

The Blotter

September 2004

Either Two Vast and Trunkless Legs of Stone or a Pair of Ragged Claws

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In This Issue: Pretty Pictures by Harvey Mercadoocasio and Chip Hildreth. Pretty Words by Jim Penny, Garry Somers, and Ann Meilahn. Plus, Marty Smith's Paper Cuts and The Dream Journal.

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Wake*, by Harvey Mercadoocasio. See
pp. 4-5 for more from this artist.

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This magazine may contain typos or bad words

Items Worth Mentioning
from the desk of Johnny Pence**Starting with Steve Earle, Ending in Insanity**

In an interesting bit of synchronicity—or maybe it's just that I'm always thinking about P. B. Shelley's "Ozymandias," but either way—I happened to be thinking about the "vast and trunkless legs of stone" in connection with America just the other day, before I read Steve Earle's interview in *The Onion AV Club*. He also brought it up. Not to get political or anything, I'm just musing and wondering about little things like American cultural dominance in the future of world history. Will anybody remember Rulon Gardner in ten thousand years? G. W. Bush? Steve Earle?

Did you know Shelley probably wrote that poem in reply to Horace Smith's poem of the same name, the same year? Or that Ozymandias is the Greek name for Ramses II, and that the ruined statue in question really exists at the complex of Luxor and Karnak? Do you know what you had for dinner on Thursday last week? What was the song that Ugly Kid Joe had back in the early '90s?

So anyway, about Steve Earle, I bring up the interview because I just didn't want to put the motto for this month's issue across the top and have someone say, "Hey, Pence is ripping off Steve Earle by mentioning Shelley's 'Ozymandias' within 30 days of it appearing in *The Onion AV Club*." You know how much I worry about that sort of thing. But then, who'll care in ten thousand years?

If you know Steve, tell him I think he's the man.

And if you're a youngster and wonder what the hell I'm talking about, take thirty seconds to Google "Ozymandias." Then set aside six or seven minutes to pull up "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (that one is by another poet called T.S. Eliot), the other little joke/allusion in our motto this month. At that point, if you've read them and understand anything from them, and if you also have a reasonable grasp of arithmetic (for balancing checkbooks), and understand *why* you'll never really get your head around quantum mechanics, you might as well drop out of school.

In fact, if you have those things under your belt, you should erect a big statue, your mug "in a sneer of cold command," with a motto that says "Look upon my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!" I think I'm going to do that myself here in a couple weeks if I can get around to it.

I think I'll pose for the statue with my hair parted behind, eating a peach, and wearing the bottoms of my trousers rolled. At least I'll dare to eat the peach.

n.b.: The real inscription at the base of the statue for Ramses II says, "*King of Kings am I, Ozymandias. If anyone would know how great I am and where I lie, let him surpass one of my works.*" Meh. Nice vast and trunkless legs of stone, O king of kings.

U-S-A! U-S-A! Rulon Gardner for president!

Thanks Again

I know we already thanked Gripweed Manifold and Stormfront for playing a benefit show for us, and the Cave for hosting it, but I just got back from that show and it was great. So thanks. Again. And I think it helped. I know we sold some tickets and T-shirts, so we'll Count deMoney and see.

Drinking Water

by Jim Penny

We were picking up early-season sweet potatoes on the second blistering afternoon of a hotter than normal August in eastern North Carolina. 1968 it was. The deep furrows of the potato plow bared the cool sand that had not faced this brutal sun in well over a year; the brown, damp soil turned quickly to gray, dry dirt, pocked with sweet, swollen, orange tuberous roots, occasional quartz stones, and errant rusted bottle caps from hot seasons and thirsty diggers past.

We were an invading force, stripping the land of the luscious blue-green vines and occasional potato blossoms, leaving in our wake the naked, drying soil, ripped in rows long hidden, tangled with withered stringing vine and yellowing leaves.

The fruits of our labors were lines of wooden crates from Mexico filled with "Number One Sweet Potatoes" bound for the early market of North Raleigh.

There, the going price would be two, maybe three, times what we would get next month. The boxes were arranged in jagged lines along corridors in the dusty field, awaiting the men who would grunt, lift, and stack them on my daddy's old flat-bed truck with six in-line cylinders, dual rear tires, and a growling bull-gear. The truck was barely able to heave its load through the axle-deep sand of the newly pillaged field.

Six of us worked quietly in bare feet, short pants, thin or no shirts,

and, occasionally, hats. The rapid conversation of the cooler morning had left with the dew, and now, an hour past lunch, the discussion of the food that was and the weekend that would be had both withered in the unrelenting heat. We went about our labor, automatons bent on simple, if ragged, survival, approaching the ends of the rows, each in turn, those in front helping those to the rear, no one getting too far ahead or too far behind. I was rarely the first or the last, but usually toward the middle, sometimes helped, sometimes helping, always pulling the countless tubers from the ravaged soil.

The end of each row meant a break in the shade, a cup of cool water, a chance for some to sit and for some to lean, a brief rest in the welcomed breeze that stirred the shade of the wild cherry trees. Our water sat in an orange Igloo cooler on a concrete block under the tallest cherry tree, five gallons, a chunk of block ice, one cup, and six people, five black and one white: me.

I was second in line to drink, and for the first time in my fifteen years, I faced the certain and undeniable prospect of drinking behind the coloreds. Ahead, a young woman of about my age drained the cup, sighed in the lingering pleasure of cold water on a hot day, and handed the cup, a molded, dimpled smoke-green glass of undistinguished design, to me.

I reached for the wet cup, still cool from the chilled water, the intensity of the moment searing my brain,

The Blotter Dream Journal

real dreams, real weird

I woke up this morning thinking that it would be a really good idea to genetically engineer butterflies to eat the wood in planted pine trees in a certain pattern so that people didn't have to cut the trees down with chainsaws. My initial thought was that the butterflies should be brilliant iridescent indigo and green, but that seemed a bit showy for such a blue-collar genetically engineered butterfly. Instead, I decided on a matte black with yellow spots and some graphite gray. That was an easier gene sequence to steal directly from termites, anyhow. It was also of some concern that the lumberjack butterflies might eat into houses, but there was another gene sequence that might keep them away from houses altogether. And if not, we could always poison them.

—J.P., Hillsborough

I go out into the front yard of my mother's house in the dim early morning. Two of my uncle's brightly colored race cars are parked on the lawn (In reality he used to drive sporty convertible). My mother and a middle-aged female friend or relative come out of the house in night gowns and then race loudly down the road in the race cars. When they come back in a few minutes the friend says the exhaust pipe has cracked open. She parks the damaged car on the front porch. Now the car has shrunk to the size of a suitcase and is burning, so I am thinking about maybe digging it out into the yard to keep the house from catching on fire. Suddenly the car is beside me. I look up at an unlit street lamp high above me and the car. Then I look back down at the car, and up at the light again. The bulb is still unlit.

—H.G., Raleigh

I dreamt I saw a statue titled *The Goddess of Flight*. It showed a woman in an airline seat, throwing up into a bucket.

—anon., Durham

Please send excerpts from your dream journals to Jenny at mermaid@blotterrag.com. If nothing else, we love to read them. We won't publish your whole name.

burning my soul far beyond anything the glaring, scoffing sun, glinting from the lip of the cheap five-and-dime glass, could ever do to my shirtless back. White people didn't drink after coloreds, an unexplainable, heretofore immutable, and now apparently untenable law with me at the cusp of eternal damnation.

There I stood, cup in hand. There was no visible spit on the rim, but I had watched those brown lips, heard that soulful sigh, and even imagined a slight string of spittle spun from lip to glass as she lowered it, closed her eyes, and swallowed the water that cooled her.

I wonder if she saw, or felt, my

pause. Did the others? Did they feel the same for having to drink after me?

I held the glass in my right hand not wiping the rim, drew my water with the left, raised the cup to my face, gazed at the distorted reflection of my nose, lips, and tongue, and drank it all, ignoring the cold chill that burned my throat.

Was this burning the mutation I feared? Was it my soul in flight, fleeing its soiled and impure vessel? Was it the end of the life I had known, would I be shunned by friends and relations, chased by dogs, cast beyond purgatory now that I was one of the damned, who had drunk behind the coloreds?

My throat thawed while the chill spread through my heated innards, bringing a shiver to my spine, and I handed the cup to the smiling, older gentleman behind me.

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Jim Penny says, "I am an applied statistician for a small certification testing company near RTP. In my spare time, I wander around Raleigh in a kilt spending money I don't have in bars my mama warned me about. I don't pick up potatoes any more, but I had more spending money when I did."

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Paper Cuts Books You Might Not Have Read by Martin K. Smith

By-Line, Ernest Hemingway
edited by William White / Scribner's, 1967

Ernest Hemingway is a feature of the American literary landscape. This is a simple statement of fact. He's in the canon; he's anthologized and taught; everybody reads him at least once in the course of a standard education (usually his short story "The Killers".) There's not much point anymore in arguing whether he's a "good" or "bad" writer. People don't debate on whether, say, Pilot Mountain is good or bad—it's just there.

Hemingway made his early living as a newspaper correspondent. Even after his fiction found success, he could still be persuaded into occasional journalism, despite grumblings on how it distracted him from his "real" work. (Rare is the writer who'll turn down a paying gig.) The pieces in this best-of collection cover his whole career, from 1920 to 1956. Almost all are on subjects one associates with Hemingway: war, sport, bullfighting, hunting-and-fishing. All are in a style I link not just with him but with a whole Depression-realism, hard-boiled-detective "the Great War trashed our illusions and left us cynical" sensibility. It's a flat, deadpan voice uttering short sentences—a newsman's simple statements of fact—or, if he gets worked up over something, a train of short statements coupled by conjunctions. In the early pieces it has a kind of rat-tat-tat monotony like a typewriter or a telegraph key.

The bull ring or Plaza de Toros was a big, tawny brick amphitheatre standing at the end of a street in an open field. The yellow and red Spanish flag was floating over it. Carriages were driving up and people getting out of buses. There was a great crowd of beggars around the entrance. Men were selling water out of big terra cotta water bottles. Kids sold fans, canes, roasted salted almonds in paper spills, fruit and slabs of ice cream. The crowd was gay and cheerful but all intent on pushing toward the entrance. Mounted civil guards with patent leather cocked hats and carbines slung over their backs sat their horses like statues, and the crowd flowed through." (1923)

He could get close to lyrical though, when writing on something he enjoyed.

Then the heavy rod arcing cut toward the fish, and the reel in a hand-saw zinging scream, the marlin leaps clear and long, silver in the sun long, round as a hog's head and banded with lavender stripes and, when he goes into the water, it throws a column of spray like a shell lighting.... Then he comes out again, and the spray roars, and again, then the line

feels slack and out he bursts headed across and in, then jumps wildly twice more seeming to hang high and stiff in the air before falling to throw the column of water and you can see the hook in his jaw. (1936)

(This piece also mentions the true story of an old Cuban who hooked a humongous marlin, which dragged him out onto the open ocean. He spent two days drifting and fighting off sharks trying to eat his catch—i.e. the gist of Hemingway's novel *The Old Man and the Sea*.)

His style can make dialogue sound a bit stilted. (This segment requires some backstory: in 1956, in Africa, he and his wife Mary survived two small-plane crashes in the space

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of a week. Garbled reports reaching the outside world said they'd been killed, so on returning to civilization they got to read their own obituaries.)

Miss Mary woke up and said "Haven't they brought the tea? And what are you reading?"

"Darling," I said, "I am observing the early-morning traffic of Nairobi and reading a number of obituaries that came last night."

"Darling," Miss Mary said, "I really wish you would not read so many of those obituaries. I think it is morbid probably. Anyway we are not dead and so it is rather an affectation. We never read other people's obituaries and I do not really see why we should read our own. Besides it could be bad for you."

"I quite agree with you," I said. "But it is becoming a vice."

"Darling," Miss Mary said, "don't you think you have enough vices already?"

The war reportage holds some historical interest for its wide range. He covered Greece vs. Turkey in 1922, the Spanish Civil War from 1937 to '39, and China under Japanese invasion. He even landed with Allied forces on D-Day, right up there in the line of fire. (I was also interested to note that in the 1930's he was an isolationist. He saw that a second World War was coming, but felt America should steer clear of it if possible.)

I confess to skimming through the sports stuff, not being a sports kind of guy. And to be honest, none of the pieces stirred me as much as one might expect from a Literary Landmark. That's one problem with being a Literary Landmark: your reputation precedes you. His rep was a toughie: that of a butch, strong-silent-type, the kind of man's man

whom nobody would expect to even think about creative writing, but who up and wrote stuff. I see it as a kind of large shadowy dark thing named The Hemingway Mystique, that followed him around like a haint, and cast a distorting veil between the outside world and the real person.

I still respect the guy, though (which is why I have refrained from referring to him as "Papa" or "Hem"). He saw combat in several wars; he survived two small-plane crashes, three divorces and a Big Literary Reputation. His style works best in his fiction, where he describes intense and gut-wrenching events in that flat factual voice, leaving the readers to color in the emotions themselves. So if you haven't read him before, go to the novels first—then, if you like his fiction enough, you can come back to these dis-patches.

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The Armadillo
By Garry Somers

"**Y**ou're quite certain that we have enough petroleum, Antic?" Mrs. Arnette said to the man driving the blue Eldorado. He glanced over at her, using the rear view mirror, but did not respond. This did not faze her in the slightest—Mrs. Arnette rarely paid attention to those people to whom she was talking. Her love was the art of the monologue. Soliloquy.

The man behind the wheel,

who had been Mrs. Arnette's occasional driver for many, many years, had developed the ability to tune the woman out, or rather tune out his own habit of responding to the things that she said. He also suppressed a smile for her word selection. She meant "petrol," of course, and affected this mistaken usage for his sake because she thought it was Continental.

The smile he suppressed was balanced by the slight annoyance

he had for the woman, who for reasons surpassing his understanding called him Antic, a word for which he could not find the associative etymology, for his name was Sanjiv. He now assumed that she mispronounced his name, no, misspoke, out of some unsubtle need to irritate.

"Yes, ma'am," was all he said.

The Cadillac tore down the highway, the sage and cactus desert peeling by to the monotonous thump-thump-thump of old concrete expansion joints under the thin skin of asphalt. Mrs. Arnette didn't notice. She was not concerned with the journey, with the things-between-things. She had a set of rules for those things that required her valuable attention, a list one might say and put the window was not on that list. She supposed that this might be attributed to her childhood, when her father would take the family on interminable vacations. He saw things that the rest of the family couldn't, but this didn't stop him from pointing them out. He would entreat his wife and children to "Lookee, Lookee, ya'll, out the starboard window!" and when everyone looked, they were unable to determine what it was he wanted them to notice. It could be a lone scrub pine as often as a longhorn with a six-foot span.

"Petroleum is the true root of all evil," Mrs. Arnette said to Sanjiv. He didn't even twitch, she noted. "As desert people, we both know this." Nothing. So it was going to be one of those days, she thought. A hard nut to crack.

It was Mrs. Arnette's Eldorado.

Actually, her former husband's, his pride and joy, Sanjiv understood. A fairly substantial piece of Detroit iron in the two-door coupe style. Terrible fuel economy, but to speak of such things in Texas was tantamount to committing a grave sin, like child molesting. Sanjiv chuckled under his breath, just one hmm-hmm, quietly enough that the lady didn't hear.

Sanjiv, whose full name was Sanjiv Singh Singh, didn't know why Mr. Arnette had left his wife, although he had his suspicions. Sanjiv's own estranged wife was somewhere in the east; that is, North or South Carolina. But he loved it here. Sanjiv found it especially Texan to be driving very fast on a long straight two-lane road in a powerful car. If someone coming up behind him wanted to go even faster, or if he was that faster car closing on a slower vehicle, there were occasional extra wide shoulders in the road called Courtesy Lanes for the slower automobiles to move out of the way. Which they always did. Sanjiv found this unlikely behavior in the Wilder West fascinating. His wife, however, had hated living in Texas, and despite everything he understood about American women, he had been unable to convince her to stay with him. A mistake, of course, for their marriage to have ever happened—everyone had told him. Marrying for love, Sanjiv knew, had been the real error. And to marry outside one's people, also a mistake. She had fallen in love with his surface—his dark skin, his beard, his turban. Of such things failures are made. Even when she

had been so enthusiastic in her study of Sikh, the precepts of The Gentle and Clear Thinking Swami, he had known in his heart that their time was short. Ah, well, he thought for the millionth time.

"Mrs. Arnette, I am not from the desert, you know," he replied quietly. "Mine are mountain people." But she didn't even look at him, continuing her own one-sided conversation.

"And this is the great American desert, and here we are," the woman said. "I believe, however, that God never intended for man to live here. Humans are water creatures. We require moisture; we crave it. Look at all of our artwork. The clouds in the sky are representations of the beauty of water." Mrs. Arnette's hands fluttered in front of her face like strange butterflies. Sanjiv's gaze rested on the older woman's eyes, which were a handsome brown, and large in a way that made her seem demure. Her hair was a short and curly gray, but not the gray of old age. Instead her coif was a shade carefully considered by a team of experts in the knowledge of what attracted, what soothed, what seemed both youthful and experienced. If she would just keep some of her thoughts unspoken, Sanjiv thought, she would be a fine catch, as the ever-practical American idiom stated.

"And still we come to the desert to build our cities. Nineveh, Damascus," Mrs. Arnette paused. "Samarkand. And Lubbock." She peeked for an instant at the rear view mirror. There it was, the flicker of his eyes at her for that last. Got him, she thought.

Harvey Mercadoocasio

In feudal Japan, thousands of years ago, in time a of despair and war, there where legends of the coming of an *illustrated monkey*, who, with his enchanted brush, would paint images so beautiful that those who where fighting would gaze upon them and forget all they where fighting over, vanquishing the woes of the people, bringing peace and harmony to the land...

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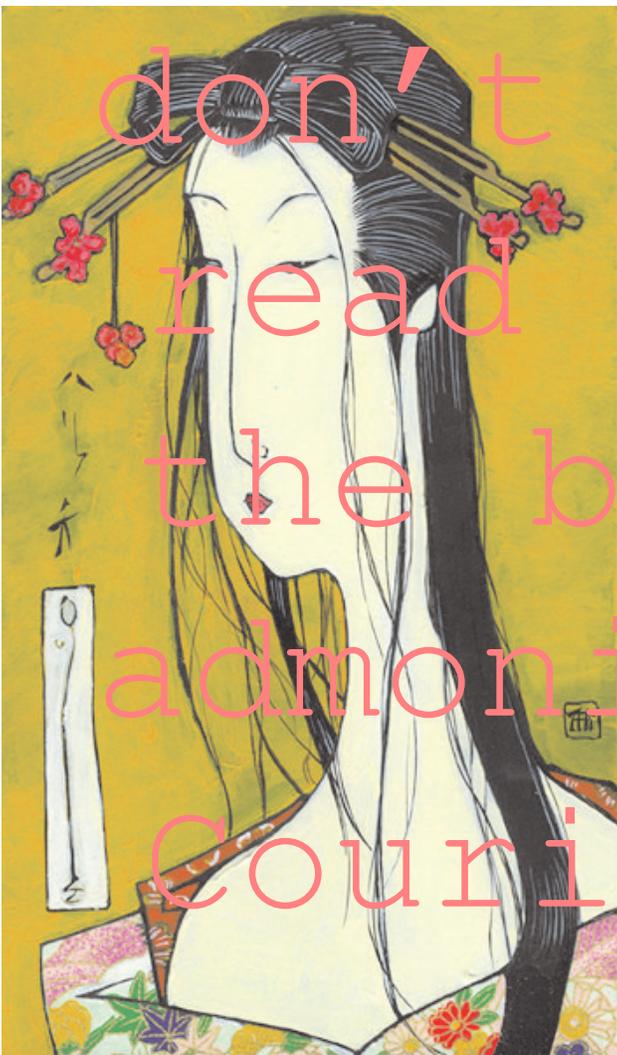
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“All of the world’s great think-
ing began in the desert. Egypt. The
Jews of Yore. Christianity. Islam.”
Mrs. Arnette frowned. “Why do
you suppose that is, Antic?” That
one was just for fun.

“My name is Sanjiv, ma’am,”
Sanjiv said, caught off guard. He
bit his tongue. Difficult woman.
Didn’t she know about Buddhism,
or...

“What about the...”

“Hin-doo? Right. I suppose
there are exceptions to every rule,”
she said. “But that’s beside the
point. Let’s stick with those
Muslims. Can you please explain to
me your idea of Heaven? What can
you be thinking when you believe
that paradise is a land with ninety-
five beautiful young virgins at your
beck and call? What normal adult
man wants a plethora of simpering
teenagers wandering around, with-
out the slightest bit of sexual
experience?” Mrs. Arnette said,
leaning back in her seat, clearly on
a roll. “It’s like you men have no
imagination. Are these real women,
or just ethereal figments of the
dearly departed? Who are these vir-
gins? What happens after you have
sex with them in the air-condi-

tioned tents of Paradise? Do they
get to leave? Or is their deflower-
ment erased overnight? Is spending
eternity in Paradise with some dys-
functional dead man punishment?
Isn’t spending life with them pun-
ishment enough?” Stopping to take
a breath, she rolled her eyes in the
direction of the rear-view mirror
for emphasis.

This was too much, thought
Sanjiv. He felt his hands squeeze
the steering wheel.

“Mrs. Arnette, I am not
Muslim,” said the man. “I am Sikh.
We have talked about this before.”
It was too late. She had gotten his
goat—another fine American
idiom.

“Of course. My mistake,” the
woman said.

Sanjiv flipped the switch on the
dashboard to illuminate the big
Cadillac’s headlights. Daylight was
collapsing with the rapidity one
found only in the desert. There was
a scuttering in the road out in front
of the reach of his headlight’s
beam. He shifted his foot over to
the brake pedal and pressed down,
but the heavy vehicle rolled all of
its weight up into its shoulders and
pushed back against the brake.



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Armadillo, he thought, attempting to steer the Eldorado safely over the top of the little armor-plated creature. But the animal wasn't cooperating and ducked-and-weaved as if it were trying to commit suicide under his car wheels. He swerved.

Ba-dump!

"We're going too fast, Antic," Mrs. Arnette said.

"Mrs. Arnette, we struck an animal," Sanjiv replied.

"Stop the car," she said. "Please." Off guard again, Sanjiv brought the boat coasting to a stop.

"What was it?" Mrs. Arnette asked.

"An armadillo, ma'am," Sanjiv said. He began to explain, but Mrs. Arnette cut him off.

"Go back and see if it is OK."

"Ma'am, we ran it over," Sanjiv said. "Surely, if it is not dead it soon will be." He felt his shoulders rise in a slow shrug.

"Go look, please, Antic," Mrs. Arnette, her tone half order and half plaintive. Disarmed, the driver put the car in Park and flipped on the hazard lights. Opening the door to ping-ping-ping, he stepped out and marched back up the gritty

side of the road. Flashlight, he chastised himself, but didn't go back to the Eldorado to retrieve it. The twilight would have to be enough for him to see what he must.

The animal lay broken on its side, its two uppermost legs pawing at the night air. Strange looking thing, Sanjiv thought. As if made by an alien god, rather than an earthly one. He imagined that it was evidence of the validity—of other ways of thinking. The armadillo was indeed going to die. If not by the force of the collision with the Cadillac, then certainly from the other creatures of the night, those that hungered and hunted.

He felt rather than heard Mrs. Arnette come up behind him. He started, for she never got out of the car between beginning and end points of any of their journeys. Not to use the facilities, nor to get a soft drink or something sweet. Entering or exiting the rear seat of a coupe involved wrestling the front seat belt shoulder strap out of the way and some amount of crawling, and while Sanjiv had yet to give Mrs. Arnette a boost, it was a distinct

future possibility. So the back seat was her throne. Now, standing, he was a head taller than she was. He tilted towards her for a moment.

"Bring it back to the car, Antic, and put it in the trunk," Mrs. Arnette requested.

"Oh, ma'am. This is a bad idea, I think," he said. He touched the side of his turban for a second, without knowing why.

"We cannot leave the creature here on the road. It isn't right," she said. "You will pick it up and place it in our trunk and we will bring it with us."

"Mrs. Arnette. It will not live. It has been crushed under our wheel," Sanjiv protested softly.

"Antic, I know the animal is going to die. I just don't want it to die here. It was our fault," she said, her voice steady and unnerving. Sanjiv inhaled and tried a different tack.

"Mrs. Arnette. A wounded animal is an unclean animal. Ritually unclean. It is against my—faith—to pick it up," he said. He felt a momentum growing. "Among my people, the butchering of animals is handled by special people who do that sort of thing." Well, he thought, it is only partly a lie.

"You have to put it in the trunk of the automobile," she repeated.

"I cannot. I would, but I cannot," he lied again. He heard the woman sigh, and knew that the moment had passed.

Mrs. Arnette stood there, looking down at the dying animal in the dying light.

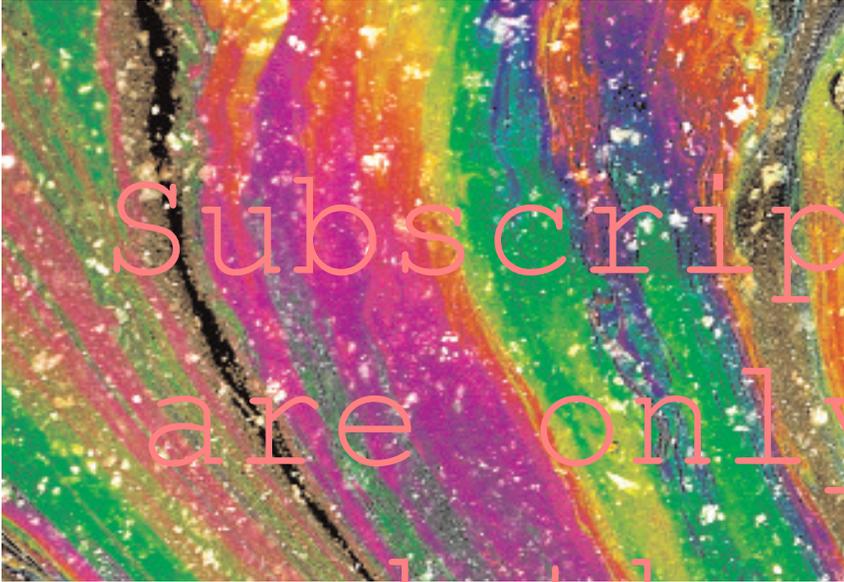
"You Arabs, you have so many rules for things that make life nearly impossible," she said. Sanjiv





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"Most of these images were taken in light rain or immediately following a storm when the sun came right out. Though one has survived for months in the same spot, most lasted only a minute or two... especially in traffic. None of them were set up, I shot 'em where I found 'em.

"I have increased the contrast in all of these images to emphasize the sharp transitions in color. In some images I've replaced the specular white with black which brings out the subtlety and variety in color. They all have been sharpened a bit; I sharpen all digital images before printing. Other than that, no enhancement or effect or color has been added, these are pretty much the colors and forms I saw when I shot them.

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almost rose to the bait—lovely idiom—but he bit the inside of his cheek hard, wincing from the pain. “I’ve had this idea for some time now. How to stop the troubles with all of you in the Middle East. We take all of those Palestinian and get them all together. Tell them all it’s a one-time offer.”

Sanjiv sighed quietly. He’d heard this one before. Mrs. Arnette elaborated.

“Move them all, local stock and barrel, to West Texas. We clear all of the folks in West Texas out first, of course. Tell the Palestinians they get all of that desert, all the roads and phone-lines and houses free-and-clear as part of the deal. They get the whole city of Lubbock for their very own. In a couple of years they’re allowed to decide if they want to join the United States as a commonwealth or protectorate or what-have-you. In the mean time, there’s no need for them to have an army they can build their own mosques as they please, and there’s no more fighting with the Israelites. Everyone wins.” Sanjiv could hear the hands-on-your-hips satisfaction in Mrs. Arnette’s voice.

“What’s so great about Lubbock?” he asked.

“It’s the birthplace of Buddy Holly,” Mrs. Arnette said.

“What happens to all of the people in West Texas?” Sanjiv asked.

“Well, I thought that it was probably just-desserts to send them all to Palestine—that would teach everyone there a lesson or two. But that just makes a whole new soup sandwich, I suspect. So we’d have to absorb them here in the hill country. Like refugees.” Still, that satisfied voice.

The night had settled around them. Along with the idling hum of the Eldorado in the distance, the scrit of cicadas and chirrup of crickets joined in philharmonic song.

“Good idea, ma’am,” Sanjiv said in a near whisper.

At that moment, the armadillo chose to die. His armored claw-feet scabbled in the roadside dust for a second and then stopped. Mrs. Arnette and Sanjiv looked down, but there was almost nothing to see on the ground under the darkness of a moonless Texas sky.

“Damn,” she said under her breath.

“We should go, ma’am,” Sanjiv said, and without further coaxing the two walked back to the car. The man held the door, and Mrs. Arnette swiftly settled herself under the dome light that the fewest number of moths and such might enter the Cadillac. Sanjiv took his place behind the wheel. He pulled onto the empty road and accelerated to night-cruising speed. The car was quiet except for the hum of well-tuned combustion.

Mrs. Arnette could not let such a moment lie fallow.

“Antic, what do your people permit heaven to be for your women?” she asked. “Ninety-Five pairs of Manolo Blaniks!” In the dark of the back seat, Sanjiv could not see Mrs. Arnette’s hint of a sly smile.

Gary Sorens is feakin’ always in this magazine, but usually with poems. In fact, this is the first one he didn’t throw out. He wants to give some credit to a clever neice who helped him edit this piece while they were on family vacation at Fdisto.

Ann Meilahn (next page) is a theatre scenic designer who works with Autistic kids and waitresses on the side to pay those lousy bills. Her emblem in life is the phoenix. Go figure.

The Bird

by Ann Meilahn

As the bird flew over her head, she watched its wings bleeding a fire of ruby-orange blood that glistened in the haste of travel. Although high in the stars, she could see into its eyes and feel its touch of truth and blessing.

Suddenly, a magnificent display of swoops and shuffles provided her with a settled slice of rice paper in her hand. She looked down and saw it, not understanding how she could have received something, without feeling a twinge in the breathless scent of night. The creature was gone, and the darkness was evermore silent and thick with cowardice than before this moment.

The plastic lawn chair in which she sat was the only light in the seeming distance, its white gloss radiating a gloom of heaven and a foreboding of discovery. Even as she looked at the letters, she could not read them in her own eyes. She pretended to be that bird, looming, stalking the words from above.

The peace she felt as a being with wings was foreign to anything she'd hailed before in life, and the taste of tranquility was so delicious as to promote a desire never to return to her body again. The air above was cool, precious next to her skin, her pores like glitter on the brunt of steel. Her feet felt the deliciousness of the dewed grass, the after-rain mud crawling sweetly between her toes. Yet in her mind's eye, it was not earth, but air that cuddled her pinkies.

This bird she became softly fell over the breast of the woman she was. It settled its glance on the tip of the page, awaiting her fortitude with extraordinary summons. The breeze rustled the old-fashioned cotton nightgown of her youth. It still fit her demure frame, and those ruffles flitted close to her skin. The life between her legs came awake in anticipation. She didn't feel she could ever possibly be ready to read the fortune entombed in this message, even as she knew the love and heart of her would be forever changed from the soul of its text.

She sat, listening to the silence of the night, unable to tear lovely green amber eyes off the edge between word and air. She was too trepid to look at the flatness of the sheet or fear the corner of her soul window may reveal something she was not ready to see. Or feel. Or fear. She did not know how to distinguish these emotions from each other and she felt the strong woman in her rise up from her core in response.

The dominance of this side of her boasted the strength of agility in circumstance and the disposition to success. In diminished certitudes, her rescuer was the warrior who could ward off evils from which she could not protect herself. Tonight her soldier arrived, as if on the wings of a bird, to be her safety. She came to force the openness of understanding into the light.

This wild woman inside her invoked all the strength she'd ever grown or known. In preparation she felt the cavity of her earthy carcass filling with the life of pure energy and goodness and hope. She felt it arrive at the same time as her eye slid slightly down and processed that first word, the only word, her essence needed, for freedom:

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