Girl Scouts!" I hear a spark and a giggle.

"Yes?"

"It's cookie time!" A strong voice—someone's mother, I'm almost sure.

"Can you come back some—"

"Buy some damn cookies, Les," I hear Sherry demand from the kitchen. "You like kids so damn much, open the door."

There is a girl and a woman with sashes covered with embroidered badges down their fronts.

"Peanut butter good for you, Sher?" I ask.

There is a clanging of small appliances from the kitchen, but no reply.

I fill out the form and write them a check. The night air and this task ease me back into a calmer state, though my signature is almost unrecognizable. *On Planet X a handshake will be as good as a check, or credit card, or even cash.*

Sherry is hustling the last of her things into containers. The girl smiles at me and she is missing one of her front teeth. I see Gus get out of his truck and cross toward me with his hands in his khakis. I almost expect him to be smoking a cigarette and wearing a leather aviator jacket.

"Hi there," he says in a friendly tone to the Girl Scout posse as they leave. "Does Sherry need any help?" He says this to me then looks down at his shoes. We both see the bag with the videos off to the side of the front door. I see through the thin opaque plastic the steamy video I have picked out, with its picture of a woman in lingerie brandishing a knife.

I look up at Gus. "What do I look like to you?" I stammer. "Chopped liver? Sandwich meat? Is that what you think?"

My unprovoked attack is just the kind of territorial thing we both have been expecting, perhaps secretly hoping for. "Why don't you just get the hell out of Elm Terrace. . . nobody wants you here." I wheeze and then I give him my best get-back-to-your-Dodge gesture.

His jaw works down in a muscular cinch. He is wearing a scent that I imagine comes in a penis shaped bottle. It is too much to bear, having him at my door flexing his well developed sense of manners.

"Blast off sailor!" I signal again: get-out-to-your-Dodge, and am surprised at myself for using the word *sailor*.

"Sher?" He twists to get a peek around me.

I close the door but he has his moccasined foot in the way. I lean on the door crushing his foot. The Indian's didn't have wooden doors when they invented those shoes partner, and that's too bad for you. I give an extra effort. His fingers are in the jam also, and I decide I want to keep one for a trophy. I let off some and then cram down on his foot's meaty flesh.

"LESLIE!" I hear my wife shout behind me.

With this pause in my effort, Gus picks up the two videos and jams them in the space he has managed to keep open. Then Sherry has my shoulders.

"Jesus. . . Leslie. . . let go a the door," she says in her rawest Boston voice.

"Get back!" I shout.

"Gus! Gus, stop it now. . . I mean it. . . stop it!" There is a familiar tone in her voice, one that I recognize, one that makes little sense to me, but makes me feel awful. It is the tone she used when we were first in love, she would laugh at the funny things I tried to say for her, and while she was laughing, she would demand I stop.

I feel a great static remembering this and how the videos have arrived here for Gus to use against me. I hear him thunk the door with the butt of his palm. He pulls his foot free and the videos fall to the ground. "Piece a shit," he says.

This Life is Frightful

I watch from our bedroom window as they get in the Dodge. I am limited to seeing them at the mall or driving along the freeway, presumably, from now on. I think I see my wife put her hand on Gus's right thigh as they pull away, out of Elm Terrace forever.

There is no rest for me. I am in a rocket ship headed for Planet X and I cannot stop. I am making steering corrections, controlling my entry into the sweep of the green planet—flying from my moments here—edging closer and closer. I can feel the hot gas escaping from the nozzles and the slow burn of the entry making me more alive, taking the sheaths off my nerves.

Everything I have wanted in this life, on this blue planet, I have been able to have or has been within my reach, yet it has never been enough. *Planet X will not play this trick on its citizens.*

I know now I left the earth's atmosphere before my wife even started divorce proceedings. All my resistance to this has been the cloaking by my own internal government trying to hide my mission. Since the moment I knew that Old Man Lawson chose the 18th floor to take his swan dive, I have known that there was only one thing I could have that no one could take away. Planet X.

I spend the night wandering the golf course's lunar sand traps and celestial greens. There is only the chug, chug, of the rain birds periodically popping their beaks up to spit their venom. I see a skunk far off under a hedge, but he/she is too wise to come near.

I lie down in a bunker and sight the sky with nothing holding me to this earth, no structures, no billboards, no men, no women. My horizon is the black halo of grass fuzzing the edges of my capsule. I feel the sand is still warm from the day's sun. I drift back-first toward Planet X. So content I could sleep forever, yet I am awake, knowing I must control my descent, that there is more I must accomplish before I will be a complete citizen of this new world. I must not let my dreams invade my mission. I track a satellite passing rapidly through my view. Its unnatural speed makes me careful. I lie very still. I will not give away my position.

The morning ascends with clouds banked in squadrons protecting the eastern horizon. For a time I perceive an apocalyptic glow, but it vanishes and the day opens like a marching band coming into view. There is a high humming in my ear. A man has come to check that my sand trap is neatly raked. He has the oversized round head of Old Man Lawson and its face registers shock to find me contorting in an electric spasm.

"What can you tell me Old Man?" I ask.

He picks up the rake with precision, carefully measuring its lethal mass. "You do not belong here," he blurts.

"Then where?"

"The moon for all I know. Not here in this trap. Not on this golf course."

"Am I no longer a citizen then?"

"You are not wanted here. No one is allowed to sleep on this course. Get out before I call the security guards." He holds the rake as if it were a rifle and he's there to defend his own private property.

I notice the rake is from Tru-Value and this I know is a message. I must take this man for what he is: a holograph from Old Man Lawson. "Should I fly away then?" I ask it.

"Fly away and don't come back," It says. "Understand?" it then jerks the rake as if to bayonet me.

It Is Unbearable

The freeways are empty at this hour. Only the weary workers of the third shift are making their ways back to their cylinders or squares of furniture and flickering televisions. I run my Taurus up over the hundred mile per hour mark. I am plummeting headlong over expansion cracks, and the abutments between my lane and the opposing lanes whisper by my capsule like digital tenths of seconds on my watch.

The air strip is up and out to the North of Elm Terrace. As I zoom, the city fades into longer and lower buildings, then plots of undeveloped land marking the in between, then a prison, then open space. I see Kurt's truck moseying up ahead. I pass him in a sweeping maneuver that at this speed leaves me breathless. I hear his horn die quickly behind. I see the clouds have popped up into great heavenly bodies, wide waisted and laughing as they fill the sky.

The specific mass of these particular clouds seems just right for Planet X, with only a tinting needed, like one might apply to the water of a carnation to achieve a slight green color on St. Patrick's day. It is an excellent sign post.

I am breathing in long guffaws at the thought of being so near to something I am so sure I want. The air elevates in my chest as if I am super-charged by oxygen particles. A great cloud of dust announces my arrival in the parking lot.

We are paired off with individual instructors. I have the pick of the litter. She is Amandaesque in her size and shape yet she has a tom-boy slap-ya-up-side-the-head-if-you-don't-pay-attention quality. I have never been with anyone quite like her.

"You're gonna fly," she says. "Stretch out like a bird." She pushes me off the scaffold to the mat five feet below. "That's it, pretend you're flying."

Slap goes my chest on the pole-vaulting mat. Then I roll off, and she jumps spread eagle down on her chest. There is something lewd and painful about this. Her face is a mask of pleasure even so. Then Randy jumps, then his instructor, then Mark, then his instructor, then Kurt, his instructor following close behind.

Bonnie pulls me from the ladder as I try to climb for my next practice. She says with the straightest face she can muster: "Now it's gonna be unbearable for just that tiny minute when you leave the plane, then you're gonna be fine, you gonna fly and I'm going to be right there, near you."

She has a faded red and black jumpsuit that matches the one they have given me except mine is crisp and new. She seems to be made of a highly durable plastic-flesh and a wind-up motor. She calls herself Bonnie, but I have noticed the other instructors call her Bon-Bon. The plane jimmys its way up to 10,000 feet, both motors throbbing. Kurt's jump suit is too short in the legs and his white socks glow over his boots.

"Where'd you learn to drive?" he shouts across to me. He then gives me a hitch-hiking thumbs-up indicator and a shake of admiration with his helmet. "You should of seen this guy," his thumb says.

"Planet X," I say, but no one can hear or cares to. I see in all their eyes internal struggles with what they think might be the end of their own personal histories. Inside their heads they are taking snap shots of the shape of the land, or of each face, or of every sound—just in case. Snap-shots of snap-shots they have in drawers even at home, or in their heads—moments they are trying to hold for one last time. Just in case. You never know. It's a long way down.

On Planet X there is no need for replaying one's personal history as each moment is as full as or fuller than the last.

Bon-Bon is hard up against me, and I sense a tussle in her own packaging though she has done this many times, I assume. I put my arm around her, and she thinks I am being playful, and she wriggles happily underneath my patronage. She may be hoping for a bigger tip or even a go round under the covers. But this is a miscommunication of the oddest sort. I am trying to make her understand that there is nothing personal—nothing personal at all between us. She has shown me how to enter the atmosphere surrounding this planet, and on *Planet X I will only be grateful, though not in her debt.* It is imperative that she understand, and I think I have lucked out with Bon-Bon as my guide. She is stamped out by a manufacturer as far as I can tell.

Suddenly the door slams open and the wind Bonnie has warned me about starts to shutter and shake the very structure of the plane. The pilot gives an everything-is-hunky-dory nod, then a happy-landings thumbs-up. I can see that Kurt's white socks are shaking as we line up for flying. His face has taken on the same luminous glow.

I reach up and give his shoulder a manly squeeze and we clank helmets trying to look at each other. I see the billowy clouds off to the east as I take my first sighting out the door. Then, after a windy second of anxiety I am relieved to spy the green patchwork of Planet X's safety below me. As they wait behind me, I give Randy and Mark a Bon Voyage bump on their helmets. I measure the exact weight of my desire for Sherry and it is still heavy and completely intact, a burning sensation like a uranium birthmark. *On Planet X all desires are reciprocated in exact proportion.*

Kurt, followed by his instructor, both whistle out the door and are gone. Bon-Bon queues me into position, and I see them dropping down, spinning like spiders floating on broken threads, losing any human dimension they had.

Then I am shoved out. Suddenly I am in the ether, the air rushing up hits me—a sharp-edged feathering of quills going back-up and over me.

Bon-Bon flies down quickly and drops below me. The red light on her video camera beams atop her helmet. I can see her white, white teeth glow beneath her goggles. The sound my capsule makes in this position is excruciating.

I release the strap of my helmet and it rips off my head. Bon-Bon goes into immediate action when she sees my hair bent up in the rushing wind, she flies straight for me. She frantically tries for my parachute's cord. I drop my right arm and roll away from her hands. As she recovers, I unzip my jump suit and the arms balloon. I am then caught in an awkward stall. Bon-Bon follows me down.

I am plunging head first. I unlace my boots as the material of my jumpsuit strains against the straps and harness of my parachute. I am cold. Bon-Bon has made it to me as I kick off my second boot. She slams into me, and I block the cord from her grasp. Every move of my arms or legs sends me into wobbly spirals, and it is hard for Bon-Bon to react quickly enough or with much effect. I begin to unbuckle the chest strap and the parachute's pack begins to shutter.

I see her then, her eyes. We are both underwater. She points up as if she is going to swim away. She shows me her big dive watch and shrugs. No more oxygen, she seems to indicate. She has gone as far as humanly possible. I understand—Planet X is the next stop. I watch her as a jelly fish the size of a car ejects from her back. She is fixed to it by glimmering tentacles. It is a spectacular sight.

She is dragged up out of my frame. She has left me now to look and actually see the way things are. I understand everything now, better than ever, as if nothing came before: around my middle soft forgiving clouds, and below me—my destination—a safe green, green planet. ■

Lisa Beth Robinson

CLOSURE

In forgetting the details of you, they have forgotten me;
I have lost a cord of my spine, grown a black
lava heart, and buried the marrow of love,
a peregrine in the house of my body. Some days
it is all I have left, this diffusion of light, destruction
following sleepless nights. Water laps at my feet
while I wait for the ashes of your bones to coat my skin.
Your touch secrets beneath my calloused hands.
I feel nothing unless I grip tightly, and often
let go as soon as I know what things are; I don't want them.

Your name is quiet on my lips, unspoken in fear,
the sound of an animal, of a shadow, of death. Again
I realize no one wants to listen, only to be heard, music
in closets and empty halls. I burn inside, hoping
I will disappear, traces of blood and teeth and skin shavings.
I face the precipice, drag myself out of bed in the morning,
wash away the nightmares, the foul smells of rotting fruit,
vomiting up last night's supper, wishing organs would follow.

You are the flesh of my memory, a vertigo imprinting
on future relationships I will begin and misplace, scatter
somewhere ahead, dried petals scented with the royalty
of being alive, the luxury in which I smother each breath.
I hold to the hope of losing consciousness, waking to have you
beside me, waking to you on the back of my neck, heavy
kisses the weight of which bind me to this earth and this day.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

by William Tyree

Furthering his reputation as the hardest working man in literature, **Stephen Dixon's** 18th book of fiction, *Man on Stage: Playstories,* was recently published by Hijinx Press, and *Gould: A Novel in Two Novels* is scheduled for publication by Henry Holt in February of 1997. As if that weren't enough, "Fritz" is from his forthcoming *Here and Then So Far: The Gould Stories*, to be published sometime in 1998, and his story "Sleep" appears in the *Best American Stories of 1996*. Dixon teaches writing at Johns Hopkins University. . . . Former cropduster and bartender **James Harms** is the author of two books of poetry, *Modern Ocean* (Carnagie Mellon) and *The Joy Addict* (fothcoming from Carnagie Mellon), for which he recieved a PEN/Revson Fellowship. Mr. Harms is currently the Writing Program Director at West Virginia University. . . . **Holly Iglesias** was formerly the Nonfiction Editor of *International Quarterly*. Her poetry and translations have appeared in *Puerto del Sol, 100 Words, Potato Eyes,* and *Sinister Wisdom*. In previous lives she has been an actor, reporter, tax preparer, and was, for a short time, a member of the Dude Ranchers Association of America. . . . **Nancy Johnson's** book *Zoo & Cathedral,* published in 1996, won the White Pine Press Poetry Prize. She lives in Washington, D.C. . . . . **Sean "Shecky" Laughlin** was raised in Anaheim, California, in sight of Disneyland. Now a resident of Burlington, Vermont, he spends his time designing custom banjos and nursing an orphaned fish, Jocko Homo. . . . Poet **Molly McCloy's** work has appeared in *Slightly West* and *Revival: Spoken Word From Lollapalooza '94.* She teaches at the illustrious Devry Technical Institute in Phoenix, Arizona, and hopes to live there just long enough to perfect the art of having sex while driving. . . . **Lisa Beth Robinson** is a letterpress printer who makes artists' books. She recieved her M.F.A. in May of 1996, and is currently pursuing a Master's degree at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She is extremely intrigued by surrealism and non-computerized animation. She honestly believes we evolved from birds.

❖CREATIVE WRITING AT NAU❖

THE MASTER OF ARTS IN ENGLISH WITH AN EMPHASIS IN CREATIVE WRITING AT NORTHERN ARIZONA UNIVERSITY

◆ FICTION

Ann Cummins
Jane Armstrong
Allen Woodman

ANN CUMMINS' S stories have appeared in THE NEW YORKER, THE BEST OF THE WEST series, BEST AMERICAN SHORT STORIES, and elsewhere.
JANE ARMSTRONG'S stories have appeared in THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW, BELOIT FICTION JOURNAL, MISSISSIPPI REVIEW-WEB, APALACHEE QUARTERLY, and elsewhere. She is the winner of the 1994 Joan Johnson Award for Creative Nonfiction.
ALLEN WOODMAN'S latest works of fiction include ALL-YOU-CAN-EAT, ALABAMA, a comic novel , and short-short stories in STORY, MICROFICTIONS, FLASH FICTION, and SUDDEN FICTION (CONTINUED). His second collection of stories is forthcoming from Livingston Press (Univ. of West AL). He is also the author of the popular children's books THE COWS ARE GOING TO PARIS and THE BEAR WHO CAME TO STAY. Woodman is the Director of the Creative Writing Program.

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Flagstaff, a city of 51,000 in northern Arizona, is surrounded by pines and aspens and is dominated by the majestic San Francisco Peaks. It is close to the Grand Canyon National Park and many national monuments. Its elevation, over 7,000 feet, clean air, a four-season climate, train whistles at night, and numerous coffee shops make Flagstaff a great place for writers.

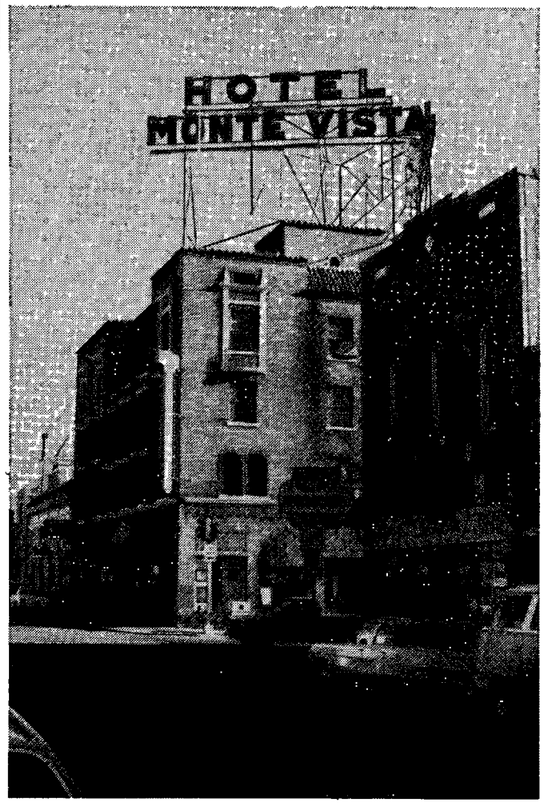

Photo by B.K. Clark.
One view of downtown Flagstaff.

◆ POETRY

Barbara Anderson
Jim Simmerman

BARBARA ANDERSON won the National Poetry Series Award for JUNK CITY. Her play in verse, 1-800-911, is forthcoming in 1996. She has received a Stegner Fellowship and an NEA Fellowship in Poetry.
JIM SIMMERMAN has published three books of poetry, HOME, ONCE OUT OF NATURE, and MOON GO AWAY, I DON'T LOVE YOU NO MORE. He is the co-editor of DOG MUSIC, an anthology of dog poems.

DATES:

We review applications between January 15th and May 1st for Fall enrollment.
We also offer some teaching assistantships and tuition waivers.
TA selection begins February 15th.
For application forms call 520-523-4911 or write:
Northern Arizona University
Department of English
Box 6032
Flagstaff, AZ 86011