

Thom Jones • Alan Lightman • Father Clement Procopio

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THIN AIR

THE RIGHT KIND OF
TROUBLE



1996 Short Story Contest Winner: Patricia Lawrence
Plus: Stories from Brian Evenson and Craig Rullman

\$4.95

THIN AIR

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TROUBLE

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IN THIS ISSUE

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

"Fifty?"

"Fifty dollars."

"Alright."

They walked back to camp.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Why do you scream so?" she asked.

He did not answer.

"Why do you yell?" she said.

"I don't know," he lied.

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

"It is true," he said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Witchcraft

Patricia Lawrence

1996 Prix de la Rarefier

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

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

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

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

My father hates fragrance.

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

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

So I tell her. "Chanel Number Five."

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

I say, "What?"

"Mariachis — a surprise! Something special."

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

"What?"

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

"Hmm?"

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

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

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

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

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

I touch my hair.

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

"No." She looks disappointed. "Well, when I was a kid I did." As she laughs she leans closer.

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

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

I say, "You're kidding."

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

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

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

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

"Look, food," I say.

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

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

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

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

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

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

hesitating before she joins my father.

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

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

I'm drunk but find myself embarrassed laying down.

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

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

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

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

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

"It's my stereo," he says.

Dolores laughs. "It's my tape."

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

He sighs and spreads out on the couch.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Of course he did," I say.

He thought her back the prettiest at the whole party.

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

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

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

Patchwork

JoLee Gibbons

I.

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

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

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

In March

JoLee Gibbons

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

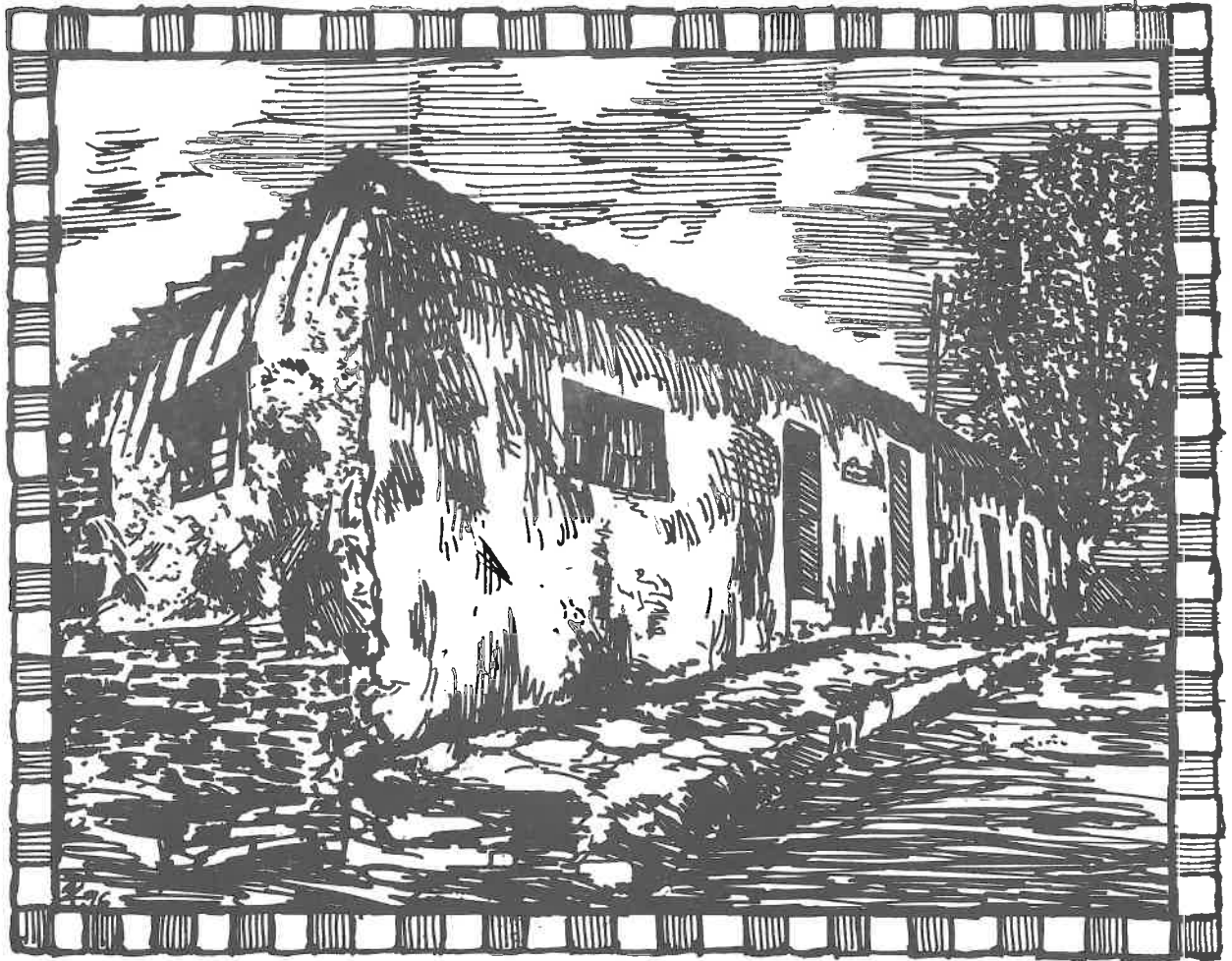
At four a.m., I heard the sound of a truck motor on the other side of the river.

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

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

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

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



Owning Nothing At All

David Axelrod

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

Every Last SOB & Then Some

Sean Brendan-Brown

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

an air already moist & narcotic.
Stupefied people stumbled from
the urinals throwing names over
their shoulders. "She hurt him,"
someone said. "With her steak
knives & Mach II champagne corks
there wasn't much left of him but tics
and gold buttons. And he *enjoyed*
hurting—he was a walking role for Lost
SOB—he raked in kudos."
My hand slid into grime and graffiti;
I heard weeping from the stall behind
then the two men flanking me
switched to Vikings and Giants.

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

Interview

Alan Lightman

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Wow.

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

Interview

Thom Jones

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

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

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

After the publication of "The Pugilist at Rest," Thom Jones' writing career blossomed like a time-elapsed rhododendron. In short order, he had a collection of stories out by the same title, The Pugilist at Rest (Little, Brown and Company),³ which was the 1993 runner-up for the National Book Award. His follow-up collection, Cold Snap (Little, Brown and Company), was published in 1995.

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

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

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

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

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

Why?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

How do you feel about the Iowa Workshop?

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

Did you study with those people as well?

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

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

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

This is too much. I quit.

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

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

And how does that happen?

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

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

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

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

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

Stalking James Joyce

Book Reviews by
Jimmy Tyrrell

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

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

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

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

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

UPSTART: Old fool, I learned it from you!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Compared to Trevor and Doyle, Danny

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

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

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

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

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

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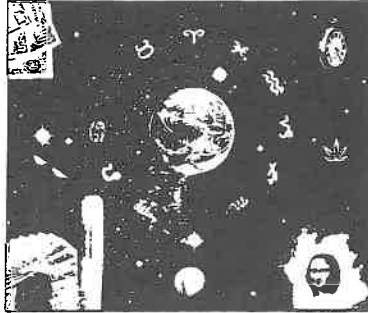
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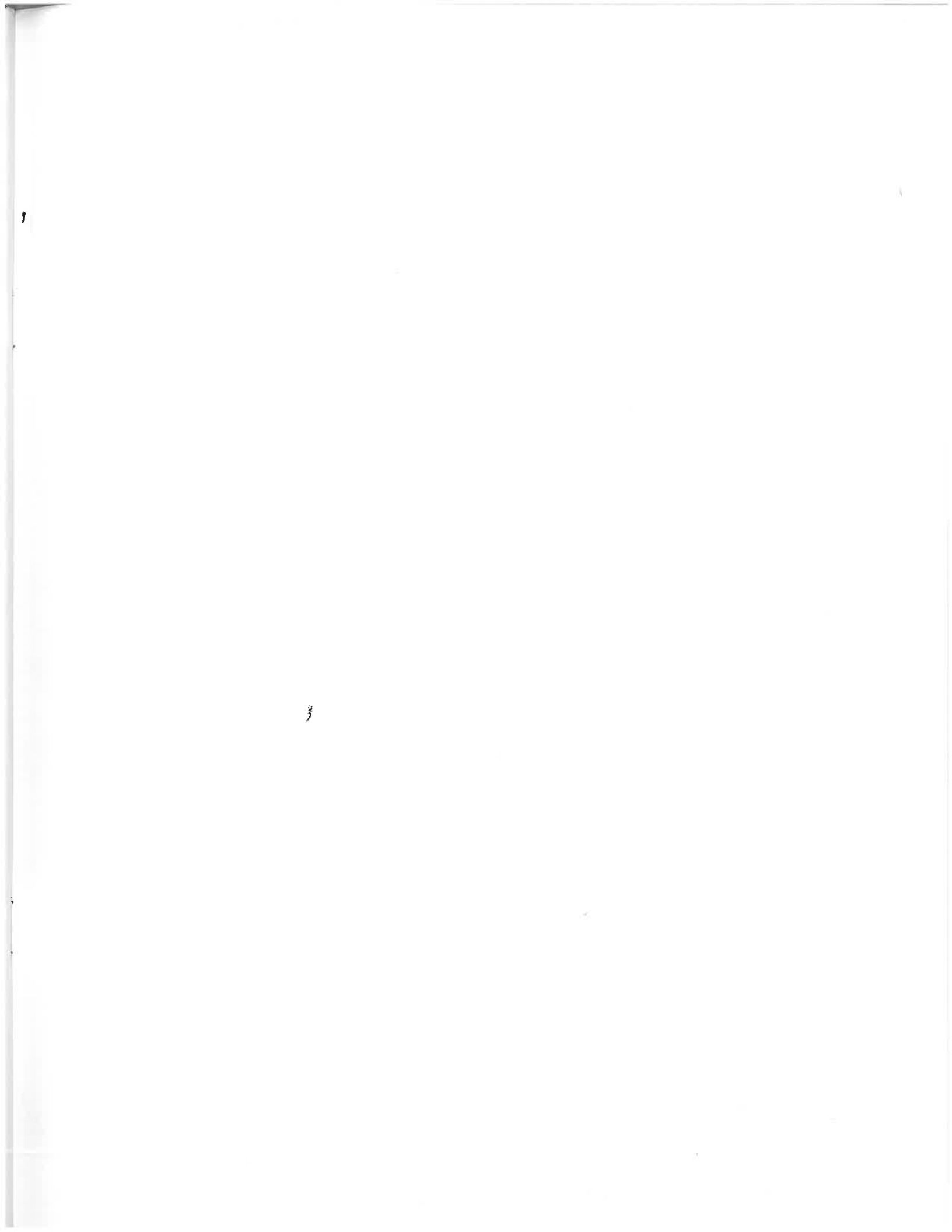
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