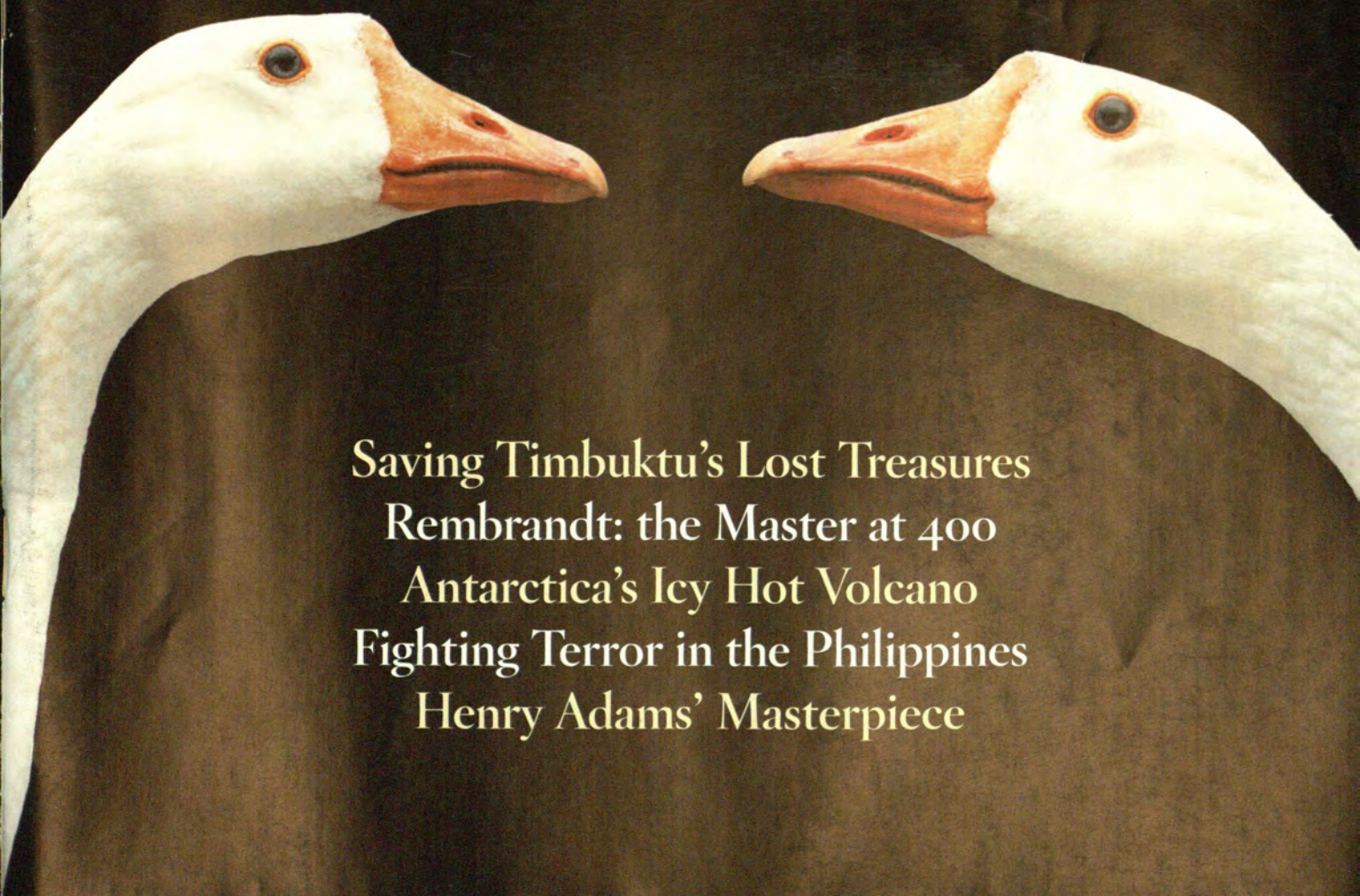


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{ DECEMBER 2006

Novelist Paul Theroux on
living with geese,
“gushing anthropomorphism”
and E. B. White’s “deficiency of observation”



Saving Timbuktu's Lost Treasures
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Antarctica's Icy Hot Volcano
Fighting Terror in the Philippines
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THIS PAGE: Ice chimneys on Mount Erebus (volcanologist Julie Calkins prepares to descend into one of the large chambers) can reach 60 feet.
Photograph by George Steinmetz.

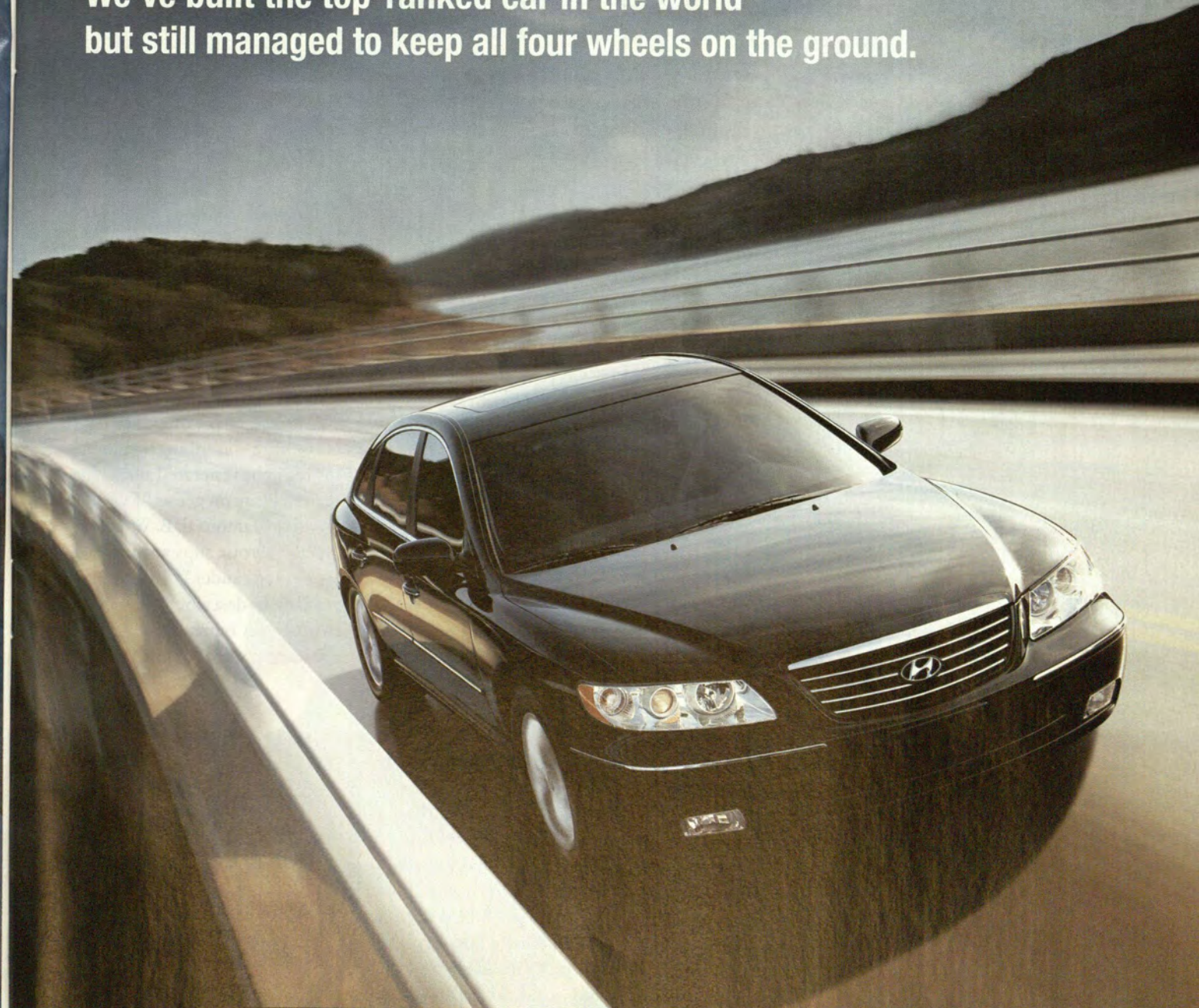
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As they head down the crater's rim, Mount Erebus spatters lava over the area they've just explored. The largest "lava bombs" are about ten feet wide—great blobs that collapse like failed soufflés when they land.

—“ANTARCTICA ERUPTS!,” PAGE 58

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MY KIND OF TOWN

LOS RANCHOS DE ALBUQUERQUE, NEW MEXICO

Mile-High Multiculturalism

The creator of savvy Native American sleuths explains why he cherishes his Southwestern high desert home **BY TONY HILLERMAN**

WHY IS LOS RANCHOS DE ALBUQUERQUE my kind of town? First, our mile-high, big-sky, cool-night, dry climate. Second, mountains in all directions, reminding you of aspens, pines and silent places. Next, there's the Rio Grande

right behind our neighborhood, its shady bosque, or grove, providing habitat for coyotes, porcupines, squirrels, and parking spaces for the assorted geese, duck and crane flocks on their seasonal migrations.

Such assets are common in the Mountain West. Nor can we claim exclusive title to the bosque, since it lines the river from its origin in the Colorado Rockies to its mouth at the Gulf of Mexico. It is the longest strip of unbroken woodland in North America, and probably the narrowest.



The network of irrigation ditches, or acequias, fed by the Rio Grande allows us to believe we are still a farming village. Water still flows to our hayfields, orchards, vineyards and gardens. Yet we also enjoy urban advantages offered by the City of Albuquerque, which has engulfed us. I am one of those country boys who left the farm but couldn't forget it. For me, living in a farm village with city pleasures at hand is a joy.

While we declare our independence—and have our own city hall, firetrucks, mayor and council, and post reduced speed limits on city streets that pass through our village—map-makers, the U.S. Postal Service and political and commercial agencies all see

"I treasure the empty, silent, untouched mesas and plains," says Tony Hillerman, an adopted son of the Southwest.

ALL SCIENCE. NO FICTION.



AVALON

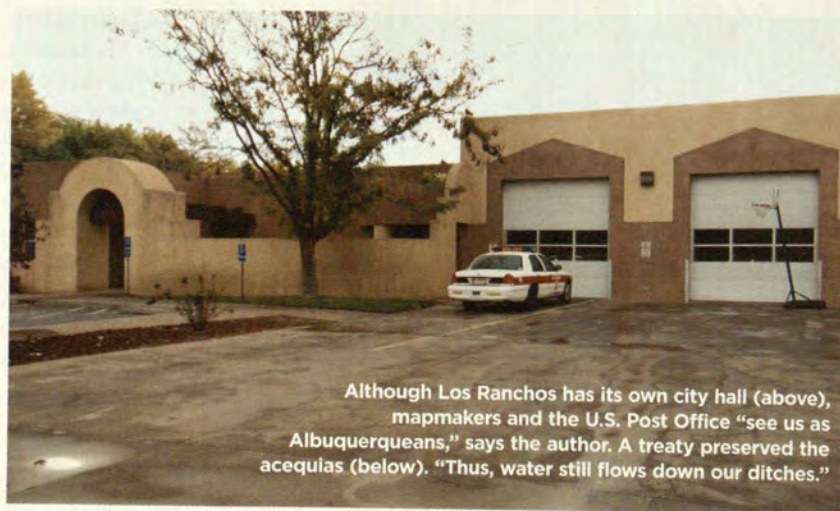
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A former mayor described the town: "4 square miles with 5,000 cranky people 5 miles from Albuquerque."



Although Los Ranchos has its own city hall (above), mapmakers and the U.S. Post Office "see us as Albuquerqueans," says the author. A treaty preserved the acequias (below). "Thus, water still flows down our ditches."

us as Albuquerqueans. In the census we are just 5,000 of a half-million citizens who make it New Mexico's major metropolis. Officially urbanites, we drive downtown enjoying the perfume of new-mown alfalfa and the sight of grazing horses. And our nocturnal quiet is punctuated only by occasional yips and honks in the bosque—the honks from the geese whose sleep has been disturbed by the coyotes stalking them.

The map of Los Ranchos on the wall in our little city hall shows a crazily shaped place. It runs along the east bank of the Rio Grande, 7,000 yards long (north to south) and much narrower east to west, varying from as little as a short block in some places to perhaps 3,000 yards at its widest. When I asked a former mayor of Los Ranchos for a brief description, he offered this summary: "Four square miles with 5,000 cranky people five miles from downtown Albuquerque."

Those miles are anything but square, and the "cranky" adjective reflects only those angry enough to call on city hall. However, as the mayor said, the downtown buildings (skyscrapers by Mountain West standards) do loom just to the south, and "Old Town"—the heart of Albuquerque before the railroad came through—is just four miles down Rio



Grande Boulevard from my house.

The survival of our village, and many others, is due to a quirk in history and to geography. History allowed our Pueblo villages, and their water rights, to escape European colonization. And geography made Albuquerque a crossroads. The Rio Grande was the north-south road, and the Tijeras Canyon between the Sandia Mountain ridge and the Manzano Mountains funneled east-west traffic through us.

Many of those villages that formed along the Rio Grande in the 18th and 19th centuries bore the names of pioneer Spanish families. Some grew into towns, such as

Bernalillo and Los Lunas. Some faded away, and some survive as Albuquerque "neighborhoods."

History preserved our acequias for us through a treaty. When the Mexican-American War ended, the West was won for us. But Mexico insisted in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo that our laws respect the rights the Spanish king had given the Pueblo Indians and subsequently granted Spanish settlers, rights that the Mexican Republic had honored after winning its independence from Spain. Thus, people who own land along the ditches still retain rights to their water until they sell those rights. Thus, water still flows down our ditches.

The root cause for our water rights dates back to when the Franciscan friars accompanying the conquistadors disagreed with the army about colonial policies. The friars argued that the Pueblo Indians were "*Gente de razón*," and as reasonable people should be treated properly and converted to Christianity. King Charles agreed, ruling that these Indians were his royal subjects and granting them rights to their lands.

We can also credit the friars with making our villages unusually multilingual, multicultural places. Indian pueblos surround us. Sandia and Zia just to the north, Isleta just down the river, Laguna and Acoma to the west, and Jemez to the north. The British had no such placid policy for accepting Indians into their East Coast colonies. The mortality rate among those tribes is estimated at more than 90 percent, mostly due to the introduction of European diseases.

Thus, while we are officially bilingual only in English and Spanish, we have neighbors who speak Tewa, Keresan, Tiwa, Navajo, Zuni, Hopi and a few other languages of tribes in the Mountain West. The artisans among them come into Albuquerque's popular Old Town plaza and sell their jewelry and pottery. The multimillion-dollar gambling casinos they have built along our highways provide us entertainment while siphoning off our surplus funds.

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I credit another merger of history and geography for causing the city that envelops us to develop the way it has. In the 1940s an isolated place was needed to build the atomic bomb. Dr. J. Robert Oppenheimer, in charge of the project, was familiar with the Los Alamos boys' academy atop the Pajarito Plateau in the Jemez Mountains, utterly empty except for the school. The Los Alamos Laboratory was built there; in nearby Albuquerque was Kirtland Air Force Base and Sandia Laboratory. Then the top-secret Manzano Base grew, where we locals believe vast stacks of nuclear weapons are stored deep in the heart of the adjoining mountain. The labs drew spinoff, high-tech support companies. The cold war heated. Albuquerque, which had been a trading center for farmers, ranchers and miners, was flooded with physicists, engineers, computer technicians and other high-skill thinkers of every sort.

This wasn't the first time that progress had a drastic impact on our town. In 1880 the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad decided to roll through our crossroads. Rumor had it that it would bid for land at Albuquerque to build a depot, various maintenance structures and space for housing and business sites. But the availability of cheaper, more stable land led the railroad to move its site about two miles to the east. Albuquerque split. What was originally Albuquerque quickly became "Old Town." The bustling railroad terminus was "New Town." A trolley service opened to join them, but the split never healed. New Town is now Downtown, and Old Town is a lively tourist center, which is another reason I like living here. Visitors to Old Town learn that the Confederates buried their cannon as they retreated down the Rio Grande. They also learn that the Church of San Felipe de Neri on the plaza is the original (with remodeling), founded not long after the colonial governor decided in 1706 this village was important enough to be recognized and named after the tenth duke of Albuquerque. They aren't told that it wasn't until 1956, when we invit-

ed the current duke of Albuquerque to come join our 250th anniversary celebration, that we found he had been misspelling our mutual name for 250 years.

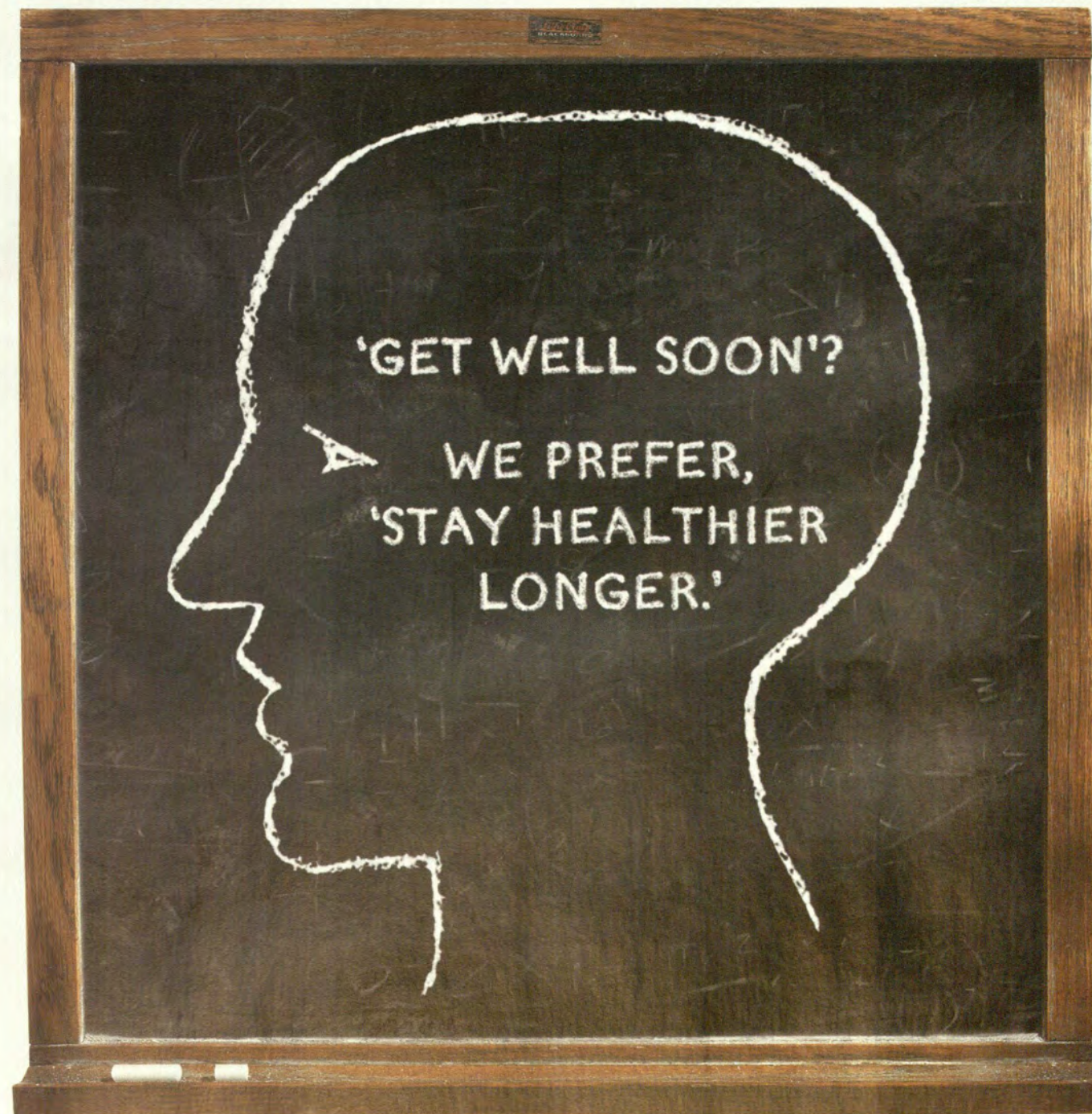
The fact that no one has yet suggested we reinsert the missing "r" reflects the relaxed attitude of this place, and that appeals to me. So does the name we've given our minor-league baseball team. They were the Dukes, recognizing our kinship with the royal family. But whoever bought our franchise took the Dukes name with it. We voted on a new name, and the Dukes are now the Isotopes.

Another reason why this is my town is our personal Sandia Mountain—called that by the Spanish because sunsets painted its cliffs watermelon red. It rises to more than 11,000 feet at Albuquerque's city limits, making it convenient for skiers and hang gliders, rock climbers and lovers of long views. The ski run is served by America's longest aerial tram, which means I can leave my home 5,000 feet above sea level and be inhaling cold, thin air two miles high in less than an hour.

From the crest the view is spectacular. Eighty miles west, the sacred Turquoise Mountain rises on the horizon. Northwest, the volcano peak called Cabezón juts into the sky. South, there's Ladrón Peak. After dark, the lights of Santa Fe appear at the base of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, and the lights of Los Alamos on the rim of the Jemez Mountain range. Along the Rio Grande Valley, the lights of more than half the population of New Mexico are visible—including my Los Ranchos porch light.

As beautiful as these lights are, the oceans of darkness that surround them have their own appeal. Those dark spaces represent thousands of square miles of mountains, mesas and plains occupied by absolutely no one. I am one of those who treasures such empty, silent, untouched places. From Los Ranchos, they are easy to reach. ○

TONY HILLERMAN's 18 mystery novels featuring Jim Chee and Joe Leaphorn include, most recently, *The Shape Shifter* (2006) and *Skeleton Man* (2004).



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