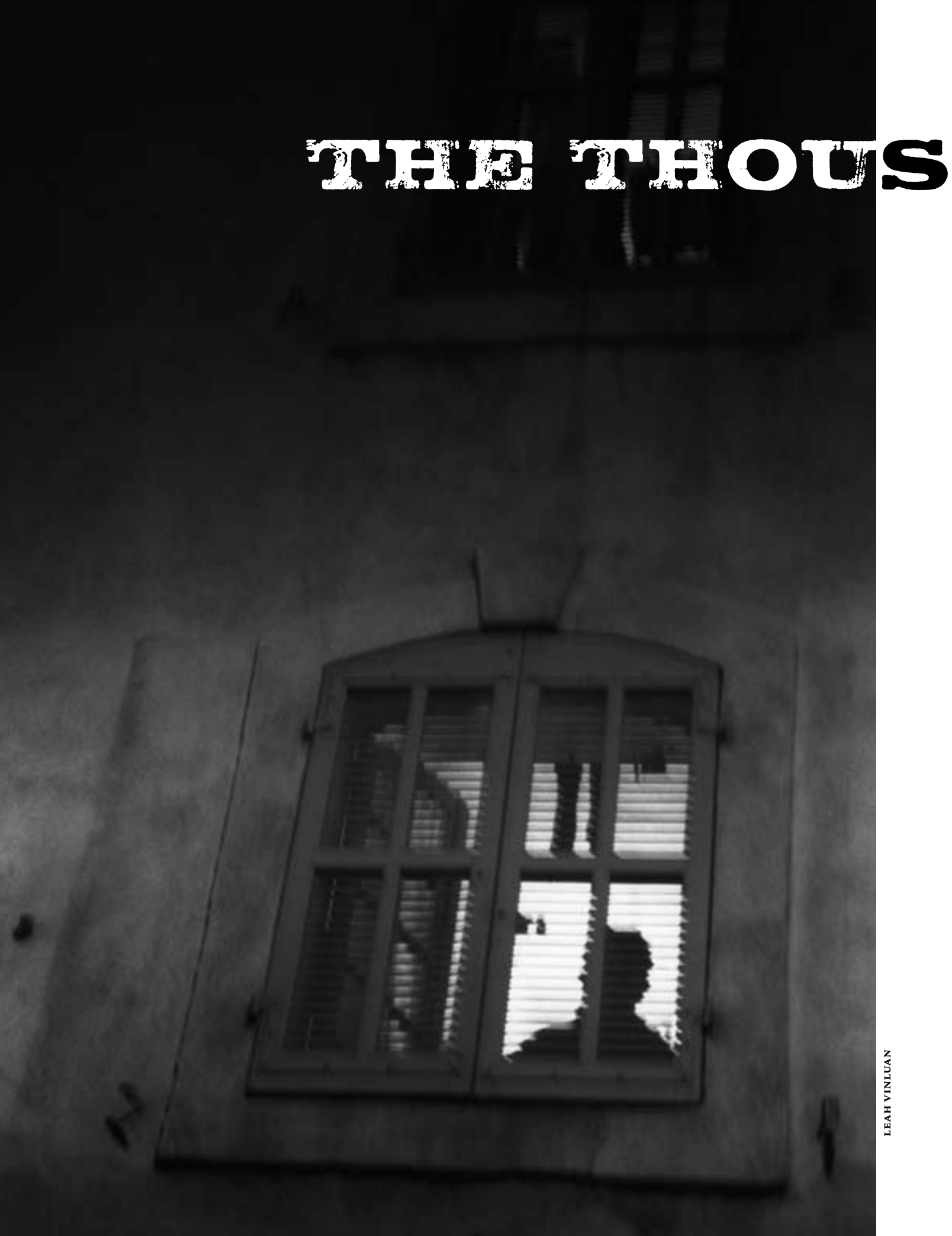


# THE THOUS



# AND-PESO SUIT

POE BALLANTINE

*for Mom and Pop*

**M**y wife, Cristina, is convinced I am not happy on this so-called summer vacation in her somnolent hometown in the mountains of Zacatecas, the Colorado of Mexico. We've been married for three years now and have a young son, Tom. She's thirty; I'm forty-eight. (I know, I know.) We're staying with her parents, and this is the first time she has seen her family since I plucked her from the *instituto* four blocks from here, where she was a student of English and I was her teacher, and hauled her up to the United States to make all her dreams come true. Whether or not I've fulfilled my role as the Magic Gringo Fairy has been rendered immaterial by the fact that we haven't been getting along for a while.

And this "vacation" isn't helping matters. No one in this house speaks English, and my rudimentary Spanish makes me feel like an old, deaf hillbilly trying to play "Foggy Mountain Breakdown" on a banjo with only one string. Also there's nowhere for me to hide. I can't stay in our hot bedroom reading books; I have to be sociable. (To be fair, I expect the same behavior from my wife when she comes to stay with my parents.) My in-laws are generous and hospitable, but they speak at me with merciless lightning brilliance and expect me actually to respond. As their guest, I sit at every meal waiting to be served first and trying to think of intelligent things to say. I nod and smile while I cut the meat from my pork spine and count how many days are left before I can go home.

Because of our language barrier, up until a year or so ago Cristina and I could not communicate so well. With little but the physical facts before us, the early days of our marriage were often challenging, even exhilarating. Gradually, however, the advent of adult communication and the steady eroding effect of familiarity exposed the bedrock of our opposing philosophies. She likes to acquire, for instance; I don't. She is by nature sedentary; I'm not. She is traditional; I am a product of anything-goes America. She does not like to be alone; I do. She considers my writing a folly and often reminds me that we have no money; I don't regard this as a problem.

My wife is acutely aware of what others think; she frets over appearances, has high expectations, puts a lot of pressure on herself, and controls her disappointment by predicting that nothing will work. She moves from doubt to distrust to complaint to worry in a predictable cycle that often erupts into a fight — and I've discovered that my sweet, mild-

mannered wife *likes* to fight. Having no shortage of subjects we disagree on, we might do battle as many as three times a day. We have argued so much that the real source of our conflicts has grown too large and distorted to confront or even recognize, so we hiss and snarl at each other over trifles, each hoping to land that final, deciding blow of blame.

To compound matters, Tom, born twenty-one months ago, has developed within the space of the past few days a chronic cough, nightly asthma, constant diarrhea, and a suppurating diaper rash that looks like a third-degree burn. Since we arrived in Mexico from our home in Nebraska, the world has flipped on him: the language, the music, the food, the cheap paper diapers (which seem to aggravate his rash), the people, the air — everything is different. Wildly inconsolable, he demands to be held almost constantly, and if he isn't being held, he's pushing over flowerpots, breaking plants, yanking laundry from the line, or attacking Zeus, the family poodle. My in-laws' house, like many in this part of Mexico, is built around an open patio, so when exiting any room, one is immediately outdoors among the mirrored pots full of vandalized geraniums. It rains nightly here in the summer, and there's really no way to deter our son from his diabolical pursuit of the poor toy poodle in the rain (cough, cough; squirt, squirt).

I avoided marriage for most of my life because I didn't think I would be any good at it — and I'm not — but I will admit that even a marriage in turmoil has its benefits. It wards off loose women, bad dates, late-night visitors, pointless binges, impetuous trips to Montreal, and insinuating questions about extended bachelorhood. (Just what kind of gringo fairy am I, anyway?) It has provided a sense of concrete responsibility that, combined with a lack of free time, has dispelled that old, constant chorus of suicidal demons in my head. Marriage is what grown-up people do, and I now belong, at least ostensibly, to their club. My friends commiserate. My mother is content. Whatever may come of my written works, I am the author, finally, of a *fleshly* progeny.

Still, I love that line by poet Rainer Maria Rilke: "A good marriage is that in which each appoints the other guardian of his solitude." But my wife is not familiar with Rilke, and solving our difficulties is not a matter of my *explaining* things to her. I've been doing that for three years, in two languages, and neither of us has changed.

**S**harp on the lookout for any chance to escape my in-laws' house, I often take the boy for walks. In the mornings we might stroll to the plaza, where he plows through flocks of pigeons, frolics with other children, swipes with impunity at plants, cackles back at the grackles, and flirts with adults. While I'm out, I usually stop in for a chat at the Hotel Jardin, where the American expatriates hold their morning convention. I got to know most of them when I was living here, before I met Cristina. As I sip my coffee and savor my beloved mother tongue, Tom scales the stairs, tries to pour hot coffee over his head, visits with every table, and repeatedly brings me the button from the spigot on the water cooler. Despite his maladies, he is an *encantador*, a charmer. Without fail he is described as *guapo* or *bonito* — handsome or beautiful. If he only knew what he's in for. You see, Tom will be baptized in a few days. His mother has brought us here specifically for the purpose of insuring his soul with God; she has even spent a thousand pesos (about a hundred dollars) on a toddler-sized ice-cream-white suit with corsage, bow tie, and Pat Boone shoes for the occasion.

Though for three and a half years my wife's been avoiding American Catholicism, with all its shortcuts, spiritless hymns, and liberal mumblings, she is still a believer. I am not a Catholic, as you may have guessed. If I had to assign myself a denomination, it would be something like Firmly in the Camp of Creation but Feeling No Need to Hump the Lord's Leg. I admire Catholicism, however, and have no objection to highly symbolic systems of worship ensconced in the warm Latin colors of jumbled history. I don't hold creepy, hypocritical priests against the Church, nor do I have anything against people muttering abstruse verse in costume for the purpose of creating a benevolent mythical atmosphere. And I appreciate the glorious achievements of Catholicism: its potent social networks; its depth of wisdom and experience; its laudable moral emphasis; its hospitals and schools and largess to the disenfranchised. I was always envious of children who attended Catholic school, partly for their courteous and well-spoken manner, but mostly because they were actually getting an education.

And though I am dubious about my own requisite appearance in the baptism ceremony, I find myself in favor of the idea. At the very least the sacrament may soothe Tom's demonic mood. Perhaps it will even relieve him of responsibility for the sins of his infidel father, who burns yet on earth, never mind in the Great Beyond.

For the last few days at the hotel, my fellow gringos have been plotting a night of poker. Before I got married and returned to the U.S., five or six of us used to play every Saturday night. Now Joe is dead, ninety-year-old Tomas has vanished (even his children don't know where he is), and Les has moved four hours away to live in pioneer squalor in San Luis Potosí, where only one other American, a drug addict, resides. But there are fresh expats — Brian from Canada and Richard from Texas — champing at the bit to take their place. Cristina is eager for me to go, so that at last I will be "happy." And I haven't had a night out by myself since the day we got married. Les even says he'll drive on down, as soon as he gets his Buick fixed.

The game is finally set for Friday afternoon and evening at the house of Ismael the woodcarver, who lives cater-corner to the Super Bol, a bowling alley that either is or isn't closed, depending on whom you talk to. Ismael is moving rapidly toward the late stages of emphysema and is unhappy in his own semimatrimonial situation. The last time I talked to him, three years ago in his covered wood shop outside his tiny bungalow, he told me that the only thing missing in his solitary life was "a good piece of ass." Well, he got that at last, from the woman who came to clean his rooms every week, and she now lives upstairs with her daughter. He lives downstairs and doesn't get much from her anymore but cross looks. He's confounded and bitter — but aren't we all, in our relentless campaign to fulfill our trivial desires? At least, I tell him, he's lifted this mother and daughter out of dirt-floor-no-electricity poverty, and he should feel good about that.

Les, who was supposed to be here by noon, calls at 5 P.M. and says that the few mechanics in the pueblo where he lives have not been able to solve his Buick's mysterious electrical problem, but he's going to try to make it anyway. I told my wife I would be home by midnight. We decide to start with only four players. Brian, the florid, thoroughly charming Canadian hypochondriac, sits to my right. Richard, who had a stroke at age forty-nine and still has pronounced left-hemisphere paralysis and halting speech, sits across from me. The veteran poker player might say to himself, fondling his chin, *Now, here's a chance for some easy winnings*, but at the rate I've started in on my bottle of Jimador tequila, any oddsmaker worth his salt would give the edge to the stroke victim.

Initially I am winning (these wild-card games are not much different from slot machines), and I celebrate with a healthy tip of the bottle. The overall quality of tequila in the world, I'm told, is declining. Tequila sales worldwide are up about 400 percent, and there just isn't enough blue agave — the plant from which tequila is distilled — to go around. To complicate matters, blue agave is being attacked by a fungus, and growers are being pressured to slow harvesting because the plant is a principal food source for the rare Mexican long-tongued bat. Ismael — who, like the long-tongued bat, derives the majority of his evening sustenance from the blue agave — has been driven by higher prices to purchase lower and lower grades of tequila. Tonight he is drinking Casco Viejo Joven mixed with Fanta orange.

It's 10 P.M. before Les finally arrives. "My radiator blew up," he explains, "and I was getting twenty miles to the gallon . . . of water." My enormous and amiable old friend is as furry white and full of shit as ever. We all wonder aloud why Les, an obese diabetic with cancer and circulatory problems, doesn't abandon that small village and come back here, where people love him and there is an actual hospital, but he has a stubborn notion of freedom. He condemns our wild-card games, as always, and when it's his turn to deal switches to seven-card stud. My winnings begin to dwindle.

*(end of excerpt)*