

pickup truck, its bed piled high with camping equipment, stopped for me and then, after we'd talked a bit, asked if I'd like to spend a week or two panning gold with him in the streams that run down from the California mountains. I figured out afterward we were in the Plumas Sierra or maybe just across the Nevada line in the Virginia or Nightingale Mountains. I know we were only a few hours drive from Winnemucca, Nevada, because that's where I wound up not much later.

The man described himself as an itinerant cook and preacher, who felt the need from time to time to get away from the habitations of men and restore himself. He said there was gold, in small amounts, in many of the streams washing down from the Sierra. There was no El Dorado in view, he had found only two or three small nuggets worth maybe a few hundred dollars each in the ten or so years he'd been doing this, but he could earn a reliable three or four dollars for a morning's work and have the rest of his day free for contemplation and to sketch out the sermons he would deliver when he returned to the world.

We were at work in a streambed within an hour or so after leaving the highway. My memory of the man, blue-eyed and rangy with graying hair, is much clearer than my memory either of the landscape around us or the exact process of panning gold. I think the land was bleak and slightly rolling, the stream shallow; there may have been some scrub foliage along the banks. The panning has been so infiltrated by movies seen before and since as to wipe out my own concrete experience. I probably did just what they do in the movies: I sieved and sifted sediment from the streambed and studied it in my pan; learned to tell gold dust from iron or copper pyrites, fool's gold, by seeing whether it still glistened under water.

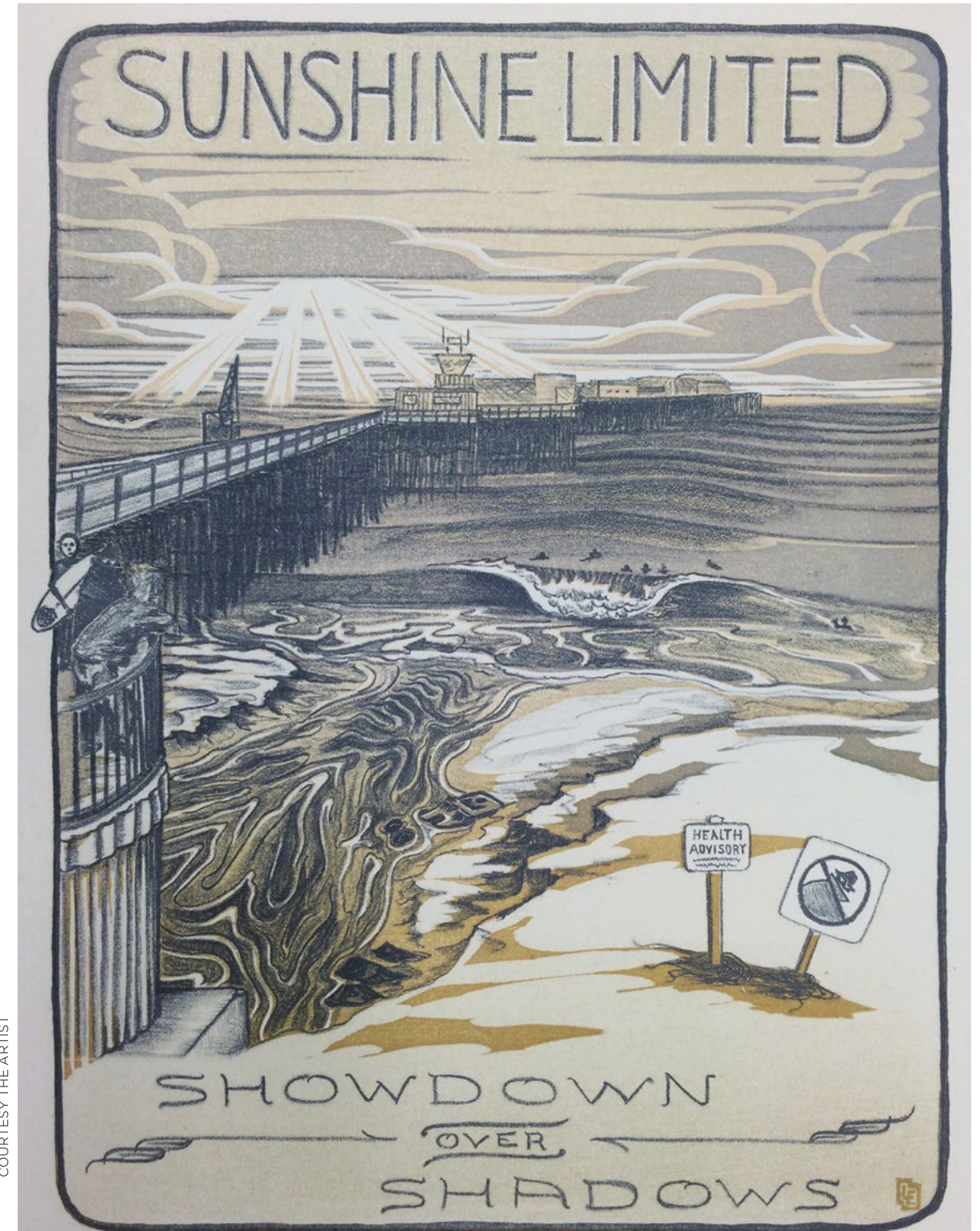
The potential consequences of a week or two in the desert, of the preacher's healing influence, will remain forever unknown. We had finished our day's work and were driving toward our campsite when the truck broke down. The repairs, he told me, would take days, possibly as much as a week. He would have to move into town himself, look for temporary work as a cook. I think we were able to drive with difficulty back to the highway, I have no recollection of footing it across the desert, and from the highway I caught my lift to Winnemucca. The man had paid me two or three dollars for the gold I'd panned.

I lost that, as well as most of my travel money, in a small casino in Winnemucca. At about two that morning, still in Winnemucca, I got a lift in a car that was going all the way to Albany, New York. They fed me, even though I couldn't drive.

Carl Schiffman is a native New Yorker, a graduate of Yale Drama School, and has had five short plays produced off-Broadway. He has published short stories in *New England Review*, *Missouri Review*, *Antioch Review* and elsewhere. His first online story is on Jewishfiction.net, based in Canada.

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