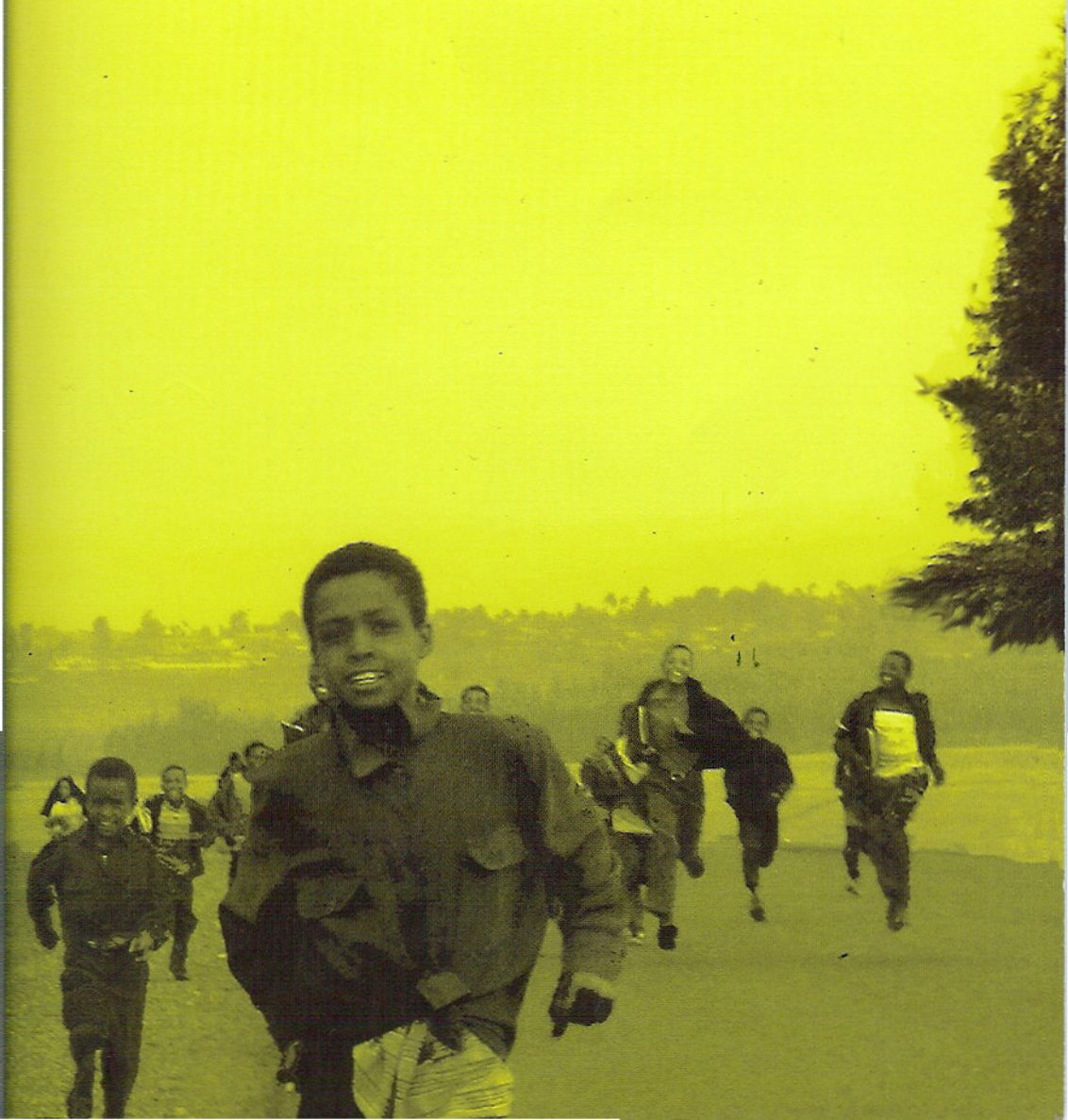


HOW

HELPING ORPHANS WORLDWIDE



porter fox

Three

Shorts

{ doctors }

(foreigner)

{ pigeons }

{ doctors }

THERE'S A PH.D. ON MY BLOCK

who's writing a book. He's middle-aged, tall and skinny with a see-through beard. I talk to him when I walk the dog at night.

Do you teach? I asked him once.

Of course.

To who?

Whom.

Whom?

My students.

What do you tell them?

The things I write about.

What's that?

Things.

There's a whole pack of Ph.D.s on my block. They strut around like they

own the place. Books in faces, pens in pockets. They talk about real estate in the bodega. They yell at the neighborhood kids to turn down their boom boxes. One weekend, they gathered two hundred signatures to petition for a city trashcan.

My friend Troy says we have a disturbance on the block. He thinks a meteor landed in the area thousands of years ago. Ph.D.s are too smart for their own good, he says. Fancy umbrellas, stiff-legged walks. The way they dig in their gardens like something's buried there. Treat pedestrian traffic like it's some kind of storm.

Why can't they keep to themselves? he asked me.

Because they're lonely.

I'm lonely.

It's worse when you think you've figured it out.

Why?

Because you think you've figured it out.

I knew a guy once who thought he'd figured things out. He got licked every day of elementary school for everything he knew. He told kids what he thought of them and they circled like wolves.

I remember one Halloween when some upperclassmen invited us to drink beer. I was sure it was a hoax. We found them in a field behind the school, pawing around like horses. Big shoulders, thick necks. My friend tipped back a bottle that I was sure was filled with razor blades. He drained it and one of the upperclassmen yelled, "Alright!" and slapped him on the back. That was the first night I ever heard him be quiet.

The Ph.D. has a story too. He's writing his book about it. He was walking up Second Avenue looking for a drink. He stopped at a friend's bar, bought a shot, then went to another to watch the game. After a few beers, he continued uptown. At Twenty-fourth Street, a group stood looking at the body of a woman who'd jumped off the thirty-fifth floor of an apartment building. Her stomach had split open, he said, and her insides were spilling out.

I'm sorry, I said.

I didn't know the body could do that.

You hope it doesn't.

Such gravitas.

I thought you were a doctor.

Not that kind.

What kind?

Who knows?!

The real kicker was waiting for him at home, though. His mother had called and left a message. She'd inherited two hundred thousand dollars that day from a cousin she didn't even know.

What does that mean? he asked.

You think they're connected?

You tell me.

I'm not qualified to answer that.

It's two hundred thousand dollars!

I'd say it's good then.

You think so?

You should be happy.

I guess I should.

{ **foreigner** }

There's an accent, hear? I imagine a Sophia or Pilar. Tammy, she says, Budweiser. She wears a tutu over her jeans, a tube top, and a black fisherman's cap.

What country are you from? I ask.

Pennsylvania, she says.

I nod in rhythm to the T.V. Big eyes on the barkeep. Nobody just
stumbled in here.

You're Italian? I ask.

No.

Your parents?

My grandmother, once, with the workers in the mountains.

I know something about that, I say, the hills, work, the *old* world.

We should go, she says.

We hold hands and walk to my place. My apartment isn't as interesting
as I remembered. The posters on the wall suggest a dull tenant. My record
collection is downright dreary. The people in my photo album seem upset with
me. The cat looks embarrassed.

I'm not a cat person, she says, jumping up on the couch.

Could've fooled me.

They are, how you say ... *conceited*.

She likes you, I tell her.

She does, says the girl, laying down alongside it.

I put an old Western in the VCR and she rests her hand on my leg.

That's more like it, I think. Clean killing. Hidden rattlesnakes. No-nonsense horsemanship.

My people love this, she says.

Horses?

The West.

It's *Gawd's* country, I drawl.

You've lived there?

Flew over, once.

Before she left we made plans for the weekend. Thursday and Friday were a head-on collision. I ran into a colleague at the copy machine near quitting time. He told me what he thought of line-cutting and I laid him out in the recycling bin. Our boss broke it up then demanded we go with him for drinks to work out our differences. The old man was a guru in negotiation. He'd fought in Korea and spoke four languages.

You need things like this every now and then, he told us.

Maybe not so often, said the other guy.

You need to wake up, he said.

I loved that old man. I would've worked for him for free. He was the last of the old guard. He knew about places where people said what they thought. Russia. Eskimos. Maybe it was the snow. Maybe that was the secret.

{ pigeons }

There's a man on the roof with a bowl of something. I see him from my office. He's tossing some kind of food to a flock of pigeons, talking to them, singing maybe. Goddamn job, you'd think they'd vary the schedule around here, make it more like a game instead of a big Doomsday Parade.

What's in that bowl anyway? The birds are really chomping down. He calls to each like he knows them by name. Brian. Jeff. Henny. *Brrring!* the phone sings. Who now? I don't even know the names of people who work here. I'd like to know the girl who carries the brown packages around.

There's an enclosure on the man's roof with a skylight. He's going in there now. He's walking down to a big kitchen. There's expensive food and last

night's wine on the counter. A woman reclines on a couch.

He's not always nice to me, she says, but he really comes through on weekends.

How do you like it then? I ask.

We've been together a long time, the man says, but it doesn't seem it.

Like a flash, she says, snapping her fingers.

I sit next to her. The man cracks an egg into a frying pan.

Don't forget I like it hard, she says.

Like a rock.

After breakfast we flip through the channels. They're all selling something.

Is that true? I ask.

There's a lot for sale, the woman says.

I'm tired, says the man, falling into a Morris chair.

You tire easily, she sighs.

Is this place for sale? I ask.

I *wish*, she says, glancing over her shoulder.

If it were up to me, says the man, I'd sell the whole thing.

Me, me, me, says the woman.

But it's not.

For sale? I ask.

The woman arches her brow, smiles. The man gets up and kisses her on the cheek.

I wouldn't just give it away, he says.