

# THE AWAKENING OF MY INTEREST IN ANNULAR SYSTEMS\*

By David Foster Wallace

In the winter of 1963 I remember I was eating lunch and reading something dull on temperature reactivity coefficients when my father came into the kitchen and made himself a tomato-juice beverage and said that as soon as I was finished he and my mother needed my help in their bedroom. My father had spent the morning at the commercial studio and was still all in white, with his wig with its rigid white parted hair, and hadn't yet removed the television makeup that gave his face an orange cast in daylight. I hurried up and rinsed my dishes in the sink and proceeded down the hall to the master bedroom. My mother and father were both in there. The master bedroom's drapes and the heavy lightproof curtain behind them were pulled back and the venetian blinds were up, and the daylight was very bright in the room, the decor of which was white and blue and powder blue.

My father was bent over my par-

*David Foster Wallace's last contribution to Harper's Magazine, "Tennis, Trigonometry, Tornadoes," a memoir, appeared in the December 1991 issue. This story is excerpted from a longer work in progress.*



ents' large bed, which was stripped of bedding all the way down to the mattress protector. He was bent over, pushing down on the bed's mattress with the heels of his hands. The bed's sheets and pillows and powder-blue coverlet were all in a pile on the carpet next to the bed. Then my father handed me his tumbler of tomato juice to hold for him and got all the way on top of the bed and knelt on it, pressing down vigorously on the mattress with his hands, putting all his weight

into it. He bore down hard on one area of the mattress and then let up and pivoted slightly on his knees and bore down with equal vigor on a different area of the mattress. He did this all over the bed, sometimes actually walking around on his knees to get at different areas of the mattress, then bearing down on them. I remember thinking the bearing-down action looked very much like the emergency compression of a heart patient's chest. I remember my father's tomato juice had grains of pepperish material floating on the surface. My mother was standing at the bedroom window, smoking a long cigarette and looking at the

lawn, which I had watered before I ate lunch. The uncovered window faced south. The room blazed with sunlight.

"Eureka," my father said, pressing down several times on one particular

\*From *The Chill of Inspiration: Spontaneous Reminiscences by Seventeen Pioneers of DT-Cycle Lithiumized Annular Fusion*, ed. Prof. Dr. Günther Sperber, Institut für Neutronenphysik und Reaktortechnik, Kernforschungszentrum Karlsruhe, U.R.G., © 2002 by Springer-Verlag Wien, New York.



spot. There was a squeaking sound from the mattress.

I asked whether I could ask what was going on.

"Goddamn bed squeaks," my father said. He stayed on his knees over the one particular spot, bearing down on it repeatedly. He looked up and over at my mother next to the bedroom window. "Do you or do you not hear that?" he said, bearing down and letting up. My mother tapped her long cigarette into a shallow ashtray she held in her other hand. She watched my father press down on the squeaking spot.

Sweat was running in dark orange lines down my father's face from under his rigid white professional wig. My father served from 1963 to 1964 as the Man from Glad, representing what was then the Glad Flaccid Plastic Receptacle Co. of Zanesville, Ohio, via a California-based advertising agency. The tunic, tight trousers, and boots the agency made him wear were also white.

My father pivoted on his knees and swung his body around and got off the mattress and put his hand at the small of his back and straightened up, continuing to look at the mattress.

"This miserable cock-sucking bed your mother felt she needed to hang on to and bring with us out here for quote sentimental value has started squeaking," my father said. His saying "your mother" indicated that he was addressing himself to me. He held his hand out for his tumbler of tomato juice without having to look at me. He stared darkly down at the bed. "It's driving us fucking nuts."

My mother balanced her cigarette in her shallow ashtray and laid the ashtray on the windowsill and bent over the foot of the bed, bearing down on the spot my father had isolated, and it squeaked again.

"And at night this one spot here we've isolated and identified seems to spread and metastasize until the whole goddamn bed's replete with squeaks." He drank some of his tomato juice. "Areas that gibber and squeak," my father said, "until we both feel as if we're being eaten by rats." He felt along the line of his jaw. "Boiling hordes of gibbering squeaking ravenous rats," he said, almost trembling with irritation.

I looked down at the mattress, at my mother's hands, which tended to flake in dry climates. She carried a small bottle of moisturizing lotion at all times.

My father said, "And I have personally had it with the aggravation." He blotted his forehead on his white sleeve.

I reminded my father that he'd mentioned needing my help with something. At that age I was already taller than both my parents. My mother was taller than my father, even in his boots, but much of her height was in her legs. My father's body was denser and more substantial.

My mother came around to my father's side of the bed and picked bedding up off the floor. She started folding the sheets very precisely, using both her arms and her chin. She stacked the folded bedding neatly on top of her dresser, which I remember was white lacquer.

**M**y father looked at me. "What we need to do here, Jim, is take the mattress and box spring off the bed frame, under here," my father said, "and expose the frame." He took time out to explain that the bed's bottom mattress was hard-framed and known uniformly as a box spring. I was looking down at my sneakers and making my feet alternately pigeon-toed and then penguin-toed on the bedroom's blue carpet. My father drank some of his tomato juice and looked down at the edge of the bed's metal frame and felt along the outline of his jaw, where his commercial studio makeup ended abruptly at the turtleneck collar of his professional white tunic.

"The frame on this bed is old," he told me. "It's probably older than you are. Right now I'm thinking the thing's bolts have maybe started coming loose, and that's what's gibbering and squeaking at night." He finished his tomato juice and held the glass out for me to take and put somewhere. "So we want to move all this top crap out of the way, entirely"—he gestured with one arm—"entirely out of the way, get it out of the room, and expose the frame, and see if we don't maybe just need to tighten up the bolts."

I wasn't sure where to put my father's empty glass, which had juice

residue and grains of pepper along the interior sides. I poked at the mattress and box spring a little bit with my foot. "Are you sure it isn't just the mattress?" I said. The bed frame's bolts struck me as a rather exotic first-order explanation for the squeaking.

My father gestured broadly. "Synchronicity surrounds me. Concord," he said. "Because that's what your mother thinks it is, also." My mother was using both hands to take the blue pillowcases off all five of their pillows, again using her chin as a clamp. The pillows were all the over-plump polyester fiberfill kind, because of my father's allergies.

"Great minds think alike," my father said.

Neither of my parents had any interest in hard science, though a great uncle had accidentally electrocuted himself with a field series generator he was seeking to patent.

My mother stacked the pillows on top of the neatly folded bedding on her dresser. She had to get up on her tiptoes to put the folded pillowcases on top of the pillows. I had started to move to help her, but I couldn't decide where to put the empty tomato-juice glass.

"But you just want to hope it isn't the mattress," my father said. "Or the box spring."

My mother sat down on the foot of the bed and got out another long cigarette and lit it. She carried a little leatherette snap-case for both her cigarettes and her lighter.

My father said, "Because a new frame, even if we can't get the bolts squared away on this one and I have to go get a new one. A new frame. It wouldn't be too bad, see. Even top-shelf frames aren't that expensive. But new mattresses are outrageously expensive." He looked at my mother. "And I mean fucking *outrageous*." He was looking down at the back of my mother's head. "And we bought a new box spring for this sad excuse for a bed not five years ago." He was looking at the back of my mother's head as if he wanted to confirm that she was listening. My mother had crossed her legs and was looking with a certain concentration either at or out the master bedroom window. Our home's whole subdivision, Sepulveda Heights,



consisted of large prefabricated colonial homes ranged along the crest of a severe hillside, which meant that the view from my parents' bedroom was of just sky and sun and a foreshortened declivity of lawn. The lawn sloped at an average angle of fifty-five degrees and had to be mowed horizontally. None of the subdivision's lawns had trees yet.

"Of course that was during a seldom-discussed point in time when your mother had to assume the burden of assuming responsibility for finances in the household," my father said. He was now perspiring very heavily, but still had his white professional toupee on, and still looked at my mother.

My father acted, throughout our time in California, as both symbol and spokesman for the Glad F.P.R. Co.'s Individual Sandwich Bag Division. He was the first of two actors to portray the Man from Glad. He was inserted several times a month into a mock-up of a car interior, where he would be filmed in a tight trans-windshield shot receiving an emergency radio summons to some household that was having a portable-food-storage problem. He was then placed opposite an actress in a generic kitchen-interior set, where he would explain how a particular species of Glad Sandwich Bag was precisely what the doctor ordered for the particular portable-food-storage problem at issue. In his vaguely medical uniform of all white, he carried an air of authority and great evident conviction, and earned what I always gathered was an impressive salary, and received, for the first time in his career, fan mail, some of which bordered on the disturbing, and which he sometimes liked to read out loud at night in the living room, loudly and dramatically, sitting up with nightcaps and the letters long after my mother and I had gone to bed.

I asked whether I could excuse myself for a moment to take my father's empty tomato-juice glass out to the kitchen sink. I was worried that the residue along the interior sides of the tumbler would harden into the kind of precipitate that would be hard to wash off.

"For Christ's sake Jim just put that thing down," my father said.

I put the tumbler down over next to

the base of my mother's dresser, pressing down hard to create a kind of circular receptacle for it in the carpet. My mother stood up and went back over by the bedroom window with her ashtray. We could tell she was getting out of our way.

My father cracked his knuckles and studied the path between the bed and the bedroom door.

I said I understood my part here to be to help my father move the mattress and box spring off the suspect bed frame and well out of the way. My father cracked his knuckles and replied that I was becoming almost frighteningly quick and perceptive. He went around between the foot of the bed and my mother at the window. He said, "I want to let's just stack it all out in the hall, to get it the hell out of here and give us some room to maneuver."

"Right," I said.

My father and I were now on opposite sides of my parents' bed. My father rubbed his hands together and bent and worked them between the mattress and box spring and began to lift the mattress up from his side of the bed. When his side of the mattress had risen to the height of his shoulders, he somehow inverted his hands and began pushing his side up rather than lifting it. The top of his wig disappeared behind the rising mattress, his side of which rose in an arc to almost the height of the white ceiling, exceeded ninety degrees, toppled over, and began to fall over down toward me. The mattress's overall movement was like the crest of a breaking wave, I remember. I spread my arms and took the impact with my chest and face. All I could see was an extreme close-up of the woodland floral pattern of the mattress protector.

The mattress, a Simmons Beautyrest whose tag said that it could not by law be removed, now formed the hypotenuse of a right dihedral triangle whose legs were myself and the bed's box spring. I remember visualizing and considering this triangle. My legs were trembling under the mattress's canted weight. My father was exhorting me to hold and support the mattress. The respectively sharp plastic and meaty human smells of the mattress and pro-

teCTOR were very distinct because my nose was mashed up against them.

My father came around to my side of the bed, and together we pushed the mattress back up until it stood at ninety degrees again. We edged carefully apart and each took one end of the upright mattress and began jockeying it off the bed and out the bedroom door into the uncarpeted hallway.

This was a king-size Simmons Beautyrest mattress. It was massive but had very little structural integrity. It kept curving and curling and wobbling. My father exhorted both me and the mattress. It was flaccid and floppy as we tried to maneuver it. My father had an especially hard time with his half of the mattress's upright weight because of an old tennis injury.

While we were jockeying it on its side off the bed, part of the mattress on my father's end slipped and flopped over and down onto a pair of steel reading lamps, adjustable cubes of brushed steel attached by toggle bolts to the white wall over the head of the bed. The lamps took a solid hit from the mattress, and one cube was rotated all the way around on its toggle so that its open side and bulb now pointed at the ceiling. The joint and toggle made a painful squeaking sound as the cube was wrenched around upward. This was also when I became aware that even the reading lamps were on in the daylight room, because a faint square of direct lamplight, its four sides made slightly concave by the distortion of projection, appeared on the white ceiling above the skewed cube. The lamps didn't fall off. They remained attached to the wall.

"Goddamn it to hell," my father said as he regained control of his end of the mattress.

When the mattress's thickness made it difficult for him to squeeze through the doorway while holding his end, my father also said, "Fucking son of a . . ."

In time we were able to get my parents' giant mattress out into the narrow hallway that ran between the master bedroom and the kitchen. I could hear another terrific squeak from the bedroom as my mother tried to realign the reading lamp whose cube had been inverted. Drops of sweat



were falling from my father's face onto his side of the mattress, darkening part of the protector's fabric. My father and I tried to lean the mattress at a slight supporting angle against one wall of the hallway, but because the floor of the hallway was uncarpeted and didn't provide sufficient resistance the mattress wouldn't stay upright. Its bottom edge slid out from the wall all the way across the width of the hallway until it met the baseboard of the opposite wall, and the upright mattress's top edge slid down the wall until the whole mattress sagged at an extremely concave slumped angle, a dry section of the woodland floral mattress protector stretched drum-tight over the slumped crease and the springs possibly damaged by the deforming concavity.

My father looked at the canted concave mattress sagging across the width of the hall and moved one end of it a little with the toe of his boot and looked at me and said, "Fuck it."

My bow tie was rumpled and at an angle.

My father had to walk unsteadily across the mattress in his white boots to get back to my side of the mattress and the bedroom behind me. On his way across he stopped and felt speculatively at his jaw, his boots sunk deep in woodland floral cotton. He said "Fuck it" again, and I remember not being clear about what he was referring to. Then my father turned and started unsteadily back the way he had come across the mattress, one hand against the wall for support. He instructed me to wait right there in the hallway for one moment while he darted into the kitchen at the other end of the hall on a very brief errand. His steadying hand left four faint smeared prints on the wall's white paint.

My parents' bed's box spring, though also king-size and heavy, had just below its synthetic covering a wooden frame that gave the box spring structural integrity, and it didn't flop or alter its shape. After another bit of difficulty for my father—who was too thick through the middle, even with the professional girdle beneath his Glad costume, to squeeze easily with his end of the box spring through the bedroom doorway—we were able to get the thing into the hall and lean it

vertically at something just over seventy degrees against the wall, where it stayed upright with no problem.

"That's the way she wants doing, Jim," my father said, clapping me on the back in exactly the ebullient way that had prompted me to have my mother buy an elastic athletic cranial strap for my glasses. I had told my mother I needed the strap for competitive sports, and she had not asked any questions.

My father's hand was still on my

back as we returned to the master bedroom. "Right, then!" my father said. His mood was now elevated. There was a brief second of confusion at the doorway as each of us tried to step back to let the other through first.

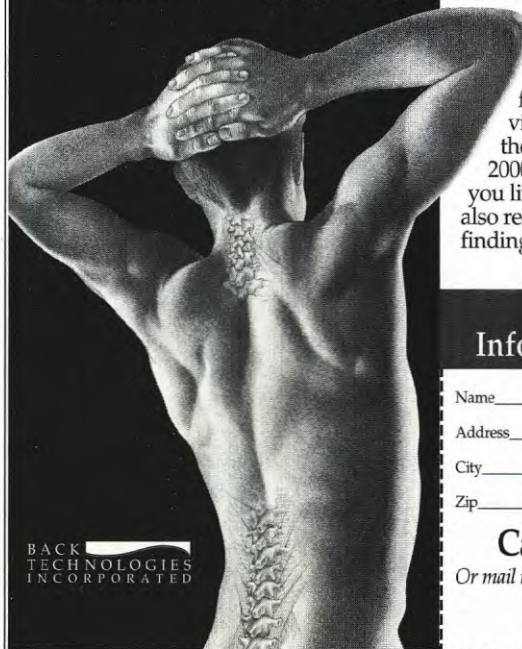
There was now nothing but the suspect frame left where the bed had been. There was something exoskeletal and frail-looking about the bed frame, a plain low-ratio rectangle of black steel. At each corner of the rectangle was a caster. The casters'

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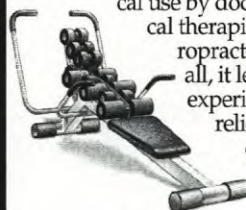
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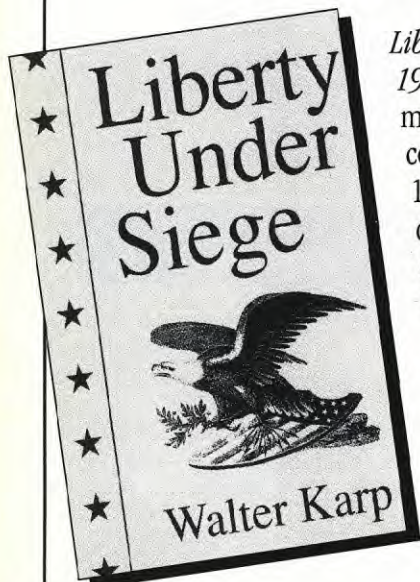
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wheels had sunk into the pile carpet under the weight of the bed and my parents and were almost completely submerged in the carpet's fibers. Each of the frame's sides had a flat steel protrusion welded at ninety degrees to its interior's base, so that a single rectangular narrow shelf perpendicular to the frame's rectangle ran all around the frame's interior. This little shelf was obviously there to support the bed's occupants and king-size box spring and mattress.

My father seemed frozen in place. I cannot remember what my mother was doing. There seemed to be a long silent interval of my father looking closely at the exposed frame. The interval had the silence and stillness of dusty rooms immersed in sunlight. I briefly imagined every piece of furniture in the master bedroom covered with sheets and the room unoccupied for years as the sun rose and crossed and fell outside the window, the room's daylight becoming staler and staler. I could hear two power lawn mowers of slightly different pitch from somewhere down our subdivision's street. The direct light through the master bedroom's window swam with rotating columns of raised dust. I remember it seemed the ideal moment for a sneeze.

Dust lay thick on the frame and even hung from the frame's interior support-shelf in tiny gray beards. It was impossible to see any bolts anywhere on the frame.

My father blotted sweat and wet makeup from his forehead with the back of his sleeve, which was now dark orange with makeup. "Jesus will you look at that mess," he said. He looked at my mother. "Jesus."

The carpeting in my parents' bedroom was deep-pile and a darker blue than the pale blue of the rest of the bedroom's color scheme. I remember the carpet as more a royal blue, with a saturation level somewhere between moderate and strong. The rectangular expanse of royal-blue carpet that had been hidden under the bed was itself carpeted with a thick layer of clotted dust. The rectangle of dust was gray-white and thick and unevenly layered, and the only evidence of the room's carpet below was a faint sick bluish cast to the dust layer. It looked

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as if dust had not drifted under the bed and settled on the carpet inside the frame but rather had somehow taken root and grown on it, upon it, the way a mold will take root and gradually cover an expanse of spoiled food. The layer of dust itself looked a little like bad cottage cheese. It was nauseous. Some of the dust layer's uneven topography was caused by certain lost and litterish objects that had found their way under the bed—a flyswatter, a roughly *Variety*-size magazine, some bottle tops, three wadded Kleenex, and what was probably a sock—and gotten covered and textured in dust.

There was also a faint odor, sour and fungal, like the smell of an overused bath mat.

"Jesus, there's even a *smell*," my father said. He made a show of inhaling through his nose and screwing up his face. "There's even a smell." He blotted his forehead and felt his jaw and looked hard at my mother. His mood was no longer elevated. My father's mood surrounded him like a field and affected any room he occupied, like an odor or a certain cast to the light.

"When was the last time this got cleaned under here?" my father asked my mother.

My mother didn't say anything. She looked at my father as he moved the steel frame around a little with his boot, which raised even more dust into the window's sunlight. The bed frame seemed very lightweight, moving back and forth noiselessly on its casters' submerged wheels. My father often moved lightweight objects around absently with his foot, the way other men doodle or examine their cuticles. Rugs, magazines, telephone and electrical cords, his own removed shoe. It was one of my father's ways of gathering his thoughts or trying to control his mood.

"Under what presidential administration was this room last deep-cleaned, I'm standing here prompted to fucking muse out loud," my father said.

I looked at my mother to see whether she was going to say anything in reply.

I said to my father, "You know, since we're discussing squeaking beds, my bed squeaks, too."



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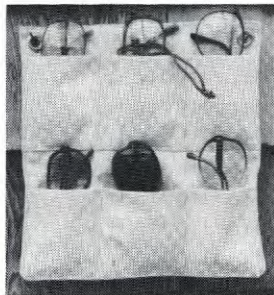




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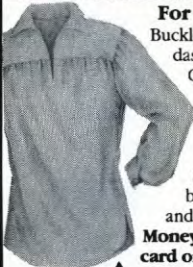


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My father was trying to squat down to see whether he could locate any bolts on the frame, saying something to himself under his breath. He put his hands on the frame for balance and almost fell forward when the frame rolled slightly under his weight.

"But I don't think I even really noticed it until we began to discuss it," I said. I looked at my mother. "I don't think it bothers me," I said. "Actually, I think I kind of like it. I think I've gradually gotten so used to it that it's become almost comforting. At this juncture," I said.

My mother looked at me.

"I'm not complaining about it," I said. "The discussion just made me think of it."

"Oh, we hear your bed, don't you worry," my father said. He was still trying to squat, which drew his corset and the hem of his tunic up and allowed the top of his bottom's crack to appear above the waist of his white pants. He shifted slightly to point up at the master bedroom's ceiling. "You so much as turn over in bed up there? Down here we hear it." He took one steel side of the rectangle and shook the frame vigorously, sending up a shroud of dust. The bed frame seemed to weigh next to nothing under his hands. My mother made a mustache of her finger to hold back a sneeze.

"But it doesn't aggravate us the way this rodential son of a whore right here does." He shook the frame again.

I remarked that I didn't think I'd ever once heard their bed squeak, from upstairs. My father twisted his head around to try to look up at me as I stood there behind him. But I said I'd definitely heard and could confirm the presence of a squeak when he'd pressed on the mattress, and could verify that the squeak was no one's imagination.

My father held a hand up to signal me to please stop talking. He remained in a squat, rocking slightly on the balls of his feet, using the rolling frame to keep his balance. The flesh of the top of his bottom and crack-area protruded over the waist of his pants. There were also deep red folds in the back of his neck, below the blunt cut of the wig, because he was looking up and over at my mother, who was resting her tailbone on the sill of the win-



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dow, still holding her shallow ashtray.

"Maybe you'd like to go get the vacuum," he said. My mother put the ashtray down on the sill and exited the master bedroom, passing between me and the dresser piled with bedding. "If you can remember where it is!" my father called after her.

I could hear my mother trying to get past the king-size mattress sagging diagonally across the hall.

My father was rocking more violently on the balls of his feet, and now the rocking had the sort of rolling, side-to-side quality of a ship in high seas. He came very close to losing his balance as he leaned to his right to get a handkerchief from his hip pocket and began using it to reach out and flick dust off something at one corner of the bed frame. After a moment he pointed down next to a caster.

"Bolt," he said, pointing at the side of a caster. "Right there's a bolt." I leaned in over him. Drops of my father's perspiration made dark coins in the dust of the frame. There was nothing but smooth lightweight black steel surface where he was pointing, but just to the left of where he was pointing I could see what might have been a bolt, a little stalactite of clotted dust hanging from some slight protrusion. My father's hands were broad and his finger blunt. Another possible bolt lay several inches to the right of where he pointed. His finger trembled badly, and I believe the trembling might have been from the muscular strain on his bad knees, trying to hold so much new weight in a squat for an extended period. I heard the telephone ring twice. There had been an extended silence, with my father pointing at neither protrusion and me trying to lean in over him.

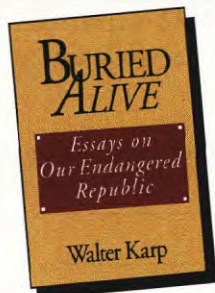
Then, still squatting on the balls of his feet, my father placed both hands on the side of the frame and leaned out over the side into the rectangle of dust and had what at first sounded like a bad coughing fit. His hunched back and rising bottom kept me from watching him cough. I remember deciding that the reason the frame was not rolling under his hands' pressure was that my father now had so much of his weight on it, and that maybe my father's nervous system's response to heavy dust was a cough-signal instead

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of a sneeze-signal. It was the wet sound of material hitting the dust inside the rectangle, plus the rising odor, that signified to me that, rather than coughing, my father had been taken ill. The spasms involved made his back rise and fall and his bottom tremble under his white commercial slacks. It was not too uncommon for my father to be taken ill shortly after coming home from work to relax, but now he seemed to have been taken really ill. To give him some privacy, I went around the frame to the side closest to the window, where there was direct light and less odor, and examined another of the frame's casters. My father was whispering to himself in brief expletive phrases between the spasms of his illness. I squatted and rubbed dust from a small area of the frame and wiped the dust on the carpet by my feet. There was a small carriage-head bolt on either side of the plating that attached the caster to the bed frame. I knelt and felt one of the bolts. Its round smooth head made it impossible either to tighten or loosen. Putting my cheek to the carpet and examining the bottom of the little horizontal shelf welded to the frame's side, I observed that the bolt seemed threaded tightly and completely through its hole, and I decided it was doubtful that any of the casters' platings' bolts were producing the sounds that reminded my father of rodents.

Just at this time, I remember, there was a loud cracking sound and my area of the frame jumped violently as my father's sudden illness caused him to faint and he lost his balance and pitched forward and lay prone and asleep over his side of the bed frame, which, as I rolled away from the frame and rose to my knees, I saw was now either broken or very badly bent. My father lay facedown in a mixture of the rectangle's thick dust and the material he'd brought up from his upset stomach. The dust his collapse raised was awful, and as the new dust rose and spread it attenuated the master bedroom's daylight as decisively as if a cloud had moved over the sun in the window. My father's professional wig had detached and lay scalp-up in the mixture of dust and stomach material. The stomach material appeared to be mostly gastric blood until I re-

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## Israel's "Right to Exist" Is it important that the Arabs acknowledge it?

In the on-again/off again Mid-East Peace Conference, the Arabs, insist that meetings take place in Madrid, in Washington or some other locale far from the area of conflict. The Israelis wanted to convene in the respective capitals of the involved parties. It seemed like a reasonable suggestion. After all, Jerusalem is only 150 miles from Damascus, Syria, and only 80 miles from Amman, Jordan. But the Arabs did not accept that suggestion and insisted on a site as far away from home as possible. Why would they wish to impose such inconvenience on themselves? They believed that meeting with Israel in their respective capitals might by inference be considered as their recognition of Israel's existence.

### What are the facts?

**A Denial of Reality:** Despite decisive military defeats in the wars that they have launched against the Jewish state, the Arabs deny the existence of the country that has inflicted such severe and repeated punishment on them. When it becomes inevitable to mention the Jewish state at all it is insolently referred to only as "the Zionist entity". This non-acknowledgement of Israel's existence is not simply a matter of semantics. Arab maps do not show Israel,

but a vast area labeled as "Palestine". Cities such as Tel Aviv and Haifa simply don't exist. Arab

**"Israel's existence is in no way dependent on the recognition of any Arab state. It's simple: Israel exists because it exists."**

school children have no "official" knowledge of the existence of Israel. Schedules of foreign airlines that show Israel on their route maps or that list Israeli destinations are not allowed in most Arab countries. Foreign publications print special editions for the Arab countries, since no publication carrying advertising of Israeli firms may appear in those countries. And, of course, tourists of any nationality may not enter most Arab countries if their passports show evidence that the holders have ever visited Israel, the "non-existent country".

**Israel Exists because it Exists:** As an inducement to Israel for yielding lands that are absolutely indispensable for the country's defense, the "West Bank" and the Golan Heights, the Arabs now and then offer the possibility of the "recognition" of Israel's existence. The sad and almost incomprehensible aspect of that is that many well-meaning people in the U.S., and in other countries believe that this might be an acceptable bargain for Israel. But it's a self-defeating exercise. Israel's existence is in no

way dependent on the recognition of any Arab state. It's simple: Israel exists because it exists. There-

fore, suppose that meaningful meetings came about between Israel and an Arab country, and suppose that an Arab diplomat would ask what Israel would be prepared to "give" if that Arab country would consider acknowledging Israel's existence. Israel should reply that it in turn would consider acknowledging that Arab country's existence. Or, Israel could declare a boycott of the Arab world and could offer to relax or to rescind such boycott in consideration of parallel gestures by that Arab country.

The bizarre concept of Israel's "non-existence" has been around for over forty years. Many have been led to believe that Israel should bring substantial sacrifices, so as to get the Arabs to acknowledge Israel's existence. It is often said that Israel needs to be "recognized" by the Arabs in order to "normalize her condition". But need not the Arabs, too, live in "normalized conditions"? And Israel is often promised that, in return for yielding vital strategic territory to the Arabs, she would be assured of "safe and secure borders". But don't the Arabs also need borders that are safe and secure? The Arab countries have come to believe that peace is only good and desirable for Israel. But it is surely at least as important for the Arabs, who have lived through five wars with Israel—the "non-existent country". Peace and prosperity can and will come to this troubled region only when the Arabs accept the reality of Israel's existence and negotiate with her in good faith.

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called the tomato-juice beverages my father had been drinking. He lay face-down, with his bottom high in the air, over the side of the bed frame, which his weight had broken almost in half. This was how I accounted for the loud cracking sound.

I stood out of the way of the dust and the window's dusty light, feeling my jaw and examining my prone father from a distance. I remember that his breathing was regular and wet, and that the dust mixture bubbled somewhat. It was then that it occurred to me that when I'd been supporting the bed's raised mattress with my face and chest preparatory to its removal from the room, the dihedral triangle I'd imagined the mattress forming with the box spring and my body had not in fact even been a closed polygon: the box spring and the floor I had stood on did not constitute a continuous surface.

Then I could hear my mother trying to get the heavy canister vacuum cleaner past the angled Simmons Beautyrest in the hall, and I went to help her. My father's legs were stretched out across the clean royal-blue carpet between his side of the frame and my mother's white dresser. His feet's boots were at a pigeon-toed angle, and his bottom's crack all the way down to the anus itself was now visible because the force of his fall had pulled his white slacks down even farther. I stepped carefully between his legs.

"Excuse me," I said.

I was able to help my mother by telling her to detach the vacuum cleaner's attachments and hand them one at a time to me over the width of the slumped mattress, where I held them. The vacuum cleaner was manufactured by Regina, and its canister, which contained the engine, bag, and evacuating fan, was very heavy. I re-assembled the vacuum and held it while my mother made her way to me across the mattress, then handed the vacuum cleaner back to her, flattening myself against the wall to let her pass by on her way into the master bedroom.

"Thanks," my mother said as she passed.

I stood there by the slumped mattress for several moments of a silence

### SOLUTION TO THE AUGUST PUZZLE

#### NOTES FOR "BY THE LETTERS"

Note: Anagrams are indicated with an asterisk (\*).

ACROSS: A. C-PULCO(e)\*; MM(ML)I-N; B. O-ROUGH; ARIZON(a); C. OBOL, two meanings; DE(DUE)R; D. SPONEE, hidden; RE-IS-ER (rev.); E. NIGH-TI(REV.); R-T-O-R-T-D, initial letters; F. I-RE-BO-X; STRAES\*; G. REMLIN\*; ST(R)ALE\*; H. NOSING, two meanings; SOSONI\*; I. FABLAU, hidden; GEN-UNE; J. AM(rev.)-BEAU; ER-BOAS; K. D-IRS; OUTTA\*-E; L. S(P)OUSA; ARTICE\*; M. ETEORS\*; ARCSET (rev.). DOWN: N. SI(GAL)S; MADAR\*-I; O. MA(E)STR\*; S(uspect)-EMIPR\*; P. ERON, "Reno" turned inside out; B(ull)-LOO; Q. RO(you)IL reversed; BASUE(l)\*; R. (ch)AISE; NOLO reversed; S. NO(rev.)-RED; T(A)RUE reversed; T. KNOERS\*; EASE-NI reversed; U. CO(B)RN; FRORE, two meanings; V. IRE-O, PROE(m); W. BOT(I)E\*; I-GAMS; X. HE-L-I; LUES, hidden; Y. CG-NETS; NASAER(g)\*; Z. H-ORION; GULERS\*.

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# Harper's Magazine 1994 Penfield Wall Calendar

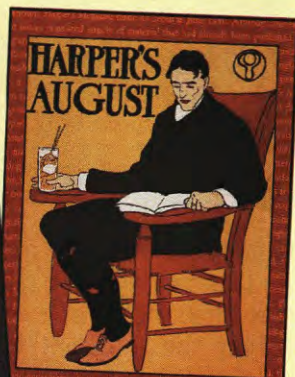
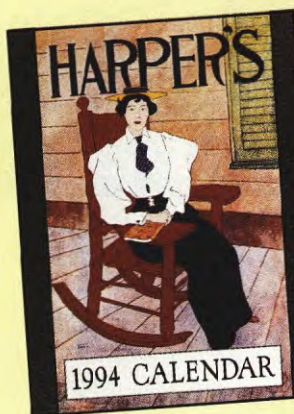
so complete that I could hear the street's lawn mowers all the way out there in the hall, then heard the sound of my mother pulling out the vacuum cleaner's retractable cord and plugging it into the same bedside outlet the steel reading lamps were attached to.

I made my way over the angled mattress and quickly down the hall, made a sharp right just before the entrance to the kitchen, crossed the foyer to the staircase, and ran up to my room, taking several stairs at a time, hurrying to get some distance between myself and the vacuum cleaner, because the sound of vacuuming has always troubled me in the same irrational way it seemed a bed's squeak troubled my father.

I ran upstairs and pivoted left at the upstairs landing and went into my room. In my room was my bed. It was narrow, a twin bed, with a headboard of wood and frame and slats of wood. I didn't know where it had come from, originally. The frame held the narrow box spring and mattress much higher off the floor than my parents' bed. It was an old-fashioned bed, so high off the floor that you had to put one knee up on the mattress and clamber up onto it, or else jump.

That is what I did. For the first time since I had become taller than my parents, I took several running strides in from the doorway, past my shelves' collection of prisms and lenses and tennis trophies and the scale-model magneto, past my bookcase and the closet door and my bedside's high-intensity standing lamp, and jumped, doing a full swan dive up onto my bed. I landed with my weight on my chest and my arms and legs out from my body on the indigo comforter on my bed, squashing my tie and bending my glasses' templates slightly. I was trying to make my bed produce a loud squeak, which in the case of my bed I knew was caused by any lateral friction between the wooden slats and the frame's interior's shelflike support.

But in the course of the leap and the dive, my overlong arm hit the heavy iron pole of the high-intensity standing lamp that stood next to the bed. The lamp teetered violently and began to fall over sideways, away from



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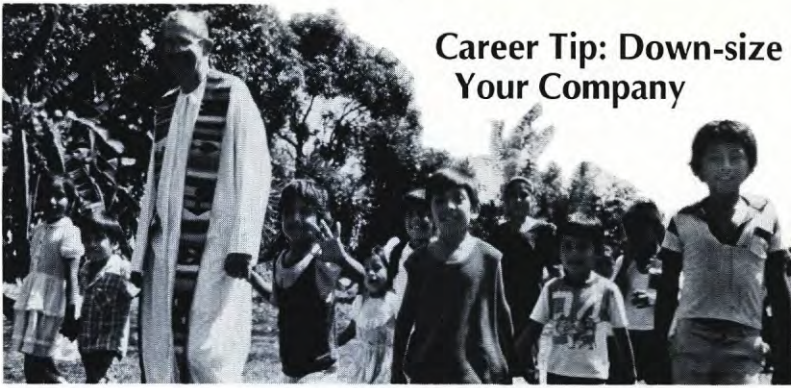
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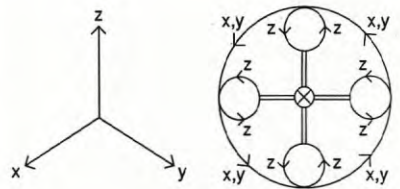
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the bed. It fell with a kind of majestic slowness, resembling a felled tree. As the lamp fell, its heavy iron pole struck the brass knob on the door to my closet, shearing the knob off completely. The round knob and half its interior hex bolt fell off and hit my room's wood floor with a loud noise and began to roll around in a remarkable way, the sheared end of the hex bolt stationary and the round knob, rolling on its circumference, circling it in a trans-dimensional orbit, describing two perfectly circular motions on two distinct axes, which put the figure in a kind of crude  $n$ -space, a non-Euclidean figure on a planar surface:



The closest conventional analogue I could derive for this figure was a cycloid, L'Hôpital's solution to Bernoulli's famous brachistochrone problem, the curve traced by a fixed point on the circumference of a circle rolling along a straight line. But since here, on my bedroom's floor, a circle was rolling around what was itself the circumference of a circle, the cycloid's standard parametric equations were no longer applicable, those equations' trigonometric expressions here becoming themselves first-order differential equations.

Because of the lack of resistance or friction against the bare floor, the shorn knob rolled in its description of this figure for a long time as I watched over the edges of my comforter and mattress, holding my glasses in place, completely distracted from the troubling minor-key scream of the vacuum below. It occurred to me that the hypercycloidal movement of the amputated knob schematized perfectly what it would look like if someone were for some reason trying to turn somersaults with one hand nailed to the floor. This, as I recall, was when I first became interested in the possibilities of annulation.

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