

Gregory Spatz

A HOLIER TEMPLE

In the new novel, his main character wakes up in a different woman's bed at the start of each chapter, never knowing how or when he got there. The women all seem to know him. In fact, they are disconcertingly familiar and mumble things like, "What time's it, Burt?" or "Could you please turn onto your side, please, so you don't snore so much?" or "Your turn to let the cat in, isn't it?" They pull sheets and blankets off him to cover their necks, kick him in the thighs if he trespasses too far to the center of the bed. They don't look at him with any of the alarm or special terror or satisfaction he feels when they fully awaken and turn toward him with their arms open and their new breasts showing and the smell of expired sleep slipping up from under the sheetcovers.

Burt is a heavyset man. He has droopy-lidded eyes of exceptional pale blue color, a gray chin-beard, and black and white curly hair. Together the curls and bare cheeks give him an ancient folk-balladeer sort of look, like a popular poet from the previous century. He's been told of the resemblance often enough he's come to feel a kinship with poets and poetry in general, though he's never written a lick of rhyme and seldom reads anything but the newspaper. His days he spends at the city middle school teaching sixth- and seventh-graders the infallible, grammatical laws of our language; nights, he takes some courses in basic astronomy at the local community college, watches television, or goes out with the woman he's found himself with most recently.

In the bed of a new woman he is always terrified when he first wakes up. He slips to the edge of the mattress and props himself on one elbow and looks around, taking stock, trying to figure out what's happened and what's next. He shakes his head, squeezes his eyes shut and open again, and runs over the details: there is the shirt he was wearing the night before, wadded on the floor beside him; there are his shoes, the brown ones this time; where are the pants? He plans his escape until something stops him: the gentle curve of her nose or something in the way her chestnut hair swirls at the temples, or the movement of her sleeping eyes under her lids (what color *are* they, anyway?). He slips out further and further, stopping, starting again, his heart banging blood

to every chilly part of him and seeming to shut it up for too long somewhere in his gut until his vision speckles.

And then suddenly she's awake and it's too late.

"What's the matter, Burt? Sleep OK?" she asks.

He opens his eyes wider, shuts and re-opens them, but the woman is still there, expecting a response. He nods. "And you?" he asks.

Without seeming to have moved she is suddenly much closer. She is shaping him with her hands and pulling him to her. "Like a baby," she says, and yawns slightly and wiggles and puts her leg over his and slides astride him. "You sure were up a lot, though. Mr. Up and Down. You're sure you slept all right?"

"Terrific."

What comes next he's learned (midway into the book) is as false and probably depraved as it is impossible to avert: a woman who knows him perfectly whom he does not know at all! He keeps his eyes from hers until her body fully emerges for him and he has put away most of his images of the last woman—the one his insulted memory keeps insisting was asleep next to him a few hours ago—so he can look right at this new one and say something. "Oh," or "Yes," or "Mmm," or "Wonderful." Anything to let her know how his pleasure runs into hers. Later, while she's showering or feeding the dog, or checking on her children or her phone messages, or running to the end of the drive for the morning paper, or starting a pot of coffee, he'll do what he can to find out who she is. What's her name this time. He'll check piles of mail and flip on the phone machine, find out who the magazines and catalogues in her bathroom are mostly addressed to. So far he's been with Betty Ledwater, Pauline Krauss, Margerie Musser, Alison Paul, Jenny Huggs, and Millicent Albright.

Afterward, always it's the same. He circles around their houses and neighborhoods, reciting numbers and street names and memorizing turns, trying to implant a familiarity where there is only distress. He asks God where this is going and why it's happening and what's the point aside from his tormented pleasure. But he doesn't really believe in a God—not in the sense of speaking to Him, that is: God, he's always supposed, is in the continuous connections between things. In the air kissing the plants and the plants' grip inside the earth. God is the marriage of color to substance and the clouds moving over the water like music, and etc. No entity you could speak to or ask for factual advice or answers. He's always been fairly certain of this, at least until recently.

“Please, God,” he says now, circling the neighborhoods he doesn’t recognize, looking for a sign to the freeway and home. “Why me?”

Today an ice fog stole the sun, making it almost impossible for the Writer to see out his window to the street below. He feels stuck in a gray void and blotted out and awful. Ordinarily he would have walked his Schnauzers around the block and over through the rose gardens on H Street, even down to the capitol to loosen his head and get ready to work. He would have admired the flowers and their different colors and the dew on them, noting which ones had opened and which ones dropped petals, and he would have ogled the women jogging by in their sports bras and lycra and headbands and spongy sneakers and fat black chronographic watches. At home he would have picked some oranges from the tree in his backyard and brought them up to eat with cream and yogurt for his breakfast. Also, he might have bought some scones or muffins from the bakery for his lunch, and maybe a newspaper at the family market (depending how much distraction he wants later on). Sometimes he’ll talk for a while with the woman below, a nurse whose husband is a cop. She has stories to make him think twice about his so-called business, his so-called calling to make up stories!

Today Brady and Duncan will have to wait. No way in the world he’s going out in all that ice-mist, probably blown straight down from Juneau, over the coastal hills and into the Central Valley here where it will stick for days. The dogs will have to use the backyard for their business. He’ll clean up after them later. Have a bowl of coconut granola and condensed milk with leftover fruit for his breakfast.

Now he paces, watching the cars emerge from the fog and swirl back into it so fast you can’t be sure they were ever there. “Burt, Burt,” he mutters. “Stupid Burt.” He’s so tired of it when he thinks of this novel. Always tired and distressed and sick-feeling and annoyed. If only the sky would clear so he could feel bright in his relationship to something. If only he could sail straight into a clearly lit, ready-made stream of narrative where the characters walked right up to you and told you every last important thing about them. If only writing this book was a little more like watching a movie.

His favorite part so far—the scene that really gets him and brings things into focus and which he looks at nearly every day for motivation—comes fairly early on in chapter three.

Burt is out with the latest woman, Margerie, strolling her neighborhood and admiring the pretty houses. She lives in an older part of midtown Sacramento where every other home is a rambling stucco or Victorian with elaborate porches, six or seven roof surfaces, and front porticos with lacy trim, ornate gables, etc. He's been with Margie exactly four hours and already he's feeling a little in love. Feeling the promise of it, anyway. They say "I love you" to each other every few minutes, and Margie is really his type, too: school teacher (kindergarten, in a neighboring district), California native (Ojai), six feet tall with ringlets of gray and white hair and a dancer's posture—straight-set shoulders, feet splayed, neck angled back—though she says she hasn't danced in years. Her face is a little clumsy-featured and thick, but that's all right. There's enough pride in her bearing to make up for it. Pride to make you think such a statuesque physiognomy was really what she wished for and what you should love her for, too. Her voice is gravelly soft and complex, underscored with an endearing sadness she's always attempting to pass off as light-hearted (an aggrieved sort of devil-may-care), though the sadness keeps ringing through to him. From her every other glance and word and gesture he can see how she longs for love. Anyone's. His will do.

He vows it: he'll withhold nothing this time. Just as soon as possible, he'll explain his situation and beg her to marry him. (Marriage, he's come to think, is really the only solution—the logical charm that will put an end to this. Then, he figures, even if he does continue waking in the beds of strange women every few weeks at least he will have a way out and a reason to go—a place to walk back to and someone to tell. So far there has been no overlap of women. His nighttime transports are total and discrete and irrevocable. The few times he's tried calling a newly abandoned lover it's ended in confusion and outrage. "But you left months ago," they insist. "But you said it was over. Over!" they yell at him. "You *said* you couldn't picture yourself married to me and so what was the point. Right? Now how can I just forget that, Burt. Why'd you have to go calling me again?" and so on).

"There it is," Margie tells him.

From the tone of her voice—plaintive, tinged with resignation and desire—he supposes it's their dream house, a fat white Victorian with cinnamon trim and shutters and a rolling lawn with a two-level terrace and an antique bird-bath.

"Yes," he says. "Gorgeous. Just as soon as the market settles and I can free up a little cash we'll make an offer."

She shifts uncomfortably next to him. She's laughed at all his jokes, but not this one. Why? He feels her eyes on him a moment—cold, evaluative. She clears her throat once. Her hand lies in his, sweating. He stares at the ground and practices reconstruing her image in his mind so he can remember it more easily later on—make the connection between them that much more quickly real. But he keeps being distracted by the wrong details, the sexually partial ones: her lovely long legs with the shins curving like spoon stems—legs a little withered around the knees and thick in the ankles, maybe, but pretty still, and weightless around his shoulders. And the softest breasts, wide and luminous. All morning he was unable to withdraw his face from them.

He squeezes her hand. "We'll sit out on the porch summer nights and the wind will play hockey with the moon," he says.

"Burt!" She flings his hand away from hers. "How can you?"

One of her schnauzers is on its rump, scratching itself at the end of its leash, the other strains endlessly forward, gasping for breath. It wants to run up that lawn to the shady front porch where no one is sitting watching them.

"That's the house I . . . the house we. . . ." she stares at him, blinking back tears. One escapes and jumps down her cheek. Her eyes are the color of crushed almonds. "It's the . . ."

They have spoken at the same time.

"What?" he says. "What's the problem, Sweetie pie?"

"This is *his* house, for Christ's sake, Burt. Mine and *Mike's*. The one we *fixed up*. Have you forgotten already? Here I tell you every last thing of myself, my life, and you—you bastard." She slaps his shoulder stingingly. "What is the *matter* with you, anyway?"

"Aw. I know what house this is. Come on." He rubs his shoulder and passes a hand through his sweaty curls. He feels remote and heart-wrenched at the same time. He doesn't love her, he only wishes to, and the more he hurts her (unwittingly or not) the more he ruins that possibility. There is no truth to hide from her, really, and nothing to confess to because no matter what he says right now she'll never believe it. "I was making a joke," he says.

"A joke?" Her mouth puckers at the corners and bits of her face flush unattractively—a streak of crimson up one cheek, a cross on her forehead, something vaguely triangular at the base of her throat. "Why? Why can't you ever *listen*?"

"I listen. You know I do." He pulls her to him and touches his lips to her temple at the hairline. This is too easy. He smooths his hands up and down

her back. "I'm sorry," he says. "All right? So it wasn't the best joke in the world." He kisses her again. "It's just . . . I want us to start fresh together. You know? And if that means making a few crummy jokes about the past then, hey. Let's make them."

She breathes in sharply. "God damn you!" She pulls away from him, smiling, then leers and starts to kiss him but doesn't. "What am I going to do with you," she says.

"Love me."

She blinks woefully and doesn't respond.

"Come on," he says, and they stagger away up the road, his arm hanging over her shoulder like a car tire, the dogs pulling ahead.

Despite having such long legs she takes a mincing step and a quarter to his one—maybe because of her shoes (moccasins with no real sole), maybe because all her life she's wanted to seem a smaller woman with a shorter and more complicated hip-wiggling walk. With every step she works in a subtle shimmy from the ball of the foot through her calf to her knee and on up softly into his hip.

Just before turning home they duck into an empty church to sit a few minutes and cool off. The walkway outside is lined with little antiseptic flowers, and there is a new sidewalk almost the color of skim milk. Inside it is evening already, shadows splashing the walls and stone floor. A woman miles away from them at the front of the church kneels in prayer. Someone steps out of a confessional, crosses himself, and starts up the aisle toward them, head bowed, and Margie pulls Burt down by the hand onto a bench between one of the side exits and an ornamental baptismal font. She stifles a giggle. He whispers "Shh," and she whispers it back. But the man is absorbed in what absorbs him and strides on by, barely glancing their way. His footfalls resonate to the peak of the church and disappear into the stained-glass images of Christ and the Virgin and other saints up there cooling and misdirecting the light.

Burt squeezes Margie's hand. He feels wonderfully alive in this delinquency with her. He hisses, "Have you fucked in a church before?"

She jabs him with her elbow, scowls. "You know I have."

"That doesn't count."

She looks questioningly, one eyebrow lifted.

"It wasn't with me," he whispers. He pulls her face to his and her torso swells and pushes out against him, her tongue flicking in and out against his.

There is that damp smell he loves, her female sweat through cotton.

"What's between us," she says, eyes shut, "is the holier temple . . . the holiest temple of all."

"Oh," he says. "Say it again!"

"What's between us . . ." she begins.

He pulls her to her feet to feel the whole length of her against him and brushes the goosebumps on her bare arms under his hands and marvels at the perfect fit of her, the precarious upwelling in his groin against hers.

And suddenly he is scared. More scared than he's been in a long time. Not because of what they're saying or doing or because he fears it will bring the wrath of God. What he believes, all at once and terrifyingly because it is so clear, is that for him nothing is holy. Not himself, not her, not sex, not any number of people praying to their God year after year in this place of vaulting, consecrated angularity. He feels it in his bones, a series of doors locking down. Wood, stone, concrete, flesh, he thinks. No meaning beyond the simplest ones. He breathes her breath into his lungs and tastes their breakfast in it, the coffee, croissants, and scones, then the bitter-dull aftertaste of her toothpaste and her teeth mixed with her saliva and misting out from her breath into him. He can't conjure any feeling that will make this stop and let his fingers swim on her skin again, convert all his perceptions back to so-called love. It's not his fault. It's the cumulative effect of pretending to love women he doesn't know. But what other choice does he have?

". . . A far holier temple . . ." she's saying. She's saying it a third time, differently, really getting off, he's not sure why.

"Stop," he says.

"I'm so wet."

"Let's go."

"What? Why?"

"Just, let's go." He tugs her along by the hand. He doesn't say he's ashamed or guilty or chastened; presumably it's what she concludes (because she can conclude it), and this allows him to keep his silence. He doesn't want her knowing how much he wishes he could be ashamed or titillated or worried or freaked enough by *anything* to feel it.

They step outside and jog the twelve too-shallow church steps down, down the milky sidewalk and back into the mind-warping heat. There is no gaudy pealing of bells to match their exit or their first look back on the church.

"The dogs," she says. "My dogs!"

He points—exactly where she left them, tied in the shadow of a dying walnut tree and licking themselves, bored, probably annoyed with always having to wait for humans.

The Writer knows this passage is essential because of where and how it arises from events in his own life—the woman it relates back to, and some way that his fictionalizing of her allows him to continue hanging on to her and to have his revenge. The two feelings twist against each other, inspiring more and more words—a star sucked into the orbit of a black hole and slowly unraveling from the universe. He goes back over and over it to make the language disappear into the event. To bring the event more clearly to the surface, because he so loves the sweetness of pain recollected. Because he wants that one day back exactly as it was so he can put it away for good and stop looking back and thinking about *her*. Get rid of her once and for all. Which is impossible, he knows, because there is never any real putting away or taking out with love. There's hardly a true event left to look at (if there ever was one), only these half-memorized words and images and smells which he'll tend to and abandon and tend to every day until it doesn't make sense to keep trying. He hopes his suffering has enough in common with the reader's to intersect, but he won't give away any of the particulars—not her name, or the church they met in or the weather that day at the third wedding of his best friend (her younger brother) the boat-builder turned poet.

Because it's a bad morning, he allows himself to fool with this passage for the first hour or two. Then he shifts gears and moves to the latest section: Burt in a flashback, the summer just after college, helping his favorite linguistics professor and pretty younger wife build their home—a rustic hideaway in the woods at the edge of town. He tries to remember the welded-shut feeling in his palms and fingers from wielding a hammer all day, that ripped solid ache through his shoulder-sinews and biceps. He remembers lashing walls to beams and then getting up there on the tippy ladder with the sun always in his eyes and the wasps droning while he drove in nails. Below him, on the forest floor, the first woman he ever loved is sorting scrap wood, usable and not, walking lazily back and forth, picking up the wood, dropping it and kicking it into piles. He loved her because of how terribly he admired her husband and because of how obliquely she preyed on his hormones, always showing him her body, inadvertently and not so inadvertently. Today she has on her usual tube-top, bikini cut-offs, work gloves and boots, hair tied up and fanned

across her back. He tries to make the chink-a-chink-a-chank-chunk of his hammer blows coincide with the sounds of her dropping and tossing the sorted wood together. He keeps trying to get her eye, but she's not looking.

"Hey," he says finally and she looks up. The husband is gone to town getting supplies, and sandwiches for their lunch.

She looks at him but he can no longer think of what to say because of her eyes, which are so copper and yellow and green, pond water and gold-edged willow leaves, and nothing hidden. "Ya? You want me?" she asks. She kicks some plywood strips together and starts picking through them with the toe of her boot.

"Look where I am," he says.

She stops, hands on her hips. "The living room," she says. She shields her eyes a moment. "Right where you are," she points, "we're gonna cut a window there. Stan doesn't know yet, but we are."

Suddenly, the Writer is reminded of water beaded on lettuce.

And in a burst of inspiration (mixed with some relief at, and hunger for his soon-approaching lunch), he sees just how to ravel out this thread of Burt's story—where to end it, maybe, and which elements from his own life to deploy. The woman will garden fanatically around the new house. She'll plant flowers to obey every phase of spring and summer; build color-coordinated banks and beds of brilliant perennials, herbs and wild lettuce. The husband will finish the house by himself, little by little, every last peg and board and beam and joist and shutter. And just as soon as the house is done (sooner?) his wife will begin sleeping with a much younger man from town. Denis. Another one of the husband's students, perhaps the Writer himself. Burt will hear about it and he'll remember the freaky insistence in the woman's eyes that afternoon, how they let him know he was the one too afraid or ashamed or hesitant to act; he'll remember the silence later while they all three ate their sandwiches with the water beaded on the lettuce. That peculiar game-like intensity of the silence between them, and the tops of her breasts showing—her thumbnail dipping in under the stretchy material to pull it up a little higher—and her legs held open so carefully, and the husband always ignoring it. He'll remember this, and think of the house he helped them to build, now lived in by strangers with the flowers still coming up every spring and summer as if from God's hand when they are only the handiwork of a lonely woman too young to love the man she'd married, and the man who'd gone such lengths to keep them both from knowing.

Eventually the magic will have to wear off—invert, evert, revert—as magic always does. The woman will wake in Burt's bed one day, maybe, and not know him. He will see from the look in her eye—terror and arousal and disappointment and disoriented curiosity. He'll turn her on her back and pin her with his arms so she can look nowhere but into his eyes and he'll say, cruelly, "So, tell me now. Who am I?"

Or, maybe he'll bypass that and get right to it. "Look here, Elaine," he'll say. "I know what you're thinking. It's like a movie, like that *Groundhog Day* or something, where you keep waking up in the same nightmare. Believe me, I know! So I'll just tell you—catch you up and save us a little time. You and I started dating about a month ago. We met at someone's going-away party—Herman and Nancy Babcock, I think? I forget what we talked about at the party. Something about shopping and why so many people like buying the same things over and over—you know, same kinds of shoes and shirts, knives and what-have-you. Like they're never done searching for the things they want even after they've bought them."

There might be a solution, too—a way out or an answer or explanation for Burt. The words will have to come from Burt though, in that case; anything from the Writer will sound too much like gospel.

"UFO's," he'll tell the new woman. "Apparently we're being enfolded in time and pushed around by aliens who want to study our breeding habits. This other guy I read about, some poor guy from Texas, he was having the same problem, only he kept waking up in the beds of horny little children. Imagine! Finally he got fed up and went to a witch doctor in New Orleans who told him he should soak his penis in horse manure and crushed flowers, chant something in Swahili about the intersections of alternate pasts and planes of causality. Go figure. I'm not sure if it worked, but we could try and find him if you want, see what came of it . . ."

Burt deserves his moments of clarity and putting-it-together. How much or what sort of clarity, the Writer doesn't know. Maybe just an image. Some freestanding emblematic picture Burt can puzzle over but not utter. The Writer will pick his nose and whittle his fingertips and Burt will wonder. The Writer will lean back in his chair and scratch himself and talk to the dogs, and add up his half-truths and word-truths and picture-truths and plain non-truths; blip them out; add them all over again.

Tonight, alone for once, Burt plugs in his contact lens cleaner and begins picking over his teeth with bright green floss in the mirror before bed. He

stares idly at his own features, working the floss in and out against his gums, and thinks through the death phases of the stars (there's a test tomorrow, and he's a little behind)—the white dwarfs and black dwarfs and neutron stars, and their various uncomprehendable densities: a parcel of packed neutrons five times the mass of the sun and no bigger than Sacramento! A husk of infinitely collapsing space more massive even than the neutron star but as small as a baby skyscraper! Thinking over these celestial wonders does not make him happier—there's still all his trouble with women—but for a few seconds he feels relaxed and almost free of himself. Maybe he glimpses his *own* ending, that final time-lift into the last chapter and on down to the bottom of the ultimate page. There will be a kind of release for him there, he hopes; one where he can remain this man picking his teeth, looking at the sadly familiar planes of his own face, and recollecting the death states of the stars. If Burt has any say in the matter (and he does, because the Writer listens) this is how it will end. He won't turn off the lights. He'll go on standing there, watching himself and getting ready for sleep.