CARDINALS

JOHN HENRY FLEMING

A PAIR OF CARDINALS HAD PECKED THROUGH THE HOUSING of my pool pump, leaving a pile of plastic flakes in the mud. "Cardinals mate for life," the pool man reminded me. "The shenanigans won't quit."

"They're beautiful birds," I pointed out.

"They're pump-wreckers. I've seen this before. Back in the war."

Here goes, I thought, and it doesn't even matter which war.

"Flocks of pairs of cardinals, to be exact," he said. "Unleashed by the enemy. Do you know what a flock of cardinal pairs can do to Army pump casings? They're a team: one chews the casing and the other gets caught in the impeller."

"Like kamikazes?"

"They were trained for it. They didn't have to be."

"But why pumps?"

"To drain the lakes and rivers of our enemy. Or relocate them, to be exact. The Army now makes deserts. Desertification is the gradual diminishment of life. As a strategy, it's news-worthless."

"I hadn't heard that."

"Now you know why."

I turned the silence into a meaningful pause while I stared at the pecked-through pump. I knew beyond a doubt that this was the beginning of the desertification of my swimming pool. Yet I had an arrangement to throw a Frisbee with my beautiful neighbor and her dog this afternoon. She'd be arriving any minute. "What's to be done?" I asked.

The pool man shrugged. "You kill them or let them die, but more will come. A swimming pool is an unnatural luxury. The water wants to grow algae. It wants to burst its concrete prison. One thing I know in life is that

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the more fragile a state, the more unsustainable it is. I barely survived childhood."

I was saved by my beautiful neighbor sliding through the bushes, followed by her shuffling, gray-bearded retriever. She pulled her wavy brown hair away from her cheek and spit a leaf off her lips. A pink Frisbee dangled from her leash hand. We'd never held hands or kissed, but we'd touched the same Frisbee, seconds apart, in the name of exercising her dog.

"Is it broken?" she asked of the pump. Her panting dog only got energetic when a disc took flight.

"Depends on your definition," the pool man stated.

My neighbor's face showed concern.

"Shouldn't be long," I told her.

The pool man chuckled. "That's open to debate."

For a moment, I wished owning a swimming pool had more clout. The truth was, the previous owner had sold me the house at a discount. The pool had cost him too much time and effort, neither much of which he had left to him, he said at the closing.

He was right. He died three weeks later. He'd taken care of this pool for life. Now, considering the discount, he'd willed that task to me. When his unforwarded mail arrived, I opened it without guilt.

The remainder of my life flashed before me, and the flash was kind of dim.

"Cardinals?" asked my neighbor, eyeing the damaged pump.

"Ma'am," he nodded, showing deference to her that he hadn't shown to me, meaning he was trying to get in her shorts. They were jean shorts, and I knew that years later I would remember my beautiful, untouchable neighbor as having once stood beside my pool pump in jean shorts, pink disc dangling from her fingertips, dying dog at her side.

"I'm glad I don't own a pool," she said.

"You could use his," the pool man said, "except it's on its way out."

We stood across from each other in a field two blocks from my house, throwing the disc to her dog and sometimes to each other. The pool man thought it would be all right if we left him to his work for a while.

Her name was Leilani because she was conceived in Hawaii, where Leilani means "heavenly lei." It's to my credit that I never made a joke about this.

She put the disc between her knees and tied her shiny hair back in a pony-

tail. Leilani was married, also to a non-Hawaiian man with a Hawaiian first name, the foundation on which their relationship was built. Our own relationship was platonic, with romantic undertones. I saw the awareness with which she held the Frisbee moments after I'd touched it. I saw the self-consciousness with which she stretched to catch the disc, freezing her lithe golden body into a tableau of feminine athleticism. This is the way it was on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Her three-year-old son went to daycare those mornings, while her husband defended himself in court against a minor charge of embezzlement from the marketing office of our local minor league baseball team. The team had temporarily suspended him with pay, pending the outcome.

We watched the disc carry through the sunny void. We leaped for it. We fumbled it. We touched it seconds apart, thinking of each other and ourselves with each other. One of us had married for life; the other had not.

Back at the side of the house, the pool man packed his canvas work bag. The pump motor hummed.

"All fixed?"

"Fixed is an unstable condition," he said. "I'll be hearing from you." He looked at his watchless wrist to make a point, then stood up with his bag at his side. The bag had the logo of the pool company, and I wondered if they knew that they had a repairman with a philosophical opposition to repairs.

Then again, he was right. The three of us heard a whistle and chirp above, and we raised our eyes to a patient pair of cardinals in the tree.

No one spoke until the pool man said, "That'll be two hundred nineteen dollars for parts and labor."

Later, much later, I turned off the pump and sat on the edge of my pool, my feet on the top step. I had no use for a pool. The top step would be the farthest I'd ever venture into its crystalline depths. It had come with the house. Was its artificiality too fragile a condition for this world with its teams of cardinals pairing up to restore disorder? So much apparatus, so much process, just to keep my feet cool.

I closed my eyes and let the water go still around my ankles. I listened to the cardinals outside the screen door, pecking away in the dusk.