

AIR MAIL by JEFFREY EUGENIDES

Universal consciousness or a really bad case of dysentery? JEFFREY EUGENIDES (b. 1960) threads the needle in this alternately hilarious and haunting portrait of a young American traveler who takes up residence in a Thailand beach shack. Eugenides won the Pulitzer Prize in 2003 for his novel Middlesex and has also received a Whiting Award and a Guggenheim Fellowship.

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THROUGH THE BAMBOO Mitchell watched the German woman, his fellow invalid, making another trip to the outhouse. She came out onto the porch of her hut, holding a hand over her eyes—it was murderously sunny out—while her other, somnambulistic hand searched for the beach towel hanging over the railing. Finding it, she draped the towel loosely, only just extenuatingly, over her otherwise unclothed body and staggered out into the sun. She came right by Mitchell’s hut. Through the slats her skin looked a sickly, chicken-soup color. She was wearing only one flip-flop. Every few steps she had to stop and lift her bare foot out of the blazing sand. Then she rested, flamingo style, breathing hard. She looked as if she might collapse. But she didn’t. She made it across the sand to the edge of the scrubby jungle. When she reached the outhouse,

she opened the door and peered into the darkness. Then she consigned herself to it.

Mitchell dropped his head back to the floor. He was lying on a straw mat, with a plaid L. L. Bean bathing suit for a pillow. It was cool in the hut and he didn’t want to get up himself. Unfortunately, his stomach was erupting. All night his insides had been quiet, but that morning Larry had persuaded him to eat an egg, and now the amoebas had something to feed on. “I told you I didn’t want an egg,” he said now, and only then remembered that Larry wasn’t there. Larry was off down the beach, partying with the Australians.

So as not to get angry, Mitchell closed his eyes and took a series of deep breaths. After only a few, the ringing started up. He listened, breathing in and out, trying to pay attention to nothing else. When the ringing got even louder, he rose on one elbow and searched for the letter he was writing to his parents. The most recent letter. He found it tucked into Ephesians, in his pocket New Testament. The front of the aerogram was already covered with handwriting. Without bothering to reread what he’d written, he grabbed the ballpoint pen—wedged at the ready in the bamboo—and began:

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Do you remember my old English teacher, Mr. Dudar? When I was in tenth grade, he came down with cancer of the esophagus. It turned out he was a Christian Scientist, which we never knew. He refused to have chemotherapy even. And guess what happened? Absolute and total remission.