

# Stop

E. B. CAVANAGH

AT THE EDGE OF THE VILLAGE SHE VEERED off the road into a maize field where a shoestring path cut into a leafy corridor. Tounkara clocked ahead, her flip-flops snapping, her ankles flashing beneath her skirt. I didn't know where we were going. I kept thinking women would give birth at home, or maybe we were going to the maternity on the outskirts of the village, though it was difficult to imagine anyone giving birth there. When I first saw it the day before, the building looked unused. Tounkara took a hairpin turn down another path and a hairpin turn down another. When I looked through the stalks at the sky, it was dizzying. We seemed to be going in circles. A voice in my throat wanted to call out to her and ask her where we were going or where was the mother, but I couldn't. She was the midwife, and it felt like blasphemy to even notice that all those turns likely meant she didn't know. And she didn't know me either. Only the day before I'd arrived in her village for a two-year tour of service, and we'd been assigned to work together. This had to go well. I was exactly where I was supposed to be, following a midwife to a delivery, her flip-flops drumming and I drumming after her. She was going to do a strong thing now. She was going to help a woman give birth, and that woman was going to be strong, too. Everyone was going to be strong.

The mother had given birth in the field, surrounded by papery yellow stalks. When we found her she was propped up on her elbows, hardly able to sit up, collapsed, her head lolling between her shoulders. A small girl was crouching beside her, studying us and keeping back with the kind of guilt only children possess, the furtive guilt of knowing she could be blamed and didn't want to be blamed, but could be blamed nonetheless. The baby was missing.

Tounkara gripped and released the woman's lower legs, massaging them up and down. *Mye wen bi?* she kept asking. Where's your child? The woman mumbled. Tounkara's face furrowed. She tried to revive her, asking questions and trying to keep up the woman's circulation, gripping and releasing her legs. The woman's *pagne*, from her waist to her lower thighs, was soaked in blood. Too much blood. I looked at Tounkara. I wanted to know if it looked like too much to her, but I didn't have the words to ask and watched her eyes instead, trying to follow where they went. So focused she was, so absolute in her talk, her touch, her attempts to wake the mother up, that I wondered if I was in her way, an extra body she had to keep track of in the middle of an emergency.

Almost everything about me was out of place. I'd just spent ten weeks in Peace Corps training learning French, and now I was in Yéma, a remote village deep in the northern savanna, no electricity, no running water, 120 kilometers from the nearest paved road. No one who owned a car. No matter that Benin is a former colony. There are places of minimal contact with the outside world, where French is hardly useful. Yéma is a Bariba village, where most people speak Bariba, and only Bariba, including Tounkara, and at the time about twenty words made up my entire Bariba vocabulary. I watched her closely and stayed quiet, trying to make myself small, my ears keening to catch any familiar word as my eyes passed from the woman's taut legs, to her bloody skirt, to her chest where her head hung. So close to the ground, the birth smells pooled, full and fetid like wet fur and the dissected cow's eye from sixth-grade science. I wasn't going to get sick now. There was no chance of getting sick. You're going to be smart now, and you're going to learn how to handle this.

Tounkara gave up on the mother and pressed the girl who had yet to speak a

word, but now raised her arm and pointed down the path.

"*Dokotoro?*" Tounkara asked.

*Dokotoro* was the Bariba word for all places medical. The girl nodded. Another woman came running. They exchanged a few words. The woman and the girl stayed with the mother, while we took off. The field dropped behind us as we hustled through scrub grass and a small grove that broke onto a dusty clearing. Two ranch-style buildings sat under the big sky side by side. One said *LA MATERNITÉ* and the other *CENTRE DE SANTÉ*, and like abandoned outposts, they were all closed up, their metal doors barred and louvered windows shut.

A small girl was sitting there under a tall tree. She had a bundle in her arms. Tounkara walked gingerly toward her, as if approaching something holy, and I followed, my heart beating. The closer we came, the more it felt that the child must be all right, for the girl looked serene, and when we reached her and the newborn, all we could do was look at each other, not moving, not saying anything, just looking. The girl had just enough arm to hold him. A boy. He looked well. Remnants of birth fluid and mucus dusted his hairline; and the umbilicus, still attached, trailed into a white basin where the placenta sat in a shallow pool of blood.

Tounkara grinned warmly. "*Foh, wendia.*" Hello, little girl, she said, and leaned over, hands outstretched. The girl looked up at Tounkara as if she were the largest presence in the world and lifted the boy as much as she could. They seemed to have an understanding about who would do what. Once the newborn was in Tounkara's arms, the girl lifted the basin slowly with two hands, careful not to tug the cord. She was wearing a plain dress, and the basin was twice as wide as she was. I tried to smile at her, but she avoided my eyes. In Benin, polite children did. And I stood back to watch



them as they walked in unison toward the building labeled maternity, this shoeless girl glancing up at this towering woman, with an umbilical cord slung between them.

Before, I'd only seen an umbilical cord in pictures. When our mother was pregnant with our sister, she had a large photography book that explained how the baby was growing inside her, and our father had shown us *2001: A Space Odyssey*. The umbilical cord in the pictures reminded me of the line connecting an astronaut to the spaceship home, and the pictures of the womb, a globe of red-orange light, was home to this creature whose eyes were so large and everywhere were ganglion stars. I remember thinking *that is going to be a real person in there, and we are going to be responsible for her*.

My brother was ten and I was eight when our sister was born. There are pictures of us in our mother's hospital room, my brother in a blue hospital smock and me in a pink one. We took turns holding her. We look tentative. Our father must have been there; he must have taken the pictures, though I can't remember our parents together. I remember our mother showing us how to hold her. She'd been training us on how to support the neck and cup the baby's head in our hands. She said if we weren't careful, we could cause brain damage. Any carelessness would have lasting effects now, and we would have to live with that. How afraid I was of my own hands then, and afraid of my arms that they might be weak or easily distracted. How determined to prove I was steady. Can't move me, can't hurt. But what I can't remember is what it felt like to be protected by my mother.

Toukara disappeared down the one open corridor and soon returned, motioning for me to follow. We stopped at a shut door and what I guessed was her key chain in the lock. She nodded at them. You try, her nod said. The first task she'd ever given me. I put my hand on the keys and she leaned in, peering over my shoulder like a head surgeon and me her suspect intern going in with the knife for the first time. The pressure was enormous. I had to keep it all out and focus, me and the keys and the keyhole in a small window. I moved the key a hair forward and hair back, feeling

for its teeth to click into the grooves, and as I tried to turn it, in my wrist, I could feel the resistance between lock and key. My stomach tightened. But then the bolt clocked back into its casing and the door creaked open. Toukara clapped me on the shoulder. "Ah-ha!" she exclaimed, giving me a jolt.

It looked like an examination room. She set to scouting for supplies and I stood by. The room had two louvered windows, both shut. Lines of light traced the horizontal slats like light along shut blinds. There was an old metal exam table, a hand-me-down from the West. I wondered if this was really better. The metal drawers squealed as Toukara opened and closed them. She pulled out scissors, gauze, and soap and put them in my hands. She piled on baby powder and a small brown bottle and pivoted out the door, saying, "*Sa wé*." We go, and I followed, trying to hold the loose jumble without dropping a single item.

She sent the girl to get water and sat herself on the edge of the terrace. With a nod, she indicated I should place the supplies on the *pagne* spread out beside

her. She turned her focus on the newborn, and I got out of the way, taking a spot by a pillar. Legs propped and heels dug in the dirt, she'd laid him lengthwise along her thighs and showed him with welcome: "*A dam ko ma! Kà weru!*" her mouth screwed into a grin. "*Foh, woru.*" Hello, boy. How's your body? How's your mother? She spoke mirthfully to him in mock-stern voice, like an adult speaking privately to a bird.

I was thinking about Margaret. She'd written about Toukara in her Site Assessment packet, and though I'd never met Margaret, she was the only other volunteer to have lived here. She'd learned Bariba, and I admired her for that and felt a kind of kinship with her, perhaps because she'd likely asked to be placed this far out, as I had. In her packet, she called Toukara her best friend. "She is wise, patient and fun." She said I could trust her more than anyone. Fellow volunteers said I'd always be compared to Margaret, but I tried not to think about that. Toukara did seem wise. The day before when she took me on a tour of Yéma, we'd

DAVID WAGONER

## The Poets Agree Not to Talk About Money

On the patio after dinner, they agree  
to admire the sun going down at the far end  
of the garden and, behind their backs, the moon  
replaying its old role on opening night.

Now all their metaphors and similes  
are rising, sinking, rising, sinking again,  
but are better left unspoken among rivals  
perhaps less poor in spirit than in need.

Yet how can poets keep from thinking out loud  
*the moon is silvery and the molten sun*  
*is good as gold and the stars are diamonds*  
*and the garden green and crisp as something or other?*



stopped frequently to greet neighbors, and I'd notice how shrewdly she looked at them as they talked, not cutting them down exactly, but listening for what was going on behind their words. The wisdom was in her face, too, a beautiful imperial face with little paunches of age. Once, when chatting with one of her neighbors, there were about three longhorn cattle, one moment hanging out under a tree and the next charging straight for us. Tounkara leapt and yanked me out of their path. The cattle barreled but ten feet past us before they stopped and looked around, dumb-founded with dusty plumes settling all around them, as if they had no idea what they were running from, or that they'd even run. That's when Tounkara and I turned to each other and laughed. She was grand, and now she was holding the newborn's hands, singing to him, her raspy voice like a music box, all coppery bristles, wood, and pepper. She had a sense for how to act when, for knowing what a situation called for; and I thought, she must know things, things that make a person strong.

The girl returned with a basin of water and set it at Tounkara's side. "*Kà somburu*," we said to the girl. Good work. "*Kà somburu, no*," Tounkara repeated and dunked the scissors in water, dried them on her *pagne*, and began to cut the cord. I half-expected her to stop, rewind, light a lantern, and sterilize the scissors in the flame. But she angled the scissors every which way, blades that didn't cut so much as gnaw at the cord, while my reflexes hurled, fueled on fears of tetanus. I gripped myself hard not to react and looked to the girl in the plain dress. She was standing on the far side of the terrace, clinging to a pillar.

Sometimes I think about how an unfamiliar act, even an alarming one, can be muted when followed by something more familiar. Like when Tounkara washed him. She'd tossed the soap in the water basin and shook her hand around to make suds, like my mother and grandmother had taught me. Tounkara scooped up handful upon handful of sudsy water, splashing him and scrubbing between the little folds of his skin. He wailed and squirmed. She cooed at him. Her skirt was soon drenched, but she didn't seem to notice. She was fully

in it. I'd never known what it was like to be like that.

He would need his mother soon. The light was fading, chalky gray, the trees in the distance gray, and I wondered where she was. She couldn't still be in the field.

## When my father yelled, it banged through the house. He had explosions like this.

They had to have come for her. Who is *they*? I wondered. Her family. Someone to wash her.

Tounkara dried the newborn with the *pagne* and doused the truncated cord with iodine. She wrapped the gauze several revolutions around his belly.

"*Kà somburu*," I said. Good work, a cheer as common as hello and blessings and goodnight.

I think I saw then, for the first time, that she'd been scared before, scared we wouldn't find them, because she paused now and looked at me with misty gratitude. A heavy heart. "Yes," she said softly. Not the "yes" of self-affirmation, as in yes, I've been doing good work, but a "yes" given over to gods, a "yes" that humbly acknowledges, I am a vessel doing what must be done. I would come to love this about Bariba. I would love that no single person owned what was done. Everyone played a part. We were one great web. And then, within those same moments, our connection was cut. She had taken the infant's head into both hands, at first just inspecting the back and sides, his tuft of hair, but then she pressed her thumbs into the place where the head is soft, where the skull has yet to cover the brain, and she pressed hard, like kneading bread.

This memory has no sound.

IT STARTED HAPPENING THE DAY AFTER arrival. On my way to the post office in Cotonou, the commercial capitol, I walked over a mucky open sewer strewn with trash, cookie wrappers and black plastic bags, algae blooming into a neon stench as charcoal flecks spewed from a river of motorcycles and mopeds. I held my breath. Jubilant children ran at my heels, clapping their hands: "Yovo, yovo, bonsoir! Ça va bien? Merci!" I walked

more swiftly and tried to smile. They were flouting the French and assumed I was French or someone very much like the French. It was hot. The taxi drivers hissed, "Tssss, Yovo!" The children sang and clapped, and I had this idea that I could make myself into nothing.

During the ten-week Peace Corps training, we learned how to build latrines and filter water. We learned how to crush fish bones for calcium and mix it in porridge for children. We learned how to build mudstoves out of abandoned termite hills. We learned that female circumcision is a controversial topic we should keep to ourselves. They handed us a Xerox-copied booklet on female circumcision, a booklet produced by CI-AF, an African non-governmental organization for the eradication of harmful practices. I remember the drawing on the cover. An older woman cutting a screaming girl under a thatched stall, one parent holding her down, the other doing nothing. The drawings resembled those of a black-and-white comic strip. Our trainers explained those kinds of drawings are easier for Beninois to take. There was a drawing of healthy vagina. There was a drawing of a girl's torn vagina. It does something between your legs to see pictures like that. Our trainers said in southern Benin no forms of circumcision were widely practiced, but in the north, many tribes practiced excision, the second most severe form of circumcision, wherein the clitoris and labia minora are cut off. They said those who practice it believe if a girl isn't cut, she is forever a girl, but when she's cut, she learns "to clean herself up." CI-AF had people out there raising consciousness. They said, "It's best if you don't talk about it"; we'd likely alienate ourselves if we did. Those who guard the practice believe Westerners have put their people up to speaking out against it. I looked around at my fellow trainees. They sat staring vaguely into space, as if struck by a blow.

I AM A CIRCLER. I CIRCLE MY MEMORIES until I think I understand them well enough to put them down. The year before I became a Peace Corps volunteer I circled a couple highways trying to find out what had happened to my mother. I was living in Yakima, Washington then, volunteering full-time as a case manager in a maternity clinic for low-income



mothers. Every few months I took Route 97 down the desert hills and headed west on I-84 along the wide Columbia River to Portland. My mother's only sibling, Beth, lived there. She and my mother had grown up in western Massachusetts and after graduate studies each had followed the men they would marry, Beth to Portland and my mother to Upstate New York.

We visited maybe twice or three times during my childhood, and on one summer visit, when my sister was just over a year old, the air around my parents was particularly charged. They were unhappy, and I tended to steer clear of them. Beth had a small blue house, and one day, I was in one of the two rooms on the second floor, sprawled out with a photography book on the pyramids. Everyone else was on the first floor, my mother ferreting about, my father laying on the couch, my sister napping on his chest. My brother was down there too, likely building spaceships with Legos. Beth may have been outside. When my father yelled, it banged through the house. He had explosions like this. Some fly would buzz and buzz about his ear and eventually he'd erupt to get everything and everyone off of him NOW! Upstairs I sat very still, afraid to turn a single page. I didn't want to be heard; I wanted to pretend I wasn't there. The next sound was of someone coming carefully up the stairs. My mother in the doorway, clutching my sister. She squatted to the floor beside me, her face riddled with worry.

"Don't go down there. Your father just spanked your sister really hard. See here?" She'd pulled down my sister's diaper. "See the outline?"

I couldn't, but I wanted to be able to see it for her. I sat on my hands.

She grimaced, "It was redder before."

For the rest of the day, I watched Beth. I watched for looks passed between her and my mother. I wondered if she'd seen my father spank my sister. Had he? He'd spanked me twice maybe. Beth's face said little. She pulled weeds from her garden; she cooked a roast she'd bought from a German farmer; she offered us honey with our bread. She was cautious and calm and solitary. I wondered how she got that way. I thought maybe it had something to do with her garden, or her refusal to cut her hair, which was long and black and always pinned up. In contrast, my mother spent eighty dollars

twice a month for a perm and a frost at the salon. Beth's clothes were fit for casual walks outdoors, whereas Mom, a family therapist, filled two closets with business suits. She "had to look professional" and complained she couldn't buy clothes for us because our father didn't give her enough money. They were negotiating a divorce by then. He never talked about our mother to us, but at night my mother would come into my room and close the door. Taking a seat on my bed, she'd tell me things she said I shouldn't tell anyone, especially my brother or sister, because it would hurt them, like the story about the time my father shoved my brother against the

floor of the car when my brother broke his brand new kite. I had no memory of this, and she frowned. "Well, you're just not remembering right."

I'm not sure when I became a furtive girl. What I remember is suddenly being afraid of myself in the way that people who think of themselves as unacceptable feel watched and afraid of doing things wrong. One day, I thought, if I disciplined myself and stayed close to good friends, I would be okay. In my teens, I began noting the characteristics of women I admired and stowing them away for when I could practice being on my own. My thoughts often turned to Beth. She ate and shared the food she'd

CHANTEL ACEVEDO

## An Angry Lover's Alphabet

Am I something of a mosquito  
Bite, swollen, pink and round,  
Calling forth your nail that leaves  
Dents like half-moons in me to kill an  
Exquisite itch? Or am I more of a lager,  
Filled with bitter honey-brown,  
Grown warm beneath your tight,  
Hot grip. You bring me to your lip, then, like  
Instinct, you spit me out as if I were poison.  
Joking aside, Sweets, whenever your  
Kiss, like a tiny vacuum drawing up dirt,  
Lands on my skin, I, too, recoil and  
Make figure eights with my eyeballs.  
Never mind that last night we  
Ordered in together—wontons for you,  
Pizza for me—and grinning you  
Quoted Shakespeare, saying with  
Relish, "Let's have one other gaudy night."  
So what if you held my hand,  
Touched my cheek with soft,  
Unending strokes, then traced the length of  
Veins on my wrist with your tongue. My  
Waterloo, you make me your calendar,  
X-ing out my days with kisses. You are my  
Yellow fever. Yet, I will want you till the  
Zero hour when all goes dark and cold.





Like an exquisitely cohesive mosaic, [these] stories illuminate the inner lives of people fending off loneliness and trying to be made whole again.

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— *Thomas Fox Averill*

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planted, and her reticence seemed wise to me. Still, when I circled those highways at ages twenty-two and twenty-three, I was terrified of the stories my mother could have told her about me. I'd moved in with my father at age fifteen, and my mother didn't like that. She used to call my friends' mothers and tell them I wasn't to be trusted. So at first, I didn't ask Beth about family. Beth was a compost expert, so my questions focused on how to start a compost and how to feed one, when really, over the 400 miles to Portland and back and the months in between, a single question was never far from my mind, a question I didn't know how to ask. What happened to my mother?

"She was wonderful with children," Beth said on my final visit. I'd asked her what Mom was like as a girl, and she reminisced about her sister playing with toddlers at neighborhood picnics. I leaned against a side table, keeping quiet. I couldn't tell her what it was like to be her child. Beth was worried, she said. Recently, her sister seemed unable to talk about anything other than illness. She would try to get her to change the subject, but inevitably she'd steer it back to a chronic illness neither of us could be sure she really had. I took a chance and wondered aloud if my mother had been depressed and insecure for a long time. Beth nodded. She thought that might be true. When I asked where she thought the insecurity came from, her voice turned adamant in a way I hadn't heard before.

"Frankly, your father. You don't know how difficult it was."

Right, I didn't. In his defense, I told her he'd gotten help for his temper, and that was the last time I asked her what happened to her sister. Beth had a psychotic break not long after.

I DON'T KNOW WHETHER THE MOTHER Tounkara and I found in the field had been excised. When I saw her, when I saw the amount of blood coloring her skirt like a red apron, the booklet our trainers had shown us did not come to mind. I only worried that she might be bleeding too much and going into shock. Months later, when I moved to another town, a town on one of Benin's three paved roads—"highways," they called them—I met a woman who wanted to talk about excision. She reminded me

that scar tissue cannot stretch, so when an excised woman in labor has contractions the internal damage is severe until she tears. She hesitated to explain why Tounkara might have done that to the infant's head. Reluctantly, she submitted that a child born to an excised woman is thought to come out with a lumpy head and so the head must be smoothed. She couldn't confirm whether this was true. She'd never seen it herself. Though she'd been excised, she'd had all her girls by caesarian, and she said if anyone ever touched her girls, she'd kill them.

When I returned to the US, I went to the grocery store and wandered the aisles in the produce section for a small eternity, amazed at the abundance, the bins upon bins of fruits and squash—I wanted to touch them—their shapes and contours. I wanted to touch the red peppers, how they could curve and fold in like a mouth. I wanted to touch the avocado's alligator skin. I wanted to touch the frilly mushrooms and the dirt all around their stems. But none of it seemed like mine anymore. I was staring at the peaches when a woman in a silk blouse and blazer appeared and started pressing on the fruit, and a voice in my head said *stop*.

ONE OF THE ROOMS AT THE MATERNITY HAD beds lining opposite walls. It was the room that opened right onto the terrace. There was a small metal crib with small mattress where Tounkara laid the newborn. I stayed with him while Tounkara went off to do something down the corridor. I wished I could tell if any harm had been done. His face, all lemony and prunish, made him look constipated. A good sign that his parts were working. You'll get that worked out, I thought; you just need a feeding. I held on to words I'd learned working at the maternity clinic in Yakima, like meconium, an infant's tarry first excretion, and colostrum, a mother's first yellowy milk. I wanted his mother to come, and I wanted to create a little globed space around him. He'd just been born.

The girl came in with a hand-broom and swept the floor in rows, back and forth, stroke after swift stroke. Sweeping well, at a constant rhythm, row by row, was how she showed she was good. I had no idea what to do. I prayed often back then. It seemed the only place to go. I looked at the infant and wondered why



babies look so alone. "May you have much love," I whispered. "May you have many wonderful guides."

Out on the terrace, I looked toward the one road cutting through town, one dirt road in the middle of the forest, and I felt so far out. The mother had to come soon, or someone had to come and tell us where to take the baby. It was too quiet. No cars and no bicycles passed, not a soul on foot. Only the faded remains of the S-shaped etchings a girl had swept in the dirt during chores. The sun had gone behind the forest; the sky had gone to white-gray, like an eye half-closed, and all was dull in a way that embellishes nothing and points to nothing and says flatly this is what is here; there is no other world.

A man came pedaling through the grove, and with him the mother from the field, balanced somehow on his back wheel. He helped her scuff across the yard to the open double doors. Someone had wrapped her in a clean skirt. On the bed next to the crib, she lay down without a word, her back to the doors, and her back to her child. She'd had enough of light. Soon family arrived,

and they sat, not next to the mother or the crib, not comforting or comforted. Hands placed over their knees, they sat timidly on a bed against the opposite wall, not talking in low voices, but keeping to themselves in such a reserved manner I couldn't tell how they felt about the child. They had a new child. I wanted to understand what it felt like to be them. I needed to know whether this birth was a joy or a burden.

Toukara lit a lantern and placed it on the floor. She spoke quietly to the family. They nodded and kept their places, looking on steadily. The mother's people would stay for the night, and as we turned to go what I finally saw in the family was loyalty to a vigil.

I WOULD WALK THE ROAD FROM THE village to the maternity many times, circling, as I circle it now in my mind. Depending on the season, the road from the village to the maternity is sandy from drought or solid and packed down with deep rain gulleys on either side. And if the water pump near the maternity is working, there are droplets in the dirt from girls walking basins full of water

from the pump to their homes. The girls are excised in dry season; their wounds bind faster then. You spot a recently excised girl by the way she walks, stilted and bowlegged, around the pain. And though I walked that road many times, never again would I walk through the maize stalks where the mother had given birth because the next time I walked that way, the stalks were gone. The field had been razed and burned, and all that remained were crabbed ashes in the dust where roots had been before.

Only once more would I go down the road with Toukara for a birth. It was the only other one she asked me to go on, months later. There was a full moon. The light was deep blue. At the maternity, the woman lay on a flat metal table, knees up and parted, her belly round and full. The lantern light gleamed on her sweat as she trembled. Never once did she cry out or make a sound. She was lean and strong, bearing down, and I remember tucking away an image of her for how I wanted to be when I gave birth. Bariba value stoic women. Strong women. Women who bear up. I don't feel pain. Do you feel pain? Don't. □

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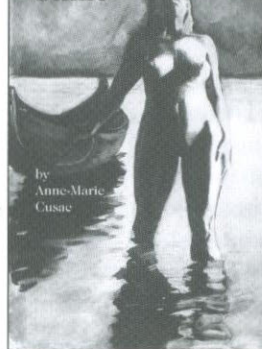
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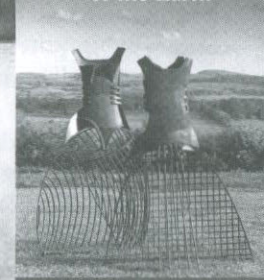


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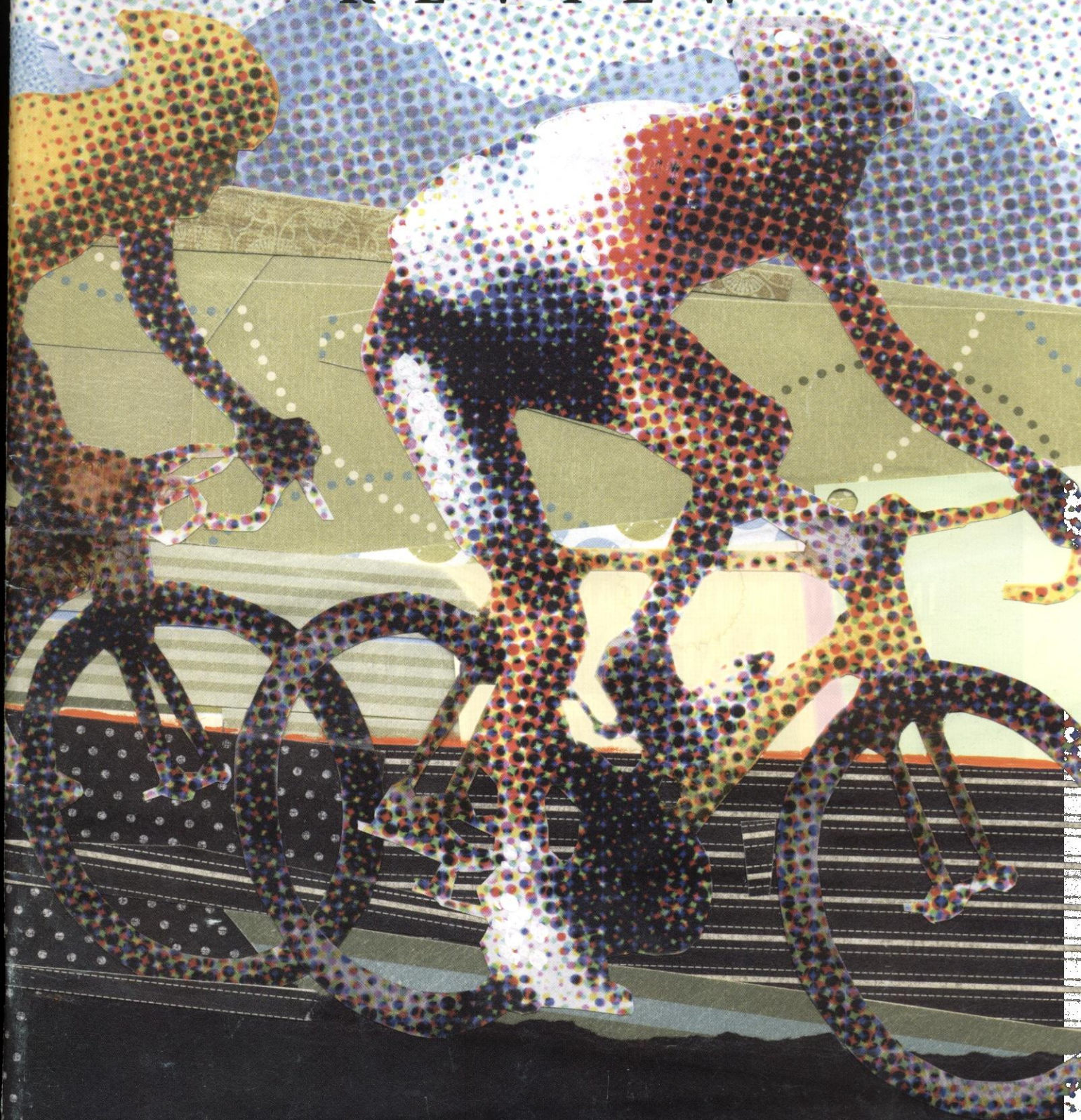
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