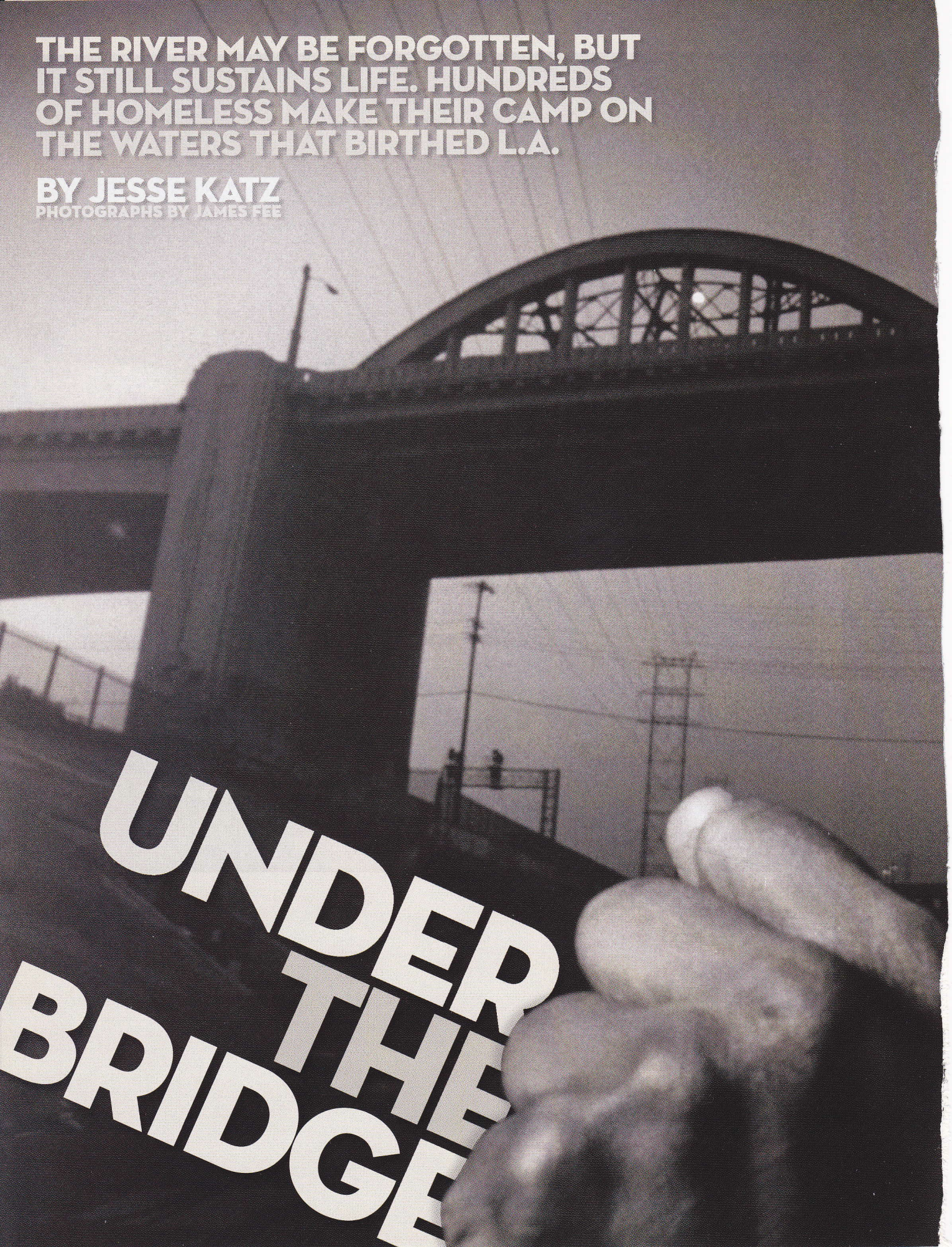
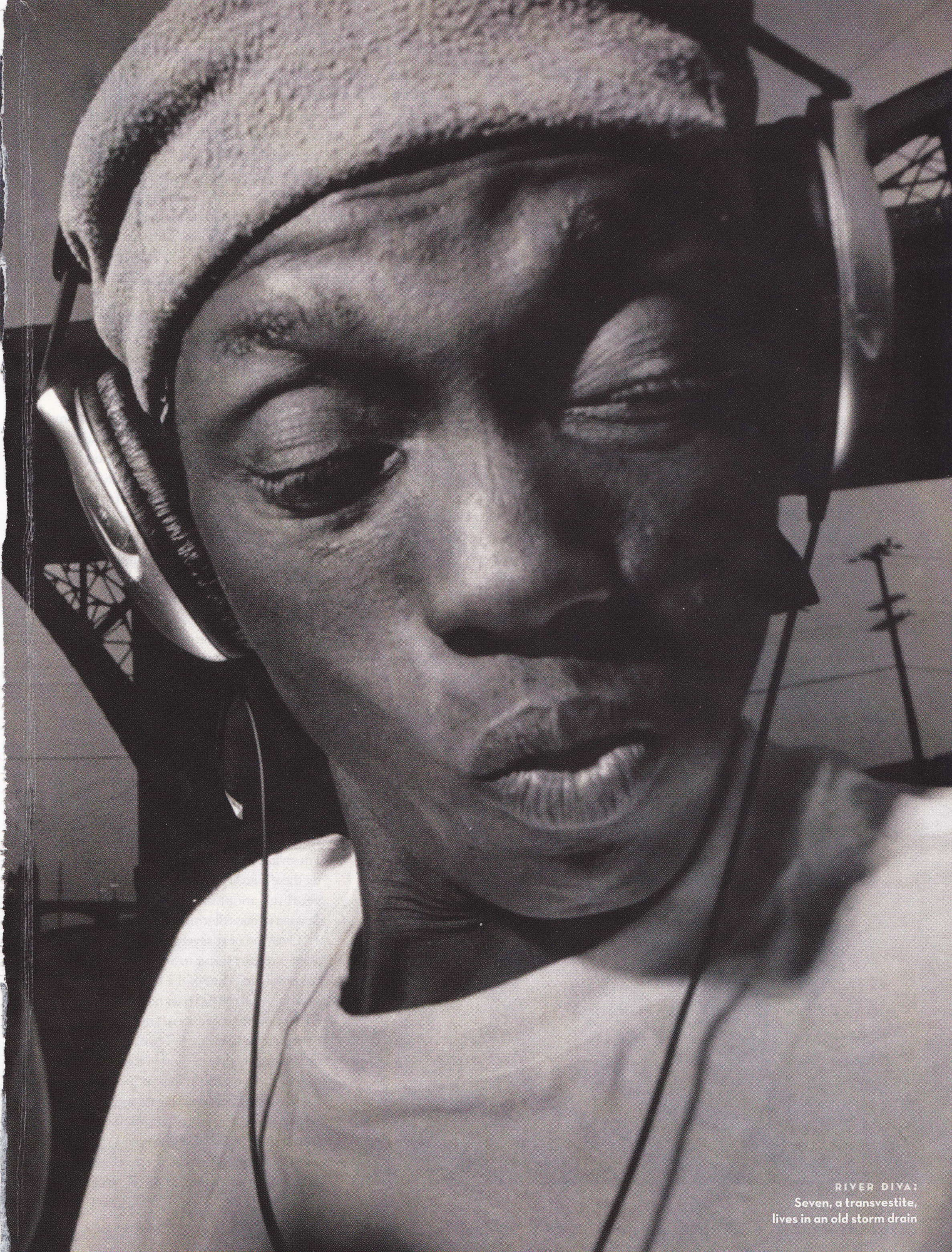


UNDER THE BRIDGE

THE RIVER MAY BE FORGOTTEN, BUT IT STILL SUSTAINS LIFE. HUNDREDS OF HOMELESS MAKE THEIR CAMP ON THE WATERS THAT BIRTHED L.A.

BY JESSE KATZ
PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAMES FEE



RIVER DIVA:
Seven, a transvestite,
lives in an old storm drain

AT THE MARGINS OF DOWNTOWN—BEYOND THE skyscrapers, across the railroad tracks, under the bridges, through a tunnel, down to the river—there is an old storm drain. The pipe is sealed shut now, but the concrete gutter into which it once fed still breaches the slope of the riverbank, leaving a notch just a few feet above the water's edge. The passage is not big, a prison cell of a spillway, and yet its desolation is precisely what has given it function again. An empty refrigerator carton is propped up at the entrance. A patchwork of tarps is strung over the top. A sheetless mattress creates the illusion of a bedroom. A suitcase with a BON VOYAGE sticker is the dresser, a pair of scented candles the light. In our imperfect vocabulary for defining urban ills, we might say that the person holed up in this dank little nook is homeless, but that would not be quite right. Everyone in the encampments along this stretch of the Los Angeles River knows that the lair belongs to Seven; it has been his home since 1998, a home that falls outside the boundaries of a society built on privacy and ownership but a home nonetheless.

Seven, as his name would suggest, is given to theater, a child of the Arkansas backwoods, tall enough to be an NBA point guard and lean enough to be a Haitian refugee. He is 38, with almond eyes, spectacular cheekbones, and a repertoire of exclamations ("Mmmm, child . . . ," "Lawdy, Lawdy, Lawdy . . . ," "Oh, baby, goddamn . . . ") that owes a debt to Little Richard. Seven is also a cocaine addict and a convicted felon, not to mention a transvestite and a prostitute, facts that have relegated him to the fringes of an already fringe population and account for his banishment to the riverbanks, one level below the tent city that anchors the Sixth Street Bridge. His prerequisite for receiving a visitor tells you everything. "Bring me some chocolate, baby," he says. "You know I'm a chocolate *lover*."

To get to him, I have to trudge down the underpass that leads from Santa Fe Avenue to the riverbed, a short but hellish journey through the bowels of the central city. I sidestep human waste and rotting food, used condoms and dirty needles, until I empty onto the floodplain, back in the glare of day yet out of both sight and shouting distance of the street. My feet slide over algae. I spot a heart-shaped box of Valentine candies washed up in the sludge. Heading downriver, out of the bridge's shadow, I scrape my shoes on dry ground, hoping for enough grip to make the scramble up the grade to Seven's grotto. He offers me a seat atop a floral blanket. We share Chips Ahoy! and milk. In time I will see crack smoked on the river. I will see tricks turned. I will witness weakness and disease. But for a few minutes on a languid spring afternoon, I can also glimpse the wonders of this clandestine perch, of the bridges stacked up in both directions, of the trains chugging past on either side, of the City Hall pyramid inching above the horizon, of phosphorescent mallards flapping in the olive wash. Seven has somehow managed to construct a riverfront fort in a city that is not even supposed to have a river, to claim a version of dignity—to be a cave-dwelling diva—on downtown's forgotten shores.

"There's something about that river," he tells me, waving a long finger at the sluggish current. "It constantly flows, you know what I'm saying? So innocent-looking. Without water there is no life. With water there is life. And yet think about it: Water is also the first weapon of mass destruction."

Over the next several weeks I would become a regular visitor to Seven's camp, and to the hovels and dens of the hundreds of other squatters who call this river home. An estimated 80,000 men, women, and children are thought to be homeless in Los Angeles County on any given night, the most visible concentration of them on the infamous "Nickel," that stretch of 5th Street coursing through skid row. But down on the river—above, below, and within its bridges—I discovered a different sort of community: structured, refined, and surprisingly conscious of its mythic geography.

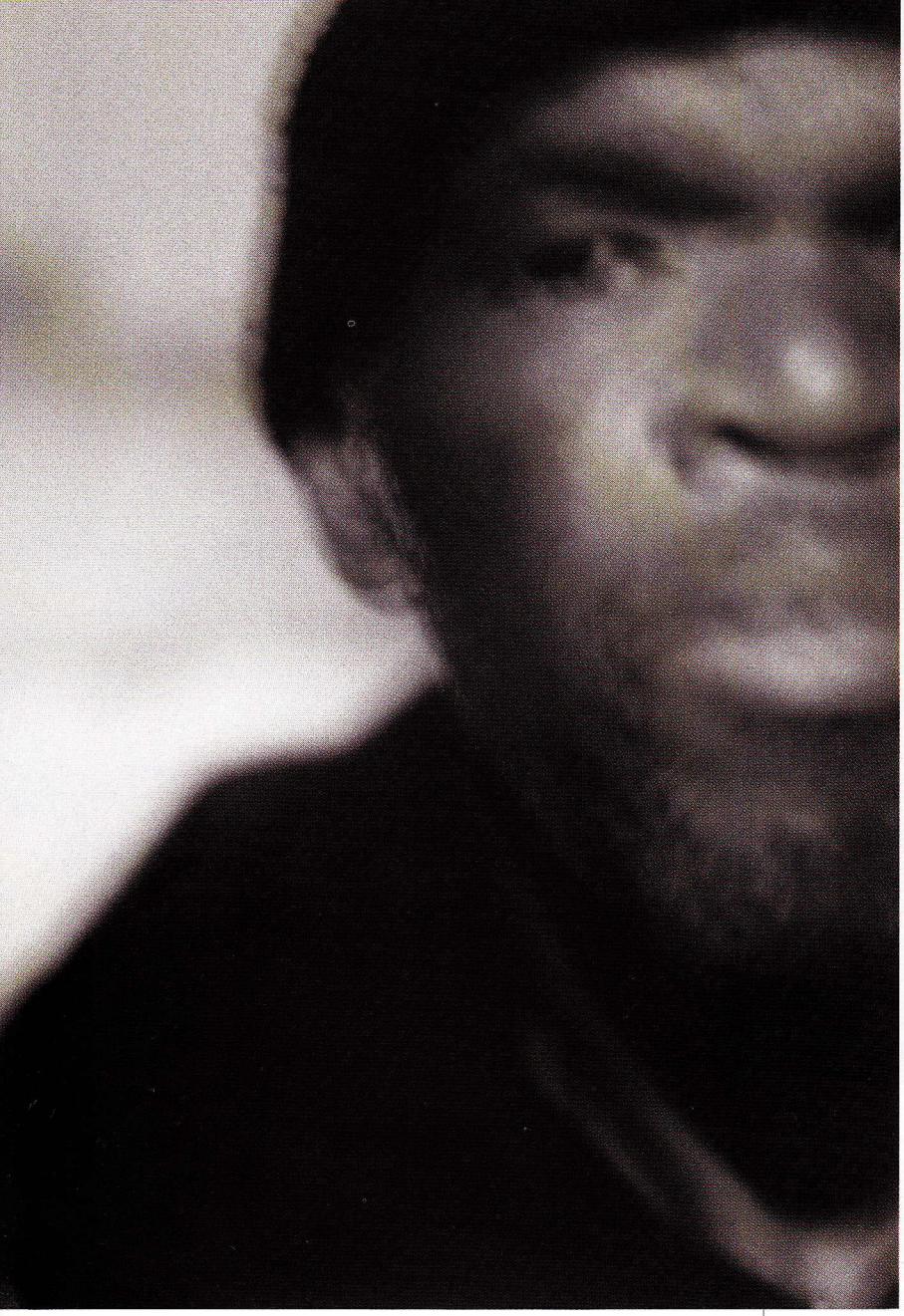
URBAN REFUGEES: Starr Jones, mayor of the Sixth Street Bridge (above), and a tired soul (opposite) find shelter at the river

Seven is, of course, right. These waters are our cradle. They fed Indians. They lured Spaniards. They are why the civic center is where it is today, the reason for downtown. Something about that juxtaposition appealed to me, about a city that is trying to scrub its streets of the destitute and about a destitute river that still welcomes them.

High in the rafters of the Fourth Street Bridge, there is a Minnesota Viking fan named Gary who lives on a trellis of beams and ledges, most of them only a foot or two wide. I try to follow him up a security fence, but I cut open my knee and have to call for Gary to pull me onto a girder. Every step is a gangplank. No railings, no margin for error. Fighting the urge to look down, I notice a fire pit in one corner, a collection of vintage *National Geographics* in another, and a shrine to murdered children taped to the wall above his bed. "I've been up here a long time, like 10, no, probably 13 or 14 years," says Gary, who has painted the words I LOVE GOD on one of the pillars. "I've celebrated Christmas, Thanksgiving, even cooked myself a turkey up here."

Deep in the catacombs of the Seventh Street Bridge, there is a former Hughes airplane mechanic named John who lives in a sunless chamber just below the roadway. I reach him by crossing the railroad tracks and working my way up a ladder, wobbly and wire runged. At the top I grab an electrical cord, hoisting myself into an arched portal covered by blankets and protected by dungeon bars. John removes the padlock and swings open the gate. "I hope you don't mind, but we smoke dope around here," he says, jamming a rock into the tip of his pipe. "I love this shit. I'm just being real. The sooner you realize what you are, the better."

At the heart of river life is the Sixth Street Bridge, grande dame of the downtown crossings. It not only serves as Seven's address; it is a cultural and economic hub, home to the river's most complex settlement—and most iconic setting. The bridges of L.A. may be just as invisible as its river, but the Sixth Street is a landmark, or at least Hollywood's idea of one, its Depression-era colonnades among the most filmed in America. In *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*, Arnold Schwarzenegger's nemesis, the T-1000, makes his return from the future at the bridge. In her "I'm Glad" video, Jennifer Lopez rides a bicycle under it. In *S.W.A.T.*, a stolen Learjet is landed on top of it. It has played a cameo in decades of car chases and gang brawls, fashion shoots and TV commercials; the acclaimed architectural photographer Julius Shulman first gained public recognition with a shot of the bridge in 1933, the same year it opened. Underneath, in the alleys and warrens formed by its arches, on a cul-de-sac of weeds and gravel and barbed wire, I meet the bridge's current residents: Swole, Loretta, Ronnie, Terry, Barry, Renee, and Gutter, along with their mayor, Starr Jones (whose name I had assumed was just another prop but which later proved to be authentic). Most, if not all, qualify for one or more disreputable labels—pimp, pusher, hooker, addict, parolee, fugitive, pauper, mental case—at-



OLD HEADS: Terry (above) and Barry (opposite) have been consigned to the bridge by a lifetime of addiction

tributes that have afforded them little sympathy or protection.

Yet the people of the Sixth Street Bridge are not here by accident. Their attachment to the span is profound, at once sophisticated and romantic. They defile it, and yet they treasure it. The bridge gives them identity, makes them something more than just homeless and downtown. "I'm telling you, this bridge is the mother ship," Starr says. "It has structure and architecture and design. It has character. It has depth. It has emotion. It has ghosts. It's a home, a shelter, a haven. It's your umbrella, your bed, your bathroom. The bridge is a hell of a woman. She'll push you around a little bit, but she always lets you come back." Starr tells me all this within minutes of our first meeting, a testament to her gift for metaphor, or manipulation, or both. "There's always a story," she says, "under the bridge."

Seventy-one years ago, in pre-freeway L.A., the opening of a thoroughfare between downtown and Whittier Boulevard was front-page news. Gathered at the midway point, a throng of dignitaries presided over the ribbon cutting—a chain of flowers snipped by a small boy. The LAPD brass band provided entertainment. It would be the last and loftiest of the nine Los Angeles River bridges designed by Merrill Butler, the municipal engineer who believed a graceful monument had the capacity to inspire civic virtue. At two-thirds of a mile long, the art deco structure leaves the ground at Mateo Street, about four blocks west of the river, and does not come down again until Boyle Avenue, on the east. It immediately became a destination for the forlorn, site of six suicides in its first decade.

If the bridge once expanded downtown's sense of itself, opening a "gateway to the metropolis of the great Southwest," it now represents downtown's outer limits. This is the terminus—at least a dozen blocks beyond the traditional notion of skid row, past the toy and fashion districts, at the periphery of the art scene—a desolate, industrial netherworld of ash and dust and pigeons. The last major street to run under the bridge is Santa Fe, but if you were to drive by, you would see little sign of the encampment. Everything is pressed up against the railroad tracks, a block or two to the east, where 6th dead-ends into a row of toppled concrete barricades. Gutter, the resident dopeman, cruises around on his bicycle, dreadlocks flopping under a felt cowboy hat. Ronnie, a rheumy-eyed Vietnam vet, turns a cinder block into a barbell, curling it to his chest until he is drenched. An Amtrak Surfliner rumbles by, curious faces pressed against the tinted glass. Swole rolls a smoke with Bugler tobacco; a visitor named Sabrina dotes on him, grooming and primping, picking at his blemishes.

"Goddamn, girl, at least wash your hands!" Swole says. "You're liable to give me typhoid."

"God don't like ugly," she scolds.

Nearly everyone—17 being the unofficial count this spring—has a tent, two-man dome models, pitched, side by side, over the asphalt. They do more than provide shelter; they offer cover for just about every illicit deed performed under the bridge, and are even rented out for that purpose, usually for about $10 an hour. Nearly everyone also has a shopping cart, or two or three, which tend to be circled around the tents like covered wagons. They are the only way to store possessions and to stay mobile—a necessity for a camp like this, which is forever disassembling and re-forming, rarely keeping the same shape from one week to the next. As downtown gentrifies and warehouses transform into lofts, the city has launched a campaign against such shantytowns; the west side of 4th Street and the east side of 7th, two of the livelier hobo jungles on the river, were both recently dismantled. The foreman at Five Ninety, a sound and film stage that borders the Sixth Street Bridge, hopes his spot will be next. (While John Travolta and Danny DeVito are inside, shooting the sequel to *Get Shorty*, crack pipes are blazing just outside the fence.) So far, though, the camp has proved resilient. During one of my visits, a city sanita-

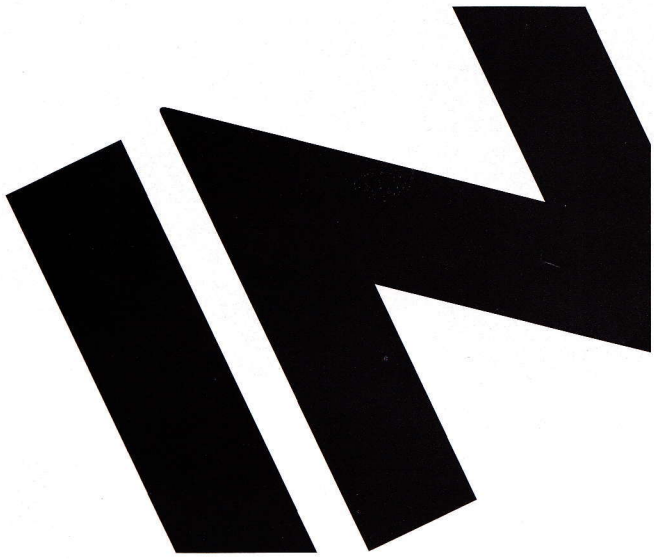
tion crew sweeps through with a bulldozer, scooping up everything that has not been packed into a cart. Gutter rolls his stuff down the river, waiting out the disruption at Seven's cove. Barry, out on a construction job that morning, loses what little he owns. Still, by nightfall they are all back, starting over, as if never run off. Twice the cast and crew of the TV series *24* set up their own camp under the bridge, the backdrop for a gun battle between Kiefer Sutherland's counterterrorism squad and the forces of evil. Everyone packs up again, heading for a toxic strip of railroad land around the corner; out of guilt or expedience, the Fox location manager offers them each $20 a day. "As you can see, we're sitting on some valuable property—income property," says Ronnie, waiting in line for his cash. The location manager dispenses it through the window of his SUV, then wipes his hands with a towelette.

"*We're off to see the Wizard . . .*," Ronnie sings, skipping back to his tent.

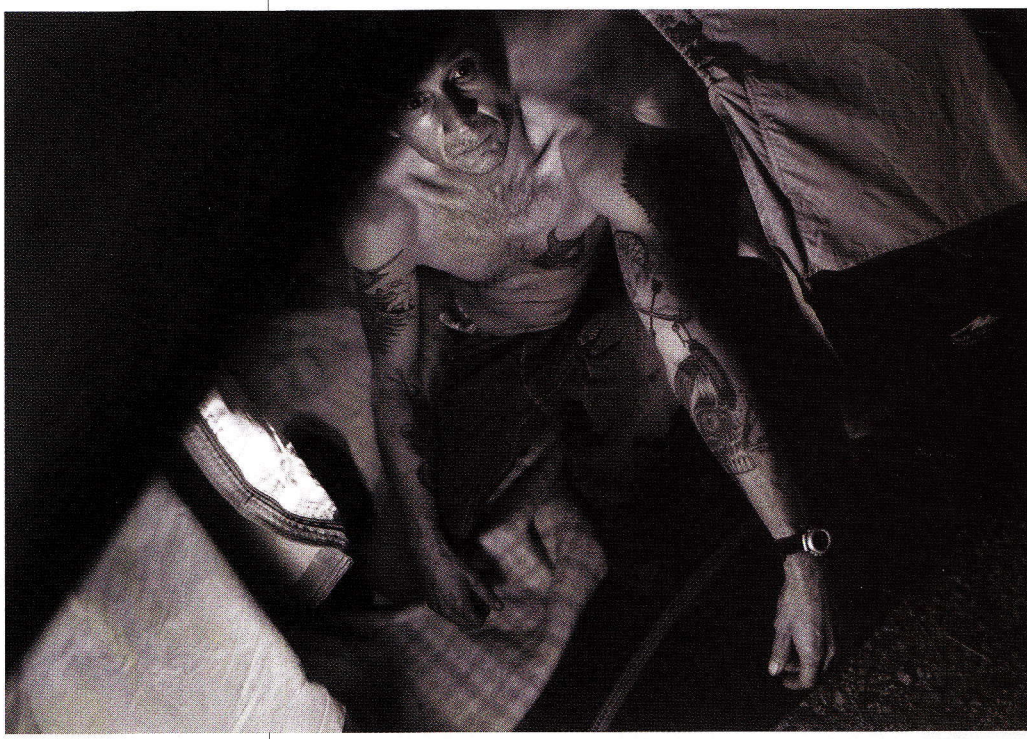
If the citizens of Sixth Street sometimes resemble the Joads, nomads even under their own bridge, they are practically suburban compared with those on skid row—quieter, tidier, more protective, a community less interested in drama than in self-medication. "There ain't no place to be homeless but here," Starr tells me. Some days she is under an arch sipping wine and nibbling cheesecake, other days down at the water listening to jazz and reading suspense. "Dean Koontz, that's my main man," she says. "He makes the murderer human—a hunter, not just a random killer. Oooh, he's morbid. But there's a beauty in it."

Starr is 57 and keeps an ATM card tucked in her knit cap. She is the mother of three, the eldest a lawyer, the next a graphic designer, and the baby a navy captain. "I used to be a yuppie, a bourgeois nigga," she says. I see no reason not to go along with the story. Most of her life she worked as a lab tech, examining blood samples under a fluorescent dark light for sixty grand a year. She sank into depression. She had a house in Pasadena, but the walls kept closing in. "I want to spend my last days free, you know, like a cowboy," she says. "When I was growing up, we listened to the radio, we scrubbed our own clothes, we bathed in the river. Three-quarters of the world still lives that way. What am I going to complain about now—'cause I ain't got no Jiffy Wax?" In 1996, Starr was interviewed for a *Los Angeles Times* article about cuts in the county's general relief benefits. At the time, she was paying $260 a month for a skid row hotel and feared she would soon be pushed to the streets. A WOMAN MOVES CLOSER TO THE EDGE, the headline read. Drugs hastened her fall. Starr was locked up for parts of 1998, 1999, 2001, and 2002, the last a trip to state prison that did not end until 2003. Each time she gets out, she comes to the bridge—the only place, she says, where she is totally free.

"You're always welcome," she tells me. "Even when you're done with this story. Let the bridge be your sanctuary every now and then."



IN THE SKID ROW OF OLD, THE STREETS BELONGED to winos, later to junkies. However destructive those cycles of misery might have been, they were surely more lethargic than the furies of today. A fix, or a bottle, could last for hours, then require even more time to sleep off. Crack's arrival in the 1980s not only spawned a physiological epidemic but changed the culture of homelessness, consigning skid row to an insomniac's pulse. The high is so short-lived, the prices and packaging so much like fast food that the streets have become a desperate hive of industry, all aimed at scoring the next rock. "We're like gypsies, living off the land, using, or abusing, whatever talents we have—like the fattest woman in the world or the man who eats fire," says Gutter, leaning against the bridge as Renee, the girl he rents out, feeds him tacos. When I see people get high, in fact, I scarcely notice the effects. Hardly anyone acts loaded. » CONTINUED ON PAGE 165



Under the Bridge

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 93 » Smoking for them has become a function, without joy, not an end. The only exception is the first of the month, when welfare and disability checks hit their P.O. boxes. The binge lasts two or three days. Then it is back to work, scavenging, hustling, recycling, burglarizing, even clocking in, like Barry, for the occasional legitimate job.

Barry is probably the most employable person under the bridge. The first time I meet him, he is lying on the ground in a bundle of stained blankets, having lost his tent to the street sweepers the previous day. I had brought some magazines for Starr to read. Barry wants me to know that his favorite book is tattooed on his arm. He pulls up his right sleeve, revealing biceps awash in ink: an ocean, a boat, a fisherman, and a giant marlin leaping out of the water. A tribute to *The Old Man and the Sea*. "One of the greatest stories of human perseverance there is, man," he says.

Like Starr, Barry has had his moment of journalistic immortality, appearing on the front page of the *Pasadena Star-News* as an eighth grader in 1976, the year he attempted to break the world speed record for skateboarding. (Paced by a motorcycle, Barry hit 45 miles per hour on Camino Verde—five shy of the mark—before police put an end to the stunt.) While a student at South Pasadena High, he soon discovered another rush, the synergy between cocaine and sex. Sex is the critical, if often overlooked, dimension of the crackhead experience. The ragged prostitutes I see under the bridge would have had trouble attracting customers just about anywhere else, yet here the drug's stimulatory power makes them indispensable; the sensation can be so physical, some men use it like Viagra, smoking just to get off. Barry's story is right out of *Penthouse Forum*: He was 16. A substitute teacher invited him to a warehouse at Slauson and Figueroa. Two naked girls greeted him. They took turns giving him head. The teacher handed Barry a pipe of freebase and told him to hit it just before climax. "I did," Barry says, "and I've been chasing it ever since."

Twenty-six years later, he is scarred and gaunt, only folds of skin for a belly. Still, he is white, a rarity in the largely black world of the river, with enough status and social grace to assuage most would-be employers. He tells me he has been sober for nine months and has been offered a job by a contractor in San Clemente. I loan him my cell phone; he calls his prospective boss every day, leaving anxious messages. In preparation for his escape, he shaves his Grizzly Adams beard and gives himself a haircut, missing enough sad wisps to pass for a chemotherapy patient. He asks to be photographed and to be given a copy. "I want a record of my progress," Barry says. "I don't want to be this skinny, toothless, motherfucking skeleton dying out here."

Nearly everyone I meet is from the rural South or urban L.A.—from corners of black America devastated by crack—middle aged, and two decades into his addiction. Only a few are women, and most of them have become commodities. Every day I see Loretta. In one stocking foot, the other bare, she dances at the edge of the road, twirling like a flower child. Her hair is wrapped in a turban, her trousers held up by rope. Her chest is covered by a yellow sports bra. Her skin is smudged with soot. She waves and shrugs at the passing truckers, beckoning, I think, but mostly dreaming. The first time I try to reach her, she apologizes. "I'd like to talk to you," she says. "But if I do, I'll start to cry."

I leave her with a notebook, hoping the words will come. When I see her next, she is beaming. "I did some writing for you!" she chirps. We sit down together on the curb, not far from Rokie, her grumpy rottweiler, who has just chewed through his leash. I am not sure what to expect—a poem, a diary—but I know it will have to be heartbreaking. Loretta opens the cover and begins to read. "Roast beef. Three-onion salad. Ranch dressing. Choice of garbanzo or bacon bits. Or maybe even both." It continues this way for pages. "Salmon cooked just right . . . Catfish and grits . . . Real crabmeat over rice, eggs, chopped onions, noodles, shrimp, and peas . . . Make a bowl for tonight!" She calls them her "recipes," menus that she hopes to publish someday in a cookbook for the rich and famous. "I want to teach people to slow down," Loretta says, "and enjoy life a little bit more."

I learn more as the days pass, of her two grown children in upstate Florida, of broken relationships, of lost jobs—as a nursing-home aide, as a casino janitor, as a McDonald's cook—and of rapes. She has not once been to the riverbed, even though she has pitched her tent alongside the tunnel for more than a year. "I just found out about the water being down there," Loretta says. One day I visit and find her distraught. She invites me into the tent, asks me to sit, tells me to get comfortable, then drops her head. The smell of urine is unavoidable. There is a mocha-skinned Barbie doll, in a lavender dress, wedged into one corner. "That's the only thing left that means anything to me," Loretta says. Tears are streaming down her freckled cheeks. Her face is in her hands. I ask what happened. She tells me she wants to join a convent, to be a nun, to feel safe. "I don't want to be under this bridge no more," she says. "I'm so sick and tired. I really mean it. That's what I want." For the first time, she asks me for money. I resist. It is a journalistic quandary, to be humane without appearing to be paying for access or information. But Loretta's pain gets to me. I give her $5. She lies down, closer to me now, and shuts her eyes. She is wearing a pleated skirt, a dark blue Catholic schoolgirl's uniform. It is hiked above her thighs.

I am cross-legged and silent, wondering what I have done. Loretta's breathing grows heavy. Her eyelids appear to twitch. I am relieved, certain she has fallen asleep, the five-dollar bill still clutched in her hand. All of a sudden she sits up. "If I go buy crack," she asks, "you're not going to call the cops, are you?" She puts on tennis shoes, the first time I have seen her wear any, and tells me she will be back in 20 minutes. And just like that I am alone, under the Sixth Street Bridge, the keeper of Loretta's tent.

The language of the bridge often seems to be drawn from proverbs, the conversations improbable, or at least out of place. For a time, I begin to think I have stumbled onto the most literate and theatrical homeless encampment in all of downtown, but wherever I wander people speak in profane and extravagant profundities. It is, I suspect, a natural by-product of life on the edge, of being devoured by one's own frailties. Most of us never have to ask ourselves what it is that makes us human. Down here, on the river, under the bridge, those questions never cease. "You want it raw?" Swole asks me the first time we meet. "I'll give it to you raw on a goddamned silver platter, bitch. Can't get no fuckin' rawer than this. I'm not the *bull*shit. I'm the *real* shit." Swole, as in swollen, for the gut bulging out of his Georgetown Hoya vest (and, perhaps, for the inflated way he promotes his interests), is a ringer for a young Redd Foxx, irreverent and foulmouthed, with

a natural North Carolina drawl and a practiced West Indian lilt. He soon sweats me for money. He presses his fist into my stomach, pretends to stick me with a knife. He pulls out a real one and cleans his fingernails with the blade. "When I'm illin', goddammit, trust me—all is fair."

I try to avoid Swole, but he corners me every time I show up. "I want to write a book," he tells me one day. "I want to call it *Stuck in L.A.* Fuck 'down-and-out.' I'm not down-and-out. I'm *stuck*." Then Swole does something I am wholly unprepared for. He sings. His voice is high and tender and unashamed, on the verge of falsetto. The song is Gladys Knight's: *L.A. proved too much for the man / So he's leavin' the life he's come to know / He said he's goin' back to find / Ooh, what's left of his world / The world he left behind / Not so long ago.* It gives me chills. I make Swole a proposition: $5 for a song, but he has got to earn it, to reveal something otherwise drowned out by his bluster. "The first battle you fight is within yourself, always," Swole says. "That's with every man. If you can win that battle, you're not here, stuck under a goddamned bridge."

Swole, I come to find out, is an army veteran, a dog trainer, a disability recipient (diagnosed as bipolar, he gets a monthly social security check for $780, a fortune down on the river), and on and off, a wanted man. He arrived in L.A. more than a decade ago, hoping for a record deal. He ended up on the streets, found the bridge, smoked himself into a hole. He was sentenced to five years in prison for a 1992 attack on an east Hollywood woman (a charge he insists was fabricated). He was sentenced to another three years in 1995 for selling crack to an undercover officer near MacArthur Park (a charge to which he admits). "I don't guerrilla pimp," Swole says. "I finesse pimp." After his release, he returned home to Raleigh. With a grant from the North Carolina Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Services, he enrolled in the Future Truckers of America training school and earned a commercial driver's license. Swole, though, was still a parolee and forbidden to leave California. Officers tracked him down last year, flew him to L.A., and locked him up for another six months. He was paroled again in March. I met him a week later. "Now I'm sittin' in a tent, on a path owned by the Santa Fe Railroad, wonderin' what the fuck I should do," he says. He digs into a backpack and pulls out a stack of papers. Among them is a handwritten letter, dated December 2003, from prison. "To whom it may concern," begins Swole's plea, which asks anyone who will listen for help with job placement services, a bus pass, food stamps, and a one-room apartment. "I've made several steps toward a crime-free lifestyle," it concludes. "Help me make more."

I stop reading and look up at Swole. Our eyes meet. "Still can't help me?" he says. "Then catch me if you can, muthafucka!"

After a couple weeks of hanging out, I am invited to a fish fry. The catch is bass, a good ten pounds of it, picked up from a loading dock the night before. It is unrefrigerated but sealed in plastic. The whole camp will eat, a meal that will vacillate between decorum and violence.

Our master of ceremonies is Gutter. He builds a fire in a metal bucket, fueled by a splash of citronella lamp oil. He sets the fish atop a cardboard box and dredges it in cornmeal. Cooking oil, salt, pepper, and Louisiana hot sauce are all laid out. A blackened frying pan teeters over the flames. "Shoo, fly!" Gutter hisses, waving a kitchen knife through the air. We are on railroad land, about a hundred yards north of the bridge, having been displaced by the set of *24*. I am squatting on the ground, next to a skinny old head named Terry, who is rocking back and forth on an upturned milk crate. "I done asked God a thousand times to help me with my addiction," Terry says. "But the devil won't leave me alone." The fish is crackling, turning golden in the oil. Gutter flips it with his knife and pronounces it done.

"You goddamned right, it's done," says Swole, who has been watching from a distance. "You stabbin' that muthafucka like a steak."

"Back up," Gutter says. "For yo' own sake."

I rest my serving on some cardboard and pick at it slowly. It tastes fine, better than fine, really—a perfectly cooked, beautifully colored, deep-fried fillet. Terry excuses himself and heads for the bushes. I take a seat on his milk crate, and this is where the trouble begins. In anticipation of his meal, Swole has dragged over a milk crate of his own, but he is still parading, being a pest, mocking Gutter's culinary touch. When Terry returns, he takes the only vacant seat, unaware that I am occupying his. I am not paying it any attention, either, until Swole erupts like a prisoner on the yard.

"Get off my muthafuckin' crate," he hollers.

"This ain't your crate," says Terry.

"Goddamned right it's my crate. Now get the fuck off!"

Terry rises, pulling a buck knife from his pocket and flipping open the blade. Swole matches each movement. I finally realize what has happened and try to interject, but Gutter waves me off. I wonder if some of the action is being escalated for my benefit, if Swole can already envision how magnificently raw the scene will look in print. If that is the case, he is way too close now to taking a man's life, or losing his, for me to relish the authenticity. They are nose to nose, gripping weapons at their waists. "You want to take this to the killin' floor?" Swole growls. "We'll take it to the muthafuckin' killin' floor." Somehow their tempers recede. Terry recognizes his mistake. I make a show of offering him his crate back. Swole concedes nothing.

"You do talk kind of foul to people, Swole," Gutter tells him.

"I don't give a mad fuck," Swole says.

"We share everything down here," says Gutter. "We get high together. We make love to the same woman, sometimes together. No need to be talking like that."

"No, it ain't like that down here," Swole says. "This ain't preschool. This is the real goddamned thing." His mouth is still flapping, but Swole's mind has moved on, focused now on one need only. He tells me to walk with him. "How 'bout that song?" he asks. We march straight through the *24* camp, past catering trucks and wardrobe racks, Porta Potties and motorcycle cops. Heads turn. Swole holds nothing in, his voice anguished and true. I reach into my pocket. He gives me Luther Vandross: *Don't you remember you told me you loved me, baby / You said you'd be comin' back this way again, baby / Baby, baby, baby, baby, baby, oh, baby, I love you / Yeah . . . I really do.*

Over and over, I am instructed not to believe anyone, warned even by some of the river people themselves. It is all lies. Lies told to satisfy me, to give me what I want to hear, or at least what everyone imagines that to be. The bridge preys on weakness, and I am a sympathetic ear. If that means I was sometimes cajoled out of a few dollars, I suppose the caution held true. But I think there is something even truer about Starr's and Barry's and Loretta's and Swole's desire to win my approval. In the end, all that belongs to any of us is our story, stories we tell others, stories we tell ourselves. Even peo-

ple with nothing—especially people with nothing—want their stories to matter. By sharing their version of the bridge with me, they were seizing the chance to be validated, to see their lives redeemed in print, if nowhere else.

"I walk the river sometimes and just say nothing and think about the fact that God controls everything," Seven tells me one day. He is wearing headphones tuned to the Christian preachers of KKLA ("the Spirit of Los Angeles") and explains that he took his name for the symbolism: the seventh day, the seven deadly sins, seventh heaven. "What I'm doing, my whole lifestyle, I know it's not serving God. But God can take the scum of the earth, the nothing, the trash, and through His grace and mercy, He rises you up, and bam, you become the leaders and kings of the world! Maybe it's already happening to me."

The day after the fight, I visit Swole. I have begun to look—and as my son reminds me, smell—a bit more like the people I am writing about. I have not changed my clothes, or shaved or showered, for a couple of days now. I am not intending to slum. It is just hard to stay clean here, and it is no longer clear to me why I should even be trying. "How do you deal with this double life?" Swole asks. "Are you, what, like Jane Goodall, in the jungles of Africa, studying the chimpanzees or something?" By now I know not to be surprised by anything, but Swole's question leaves me speechless. It is more than a clever comparison. It is a scathing deconstruction of my job.

"There's a big difference," I sputter. "Those were animals."

"Those were animals," Swole repeats slowly. "What you think we are?" He is staring me down, not angry, just dismayed. He adopts the whitest, most professorial voice he can muster: "Fortunately, your education has brought you to that point where you don't think you're an animal. But trust you me—you *are* an animal."

When I see Loretta next, she asks me to give her a ride. There is a house she knows of, a house for sale. I am reluctant, not because I fear driving around with a soiled and loopy derelict but because I cannot quite picture what we will do once we get there. I do not want to orchestrate an event that would otherwise never occur, to endorse an adventure I already know is doomed. But Loretta is insistent. She gives me the address. I ask her where it is. She has no idea. I flip through my Thomas Guide and find it, on a hillside street in El Sereno. "I need a nice place," she says. "I need some real, real, real rest."

She loads the bulk of her possessions into my trunk, afraid they will disappear if left unattended. Blankets, clothes, candies, an introductory Spanish book she has pulled from the trash. I am reminded of how it felt to be alone in her tent, concealed yet vulnerable, spying through the flaps. If anyone had challenged me, I thought to myself, I would have defended it fiercely; she had trusted me and I did not want to add to the list of men who had let her down. In El Sereno, I turn north on Monterey Road, and she spots it, a neat stucco cottage with bars on the windows. "Oh, my God, it's so beautiful!" she says. But the sign is gone. A neighbor tells us it has been sold. I ask Loretta, as gently as possible, how she had been planning to pay for it. "There's a lot of things I can do," Loretta says. "Maybe write a book about myself."

On our way back to the bridge, she has one more thing to share: "I finally went down to the river. Took myself a bath."

I see that Barry has not left. The week before he had stood at my car window and pleaded for money, just enough to get on the train to Orange County. He sounded like a man who would die if he did not leave that day. I gave him $10 and urged him never to come back to the bridge. "If you must know, I started hitting the pipe again," he says, a confession that hardly comes as a shock. "Alcoholics and addicts—we're some of the most creative people you'll ever find. We've got to come up with some way to support our fucking habit. No disrespect."

A couple of days later he shows up with some literature from the Higashi Honganji Buddhist Temple in Little Tokyo. It describes the importance of meditation over prayer, enlightenment over salvation. "I'm searching, man," Barry says, "searching for the real thing."

Starr's birthday is in late March, on a Sunday. She makes me promise to come celebrate. "You've become part of the bridge," she tells me. Four days before the party, she is picked up by the LAPD on a parole violation and charged with possession of a controlled substance. I try to visit her in county jail, but deputies tell me she has been in a fight. The mayor of the Sixth Street Bridge is now in solitary confinement. **LA**