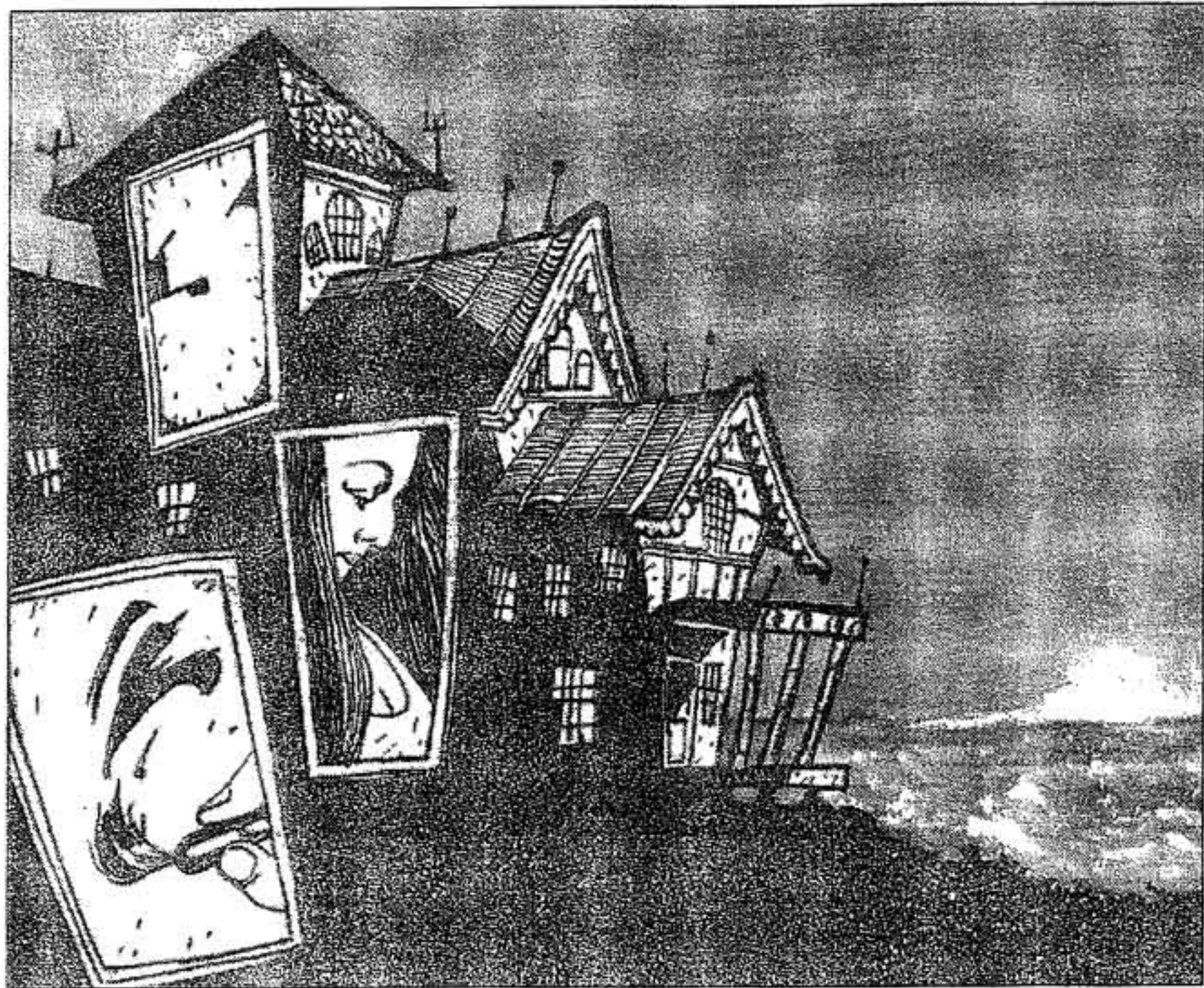


# Not Your Average Beach



RANDY DUBURKE

There is nothing usual about the guests staying at the Almayer Inn, a seaside hotel "perched on the last narrow ledge of the world" and the main setting for Alessandro Baricco's euphoric new novel, *OCEAN SEA* (Knopf, \$23), splendidly translated by Alastair McEwen. In Room 3 resides Professor Bartleboom, who is compiling an encyclopedia of limits, including an entry for where the sea ends. Almost every evening he writes a letter to the as yet imaginary woman he hopes to meet and marry. Ann Deveria has been sent to the hotel by her husband so that the sea air might calm her and induce her to forget her lover. The artist Plasson, a renowned portrait painter, is devoting the rest of his career to painting a portrait of the sea. Elisewin, an extremely delicate girl fading from life, comes to the inn as a last hope, accompanied by a priest who unintentionally says precisely what he thinks. A man known only as Adams, who has "the look of an animal stalking its prey," waits at the inn to commit a murder. And, of course, there is the ocean sea lurking just beyond the threshold of the inn, holding the guests' intertwining fates in its mysterious and musical embrace. As in his previous novel, "Silk," Baricco hypnotizes us with exotic language and erotic entanglements. Only occasionally does his prose seem pretentious. More often, "Ocean Sea" is highly romantic and breathtakingly lyrical.

JENNY MCPHEE