Montana Quarterly

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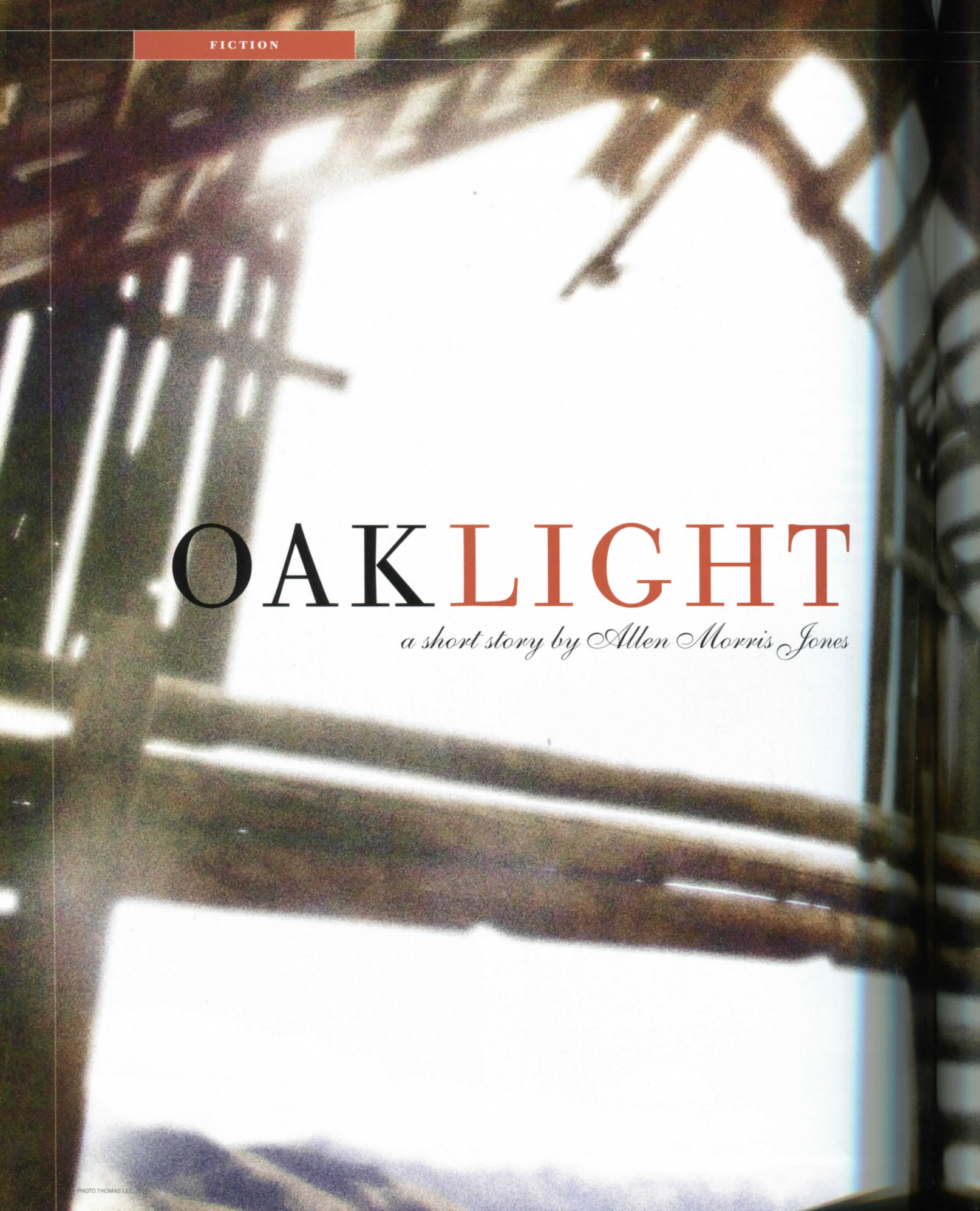
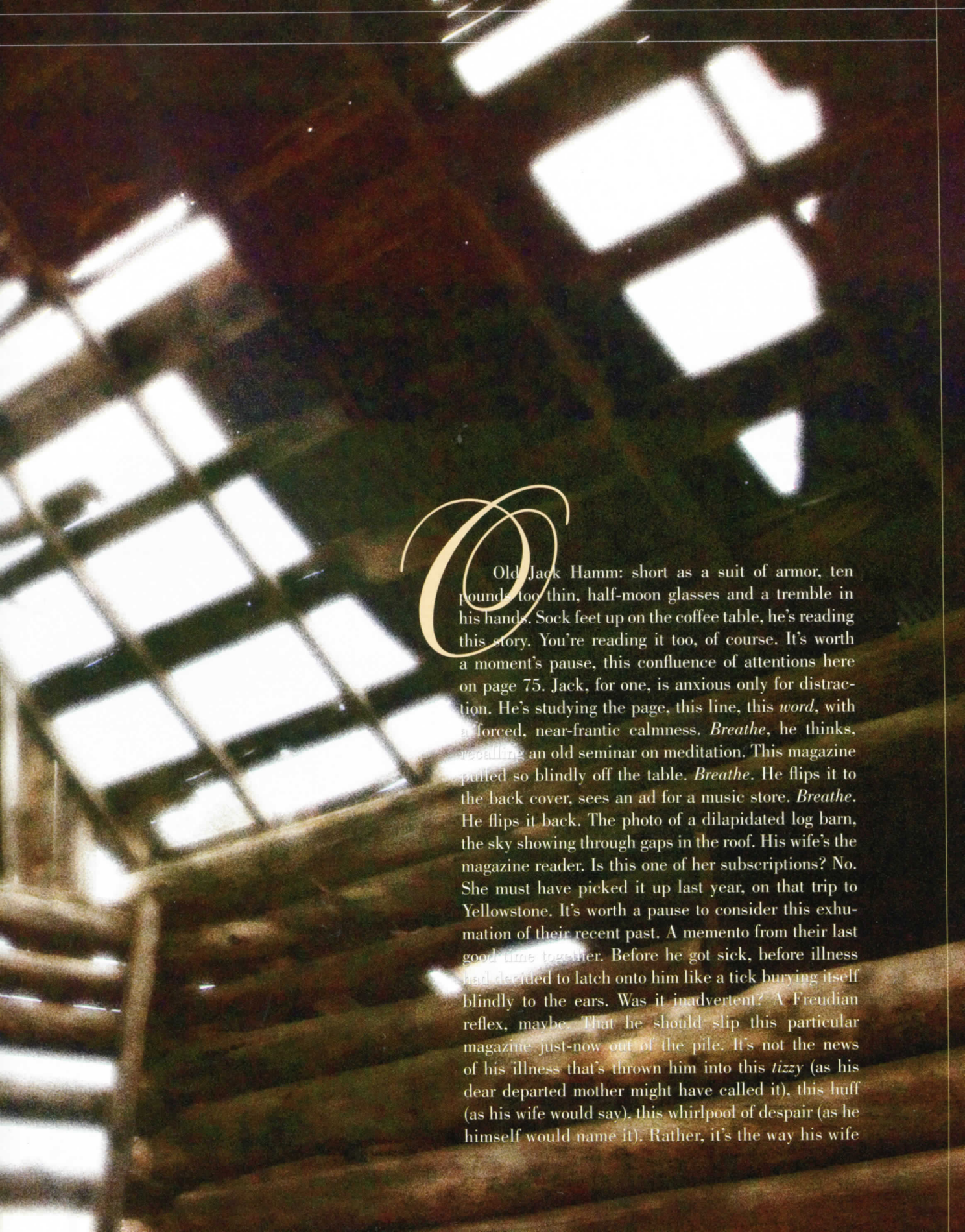


OAKLIGHT

a short story by Allen Morris Jones

PHOTO THOMAS LEE



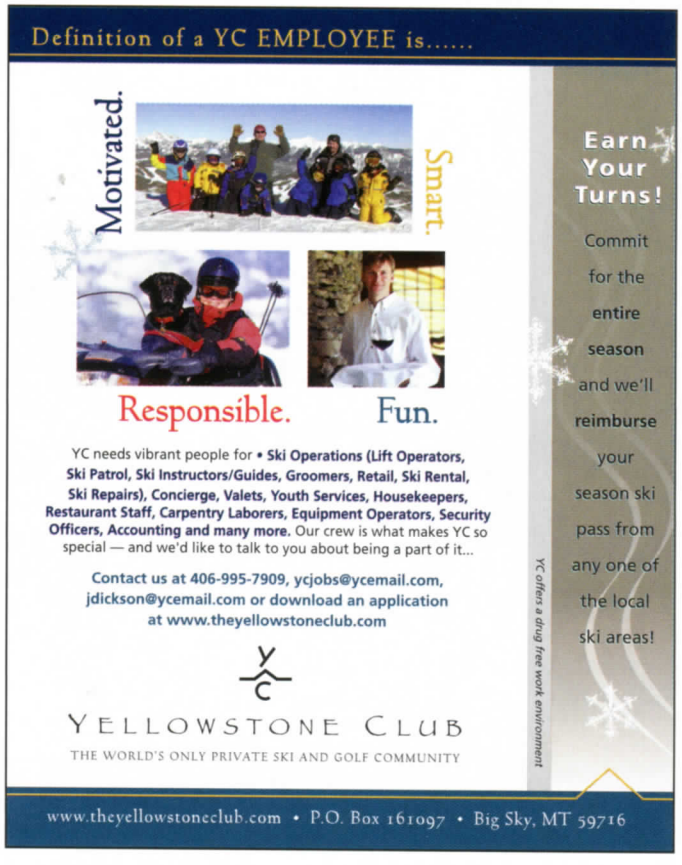
Old Jack Hamm: short as a suit of armor, ten pounds too thin, half-moon glasses and a tremble in his hands. Sock feet up on the coffee table, he's reading this story. You're reading it too, of course. It's worth a moment's pause, this confluence of attentions here on page 75. Jack, for one, is anxious only for distraction. He's studying the page, this line, this *word*, with a forced, near-frantic calmness. *Breathe*, he thinks, recalling an old seminar on meditation. This magazine pulled so blindly off the table. *Breathe*. He flips it to the back cover, sees an ad for a music store. *Breathe*. He flips it back. The photo of a dilapidated log barn, the sky showing through gaps in the roof. His wife's the magazine reader. Is this one of her subscriptions? No. She must have picked it up last year, on that trip to Yellowstone. It's worth a pause to consider this exhumation of their recent past. A memento from their last good time together. Before he got sick, before illness had decided to latch onto him like a tick burying itself blindly to the ears. Was it inadvertent? A Freudian reflex, maybe. That he should slip this particular magazine just-now out of the pile. It's not the news of his illness that's thrown him into this *tizzy* (as his dear departed mother might have called it), this huff (as his wife would say), this whirlpool of despair (as he himself would name it). Rather, it's the way his wife

had received it.

He's turned the page, trying to lose himself in the story. Frankly, he's having a hard time of it. He skips briefly to the end (as you are certainly about to do, as I just did myself) to read that line about cameras pointed toward the void. Such an awkward metaphor, camera and void. Morbid. All in all, given his bad news, probably not something he should be reading. But, it is quite a coincidence, a character named Jack Hamm. Disconcerting. Who's dreaming whom, and all that. The dancer from the dance, etc. He's read stories like this before. Back in college, those required literature courses, the twin Bs, Barth and Barthelme. Roland for good measure. In the storage shed, there's still a water-inflated anthology, heavy as a doorstop. But this story isn't an assignment. Who'd ever choose to read such a thing, especially now? Having just been told that his first surgery was unsuccessful, that his entire prostate will soon have to go, along with (most likely) a good chunk of his colon, this story serves only to focus his previously diluted anger. Who comes up with this crap? He almost throws the magazine across the room. But doesn't, quite.

The coincidences are quickening. Prostate? Colon? Jack Hamm is reading this story, by late morning light (late morning!) and trying not to dwell on the fact that his first surgery (with an entirely acceptable success rate of nearly 80 percent) will soon be followed by a second, statistically bleaker operation. With an abrupt regret, the doctor had said, "20 percent over two years." How do these things make money, these magazines? So few readers out there anymore. Internet this, Playstation that. He himself prefers nonfiction. *Undaunted Courage*, that sort of thing. *Ghost Soldiers*. History that may or may not complement his teaching of high school biology. A pleasant-enough career that he's pursued for 34 odd years. A largely neutral, inoffensive job that's bought him a house and a series of Subarus. It's taken him from there to here. It's been a soul-shriveling waste of time; a loathsome, loose-change squandering of his precious days. Thirty-four years of not having made a difference, of lecturing from the same yellowed pad, of watching an endless crop of new children make all the same mistakes, his personal failures repeating themselves like a virus.

When they'd bought this property 10 years ago (just under the wire, real estate values going through the roof shortly thereafter), they had spent the remainder of their nest egg on the house, curtains and carpets. "Guess we'll just leave the barn empty." Since then, however, he's slowly been turning it into a workshop. Reinforcing the exterior bearing walls with log-stacked buttresses, breaking out the

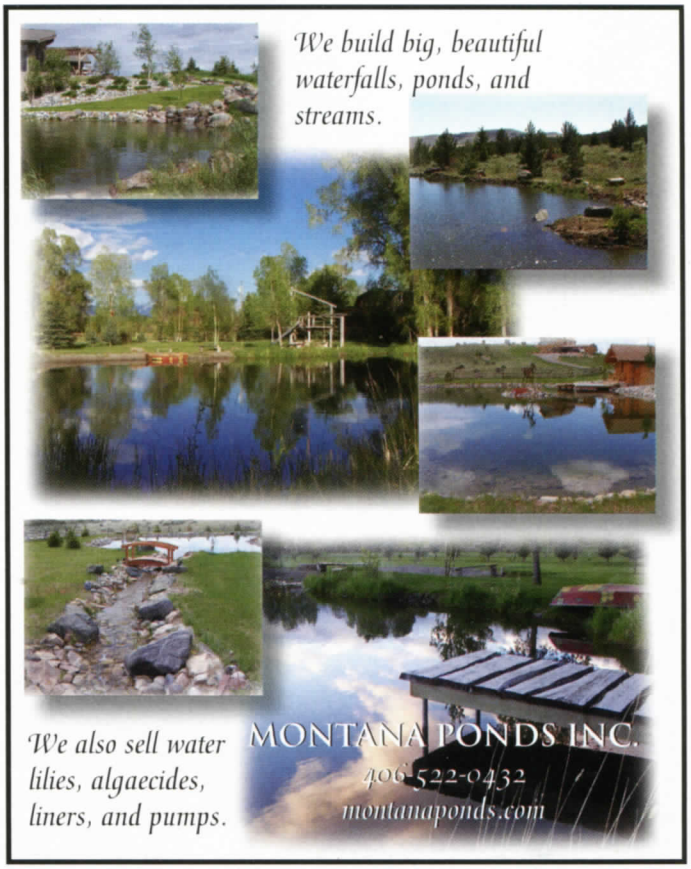


Thirty-four years of not having made a difference, of lecturing from the same yellowed pad, of watching an endless crop of new children make all the same mistakes, his personal failures repeating themselves like a virus.

stalls to replace them with work benches, drills and sanders, a row of cabinets and finishing nails sorted across in baby food jars. His best weekends have been spent building bookshelves, music boxes, bird houses. Anything without dovetails. He likes walnut best, appreciates cherry for its veneer, tolerates oak for its ubiquity. You can pick up a decent oak board at Home Depot. For the most part, he doesn't care to build with pine. Doesn't like the feel of it in his hands. The way the grains rough up against each other.

His story progresses. The page splits, disrupted by fractional ads. A jewelry store, something called Montana Ponds. *Breathe.* He lets the magazine drop flat. Through the window, he studies his barn. Good ol barn. In such a permanent state of collapse. Give it credit, though. It looks pretty in the evening light. Pretty, hell. It's just lovely. That's the word. All those dark streaks of rain on the fluted tin roof. How could this all be a coincidence? This story. His workshop. As small consolation, the photo of the barn illustrating this story isn't his barn. He even loves the smell of it. Sawdust and old manure, ancient hay. If happiness has an odor, one odor in the world, it's the inside of that barn. Used to be, yew or eucalyptus, pass him a board he was lost. But now, just from the smell of the sawdust in his nostrils, he can tell poplar from fir, knows the spice of mahogany from the mold-tang of maple. Every board has its own odor, its own interior glow. A spark of health that fairly crackles as it comes fresh off the planer. He'll miss it when he's gone. Or maybe he won't. There's that, too.

His wife knows him well enough to have gleaned the gist of the news. When he's content, he turns chatty, inclined to share his contentment. When he's disturbed, he withdraws. This news, they'd been expecting it. It had come as no surprise. It was the surprise of his life. The Big Surprise. And yet, if not this death then some other. Turns out, it's the specificity that bothers him. Now there are no doubts. And

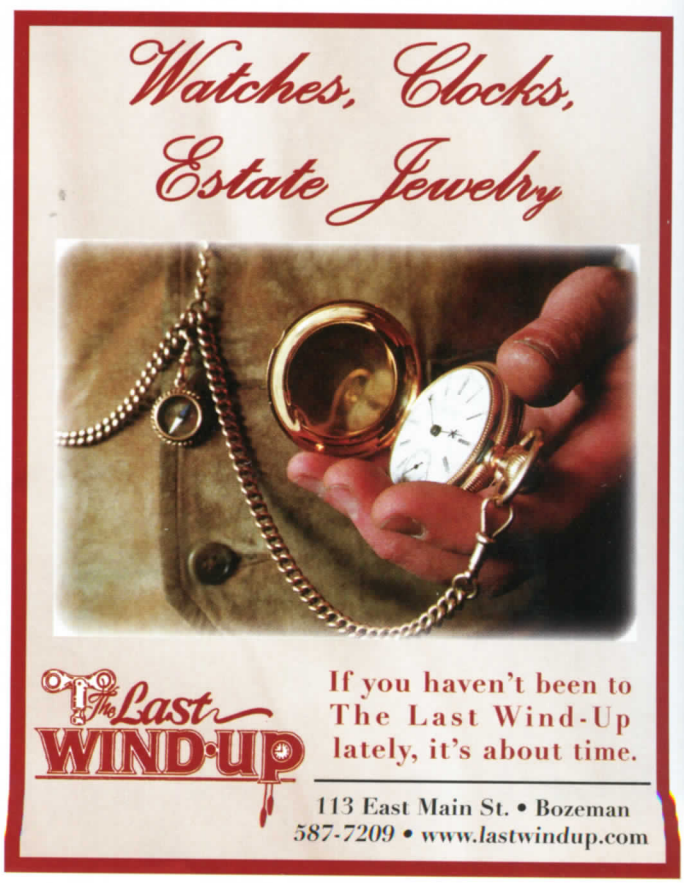


it had been the question that had been drawing him along. A few minutes before, he'd been standing vultured over his work bench, grinding furiously at the handle of an oak letter opener. Above him, in the dark-shadowed rafters, a bird had rustled on its perch, an owl maybe. Outside, the screen door had slammed. All this time and she still didn't know when to leave him alone. How many times had he told her? This was his private space, his *sanctum sanctorum*, his hidey-hole; IE: no wife. She'd never been able to take a hint. "Jack?" She'd rested her hand on his boney shoulder. Such a familiar hand. Younger than his own, it was still wrinkled, liver-spotted. The gold wedding band worn to a thread where she likes to rub it with her thumb. He'd glanced up, expecting consolation, a polite lie about miracle cures, eastern herbs. "We'll get through this," etc. But no.

She was smiling at him. *Smiling!*

His whole life, he's never been able to read her smiles. A failure of their marriage, it's been a sliver of popcorn caught in his teeth. This little irritation. What does that mean? Her one gray tooth slowly revealing itself. Was it happiness? Was she pleased to see him easing finally out of the picture? Or maybe she was putting a brave face on bad news. Here was the same enigmatic expression no doubt on the face of the story's author. For what indeed (it occurs to him) is this polite little fiction if not a chuckle in the face of the Great End. Prostate cancer or some other. An enormous bird flipped toward the final beat of every heart. His wife, after all, is dying too. So is the story's author. Not so specifically, perhaps, nor with such a short fuse, but dying nonetheless. The wife will go unnamed throughout this story. (Really, it would be too much of a coincidence if her name was also Rose.) Anyway, he's not a careful reader. He resists dwelling on the implications. Instead, he indulges himself in a deep, melancholy resignation. Pity him, put yourself in his shoes, regret the lot that he's drawn in life. Admire the way he's determined to finish this story, plug it through to the final curtain. Make the best of it. Listen to the fat lady sing.

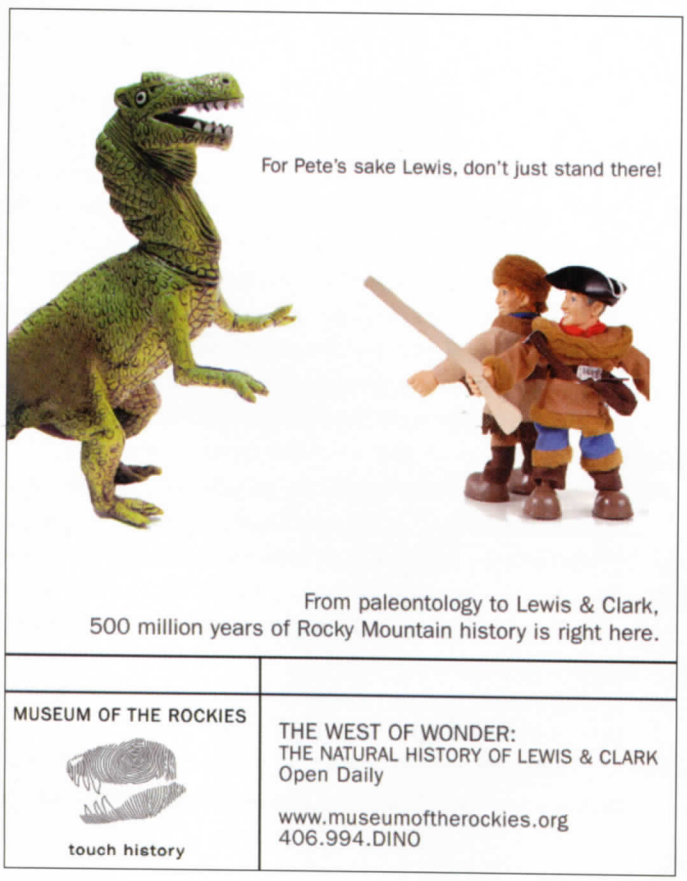
In the barn, he'd slapped away his wife's hand. *Slapped* it. Tossed down the letter opener and staggered to his feet. "You can just go to hell." His thunder had been diminished by how he was hunched over his scars, now his head came up only to her chin. Honestly? This is the worst story he's ever read. Nevertheless, he can't stop reading. He sits riveted. How will it end? Tears and reconciliation? Malice and thrown utensils? If not this death then some other. His finger, tracing these lines, trembles. What should one make of the writer in this scenario (he reads). A sadist, no doubt. To put people – *real people* – through this kind of pain. This ambiguity. Not



He'd glanced up, expecting consolation, a polite lie about miracle cures, eastern herbs. "We'll get through this," etc. But no.

only cancer but a final breakup. A good marriage potentially ruined by a single, misread smile, by an inappropriate wrinkling of the lips.

He wants to foil the writer, thumb his nose at someone who would so enjoy the notion of metastatic prostate cancer. He wants to make the best of it, ignore his wife's leer and go gently into that good night. Just an idea. Who the hell does this guy think he is? What's his name? Jones. This Jones guy. He wants to refuse it all, even self-pity. Give him a second, a minute, he'll be standing up quite as straight as he can. He'll accept his wife's failures (as she has accepted his, for damn near 40 years) and take what's coming to him.

The story is ending. There remain only a few lines. He hears his wife enter the house. He listens as she runs water into the sink. splashes it up to her face, tears off a section of paper towel. He knows her habits so well. Oh, his dear wife, his beloved Rose. The last time she'd acted like this was after her mother had died. First tears, then a beeline for the kitchen sink to wash her face. A strong woman, she's always been embarrassed by tears. Give him a minute, he'll be putting this magazine down, this ridiculous piece of shit story, and go in to his wife. Such a waste of time. Especially now. This absurd exercise in self-awareness, in . . . what's that word? Navel staring . . . Solipsism! Chicken and eggism. All that sort of thing. He'll go in to his crying wife and rebuild the rift, begin to enjoy the first few minutes of the time they have left together. And yet, he's already postponing the moment. When he puts this magazine down, it's going to be over. It will be done. No more smelling wood. No more sanding at a thin piece of oak until it glows with its own interior light. What will happens afterwards? When *he's* gone, it only follows that the oaklight will be gone as well. What's a story without a reader? A camera without film, a lens pointed toward the void. Nothing.

Old Jack Hamm, short as a suit of armor. He's here but will soon be gone. His wife whose name is and is not Rose, she's here as well. And for one more line, dear reader, one more brief breath, another shutter click on the void, we're here beside them. Until... ■