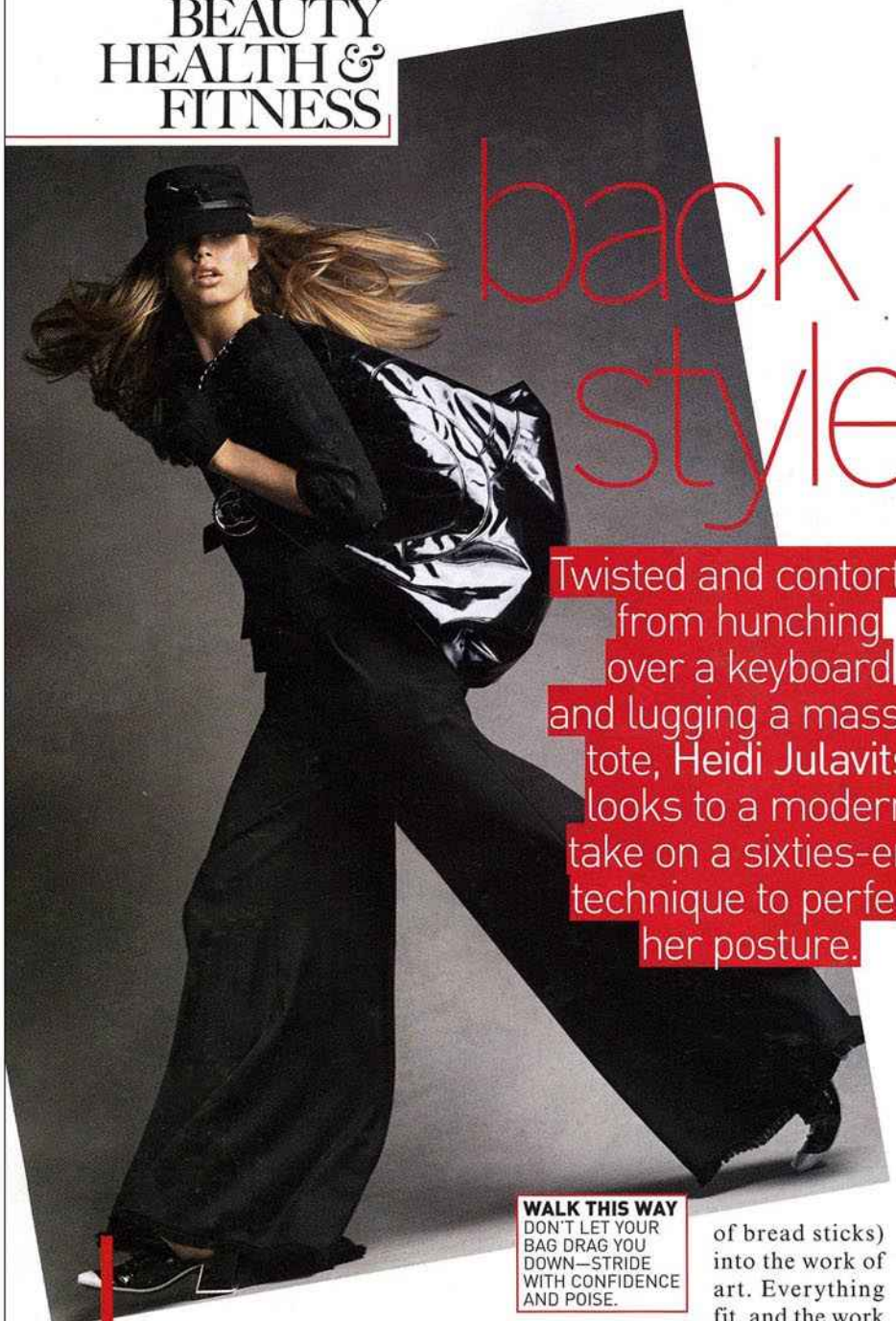
back in style

Twisted and contorted from hunching over a keyboard and lugging a massive tote, **Heidi Julavits** looks to a modern take on a sixties-era technique to perfect her posture.



WALK THIS WAY DON'T LET YOUR BAG DRAG YOU DOWN—STRIDE WITH CONFIDENCE AND POISE.

This past year has been, for me, a period of intense personal searching. I asked myself the hard questions: What kind of person am I? How do I want others to perceive me? And will my computer fit inside? For months, I pitilessly self-scrutinized as I scoured the Earth for the perfect handbag.

And then I found it. A faux-reptile, space-age grommeted Marni tote—"a work of art," as the saleswoman said. Right, but let's see what it holds, I thought as I emptied the contents of my current sad sack (laptop, books, pens, wallet, diapers, wipes, emergency Baggie of bread sticks) into the work of art. Everything fit, and the work of art, not only stunning but sturdy, seemed structurally up to the task. Then I tried to pry it over my shoulder for the crucial test-drive. Though it took me a moment to admit it (self-deception always precedes epiphany), the bag's straps were too short. Gamely, I held the bag in my hand rather than chucking it onto my shoulder and wedging it into the bony groove I'd perfected over the years. For an hour I walked around the store, bag in hand, trying to convince myself that this was indeed the perfect bag. But deep inside I knew otherwise. The Marni handbag triggered my toddler-chasing-computer-ogling forward shoulder slump, and the energy required to counteract this slump (in order to keep me upright) meant I'd be exhausted after walking half a block.

I cursed handbags—a sadistic, impractical invention—and then blamed the Marni bag in particular. It was the bag's fault I couldn't buy it. I blamed my kid. I blamed gravity. Then, reverting to quest mind-set, I turned my scrutiny inward. Maybe the problem was me. Maybe I simply needed to correct my posture. Except, as I discovered when I tried it, "simply correcting my posture" was precisely as impossible as existing for my entire waking life in mountain pose. My mind was unable to counteract my spine's naturally unnatural curvature toward the earth even when the perfect handbag was at stake. My body, in short, was imprisoned by itself. Worse still was this realization, assisted by the store's full-length mirrors: My body language conveyed timidity, insecurity, even a tiny bit of self-shame. Gravity, laziness, a momentarily shopworn sense of self-worth had initiated my downward slide, but now my bones and muscles clung to this new shape like a grudge.

I decided to take extreme measures. No wimpy massages or sweetly encouraging physical-therapy sessions. It was time to explore a reputedly hard-core yet effective bodywork technique created by a woman who, in her heyday, resembled the love child of Eleanor Roosevelt and Yoda. It was time to regain my inward (and outward) delusion of worldly dominance so I could buy that Marni bag.

It was time to get Rolfed.

Rolfing should connote a sixties-era hell massage administered by a hairy Big Sur sadist. It should connote the words *torture* and *primal scream* and inspire visions of your muscles being separated from your bones, among other gruesome posture-improving procedures. Rolfing's brutal reputation turns out to be an old hippie wives' tale, and the term "Rolfer" an occasional misnomer. For example, my chosen Rolfer, Michael Bulger, isn't technically a Rolfer—he is a Structural Integration Practitioner. Rolfing and Rolfer are registered trademarks of the Rolf Institute, so even *health >475*

though Bulger learned Rolf's methods, he studied at the Guild for Structural Integration and thus cannot call himself a Rolfer (though he does use the verb "to Rolf"). Given Rolfing's inaccurately negative rap, many recent trainees of Ida P. Rolf's methods (developed in the forties and popularized, or some might say primal scream–ized, at the infamous Esalen Institute in the sixties) are happy to refer to themselves as she did—as practitioners of Structural Integration.

Bulger's office is located near Union Square, in an ornate old New York City office building where, rumor has it, Man Ray once kept his studio. With his boyishly messy surfer hair, Bulger might be a rock star I should recognize. Many of Bulger's clients work in the fashion world: editors, photographers, models—in short, the people who helped to mainstream formerly fringe practices like yoga, Pilates, and acupuncture.

I've been told to wear "nice underwear" since this will be my only attire for the next hour and a half (it's not because of car accidents your mother warned you to wear nice underwear; it was because you might unexpectedly get Rolfed). I strip and stand by the wall while Bulger, in jeans and a T-shirt, sits atop a blue exercise ball. I bust out my best mountain pose, but he's only momentarily fooled by my fake-powerful stance. One look at my legs when I'm lying on the table yields a troubling observation: My right leg is one inch longer than my left. My pelvis is cocked. My rib cage, too, is laughably uneven, with my left ribs protruding farther than my right, a problem I've long observed from below when in bridge pose.

Yoga, in fact, is a logical entry point to Structural Integration. Rolf, decades ahead of her time, became a yoga junkie in the thirties to help resolve her back problems related to scoliosis. Subsequently, hatha yoga strongly influenced her when she was formulating her soon-to-be self-titled Structural Integration techniques. Her techniques are founded on the following premise: Bones, joints, and muscles are interconnected by a web of tissue called fascia. Due to injury and habitual use, the fascia—"intelligent tissue," Bulger calls it—compensates around these hurt or overused areas, and reconfigures the body in such a way that you become literally trapped in the shape of your own bad patterns. The keyboard slump. The shoulder as hook for the life-bearing tote bag. The torqued pelvis protecting the ski-injured knee. Since the fascia is plastic, not elastic, it can be reshaped or, as Bulger phrases it, "reeducated" to respond to gravity in a more balanced way. Or, as he puts it to me once: "I'm doing yoga for you."

PRECIOUS CARGO GET ROLFED, AND CARRY A BABY WITH THE GREATEST OF EASE.

I can walk comfortably, and seemingly forever, carrying a handbag in my hand or my daughter on my hip without having to exert myself

This sounds good to me, a lazy, lazy yogi and chronic keyboard slumper whose shoulders feel most at peace with gravity when jutting slightly forward of my chin. My first session begins mildly enough and does not, in any commonly understood way, resemble a massage. Massage is to Structural Integration as getting your hair washed is to getting your wet, knotted hair combed straight. Bulger inserts his thumb, fingers, even his elbow into the indentations between my muscles and joints. He applies pressure and gently manipulates the rubber band–like bits of tissue under my skin. I've signed up for the "Basic Ten Series," which forms the foundation of Rolf's Structural Integration methodology. Manipulating the fascia—creating differentiation in the thickened, damaged connective tissue so the joints can move through their full range of motion—works like cognitive therapy does on the brain. "Your body remembers that it has a choice," says Bulger. While the effects can be long-lasting—even permanent—Bulger has a lot of regular clients who, after completing the ten series, continue to work with him to help resolve their specific issues.

The experience of being Rolfed is primarily a painless one, though it feels less soothing and sleepy-making than it does like subdermal hygiene. Occasionally it becomes intense. "This is going to hurt," warns Bulger before he separates two filaments of connective tissue that have adhered just below my armpit—but in fact it feels wonderful after a few deep breaths, like the good hurt of the hamstrings during a forward bend.

While Bulger is open to methods that combine bodywork with psychotherapy, he believes that a past motorcycle accident is more to blame for his internally rotated knee than, say, his relationship to his father. Still, Bulger remains highly attentive to possible mind-body connections. A woman, say, with a history of bulimia may have an intense emotional response to having her stomach and her digestive system manipulated.

Given my relatively emotionless digestive system, for me the most notable by-product of a good Rolf is this: I am mentally floating when I leave Bulger's office, lucid, calmly receptive, and cheery. I'm protected inside a clear glass bubble that prevents me from reacting to the Union Square chaos with tensed shoulders or a lowered head. I tell Bulger about my post-treatment high; endorphins, I suspect, or maybe my beginning-to-improve *health >483*

posture is already elevating my sense of powerfulness. Both are probably true.

Another unexpected benefit: I'm getting great conversational mileage out of the announcement "I'm getting Rolfed." I even meet some closet Rolfees this way. "Are you talking about Rolfing?" a woman asks me the other day in the park. She tells me about undergoing an arthroscopic hip operation. Afterward she had the unnerving (and painful) sensation that her femur, which had been pulled out of her hip socket for the surgery, was in the wrong place. She visited a Rolfer, who observed that her feet were two very different colors, suggesting a circulation problem. As the Rolfer worked on her, she said, she felt a pump-pump-pumping sensation in her leg; soon her previously grayish foot had "pinked up like a baby's."

From a power-posture perspective, however, I'm not initially convinced I'm experiencing any noticeable improvements. Bulger's work is occasionally so gentle as to seem imperceptible. Yes, there are those *ooooweeee* moments, such as when he snaps on the surgical gloves and Rolfs the inside of my mouth or works those gossamer adhesions between my organs and my intestines. But at times it feels as though his fingers are merely hovering between my muscles. Only when he shifts, again almost imperceptibly, do I realize he's performing a stealth manipulation.

After my third session, I realize that in fact I have changed physically. One day I look down and am amazed to find my handbag is in my hand. A mistake? Clearly. But since my shoulder is no longer hook-shaped, the bag has slid down my arm and come naturally to rest in my palm. I don't question it. I keep walking. One block. Two blocks. Three. Suddenly I can walk comfortably, and seemingly forever, carrying a handbag in my hand or my daughter on my hip without having to exert myself to maintain a decently upright posture; my body assumes this balanced shape without my having to force it. I look less like my usual slumped Sherpa self and more like a chicly confident Cold War spy carrying a briefcase full of money.

I'm sold. Like yoga, Rolfing is one of those practices that your body instantly tells you makes a lot of sense. Meanwhile, I keep catching glimpses of this unrecognizably poised woman in glass storefronts; her back, despite the fact that she's pushing a stroller or weighted down by her office-in-a-handbag, is laughably, even arduously straight. But that power-exuding woman in the window is me, and it requires no effort at all to be her. □

green peace

New eco-friendly studios, clothes, and props let yogis inhale and exhale in spaces that are as pure as the practice itself.

NATURAL HIGH CIELA WYNTER, AN INSTRUCTOR AT TRÜYOGA, STRIKES DANCER'S POSE NEAR THE SANTA MONICA BEACH.

where to pose At **Trüyoga** in Santa Monica, everything is "green" from the ground up: The floor is planked with sustainable-harvest mahogany from Brazil, the walls are covered in low-emission paint, and the "shredded wheat" ceiling tiles are really cellulose fiber. After class, head through doors inlaid with bamboo suspended in recycled-Coke-bottle glass for a rubdown in one of the massage rooms. Trüyoga, 2425 Colorado Avenue, Santa Monica; (310) 829-2420; truyogala.com. Across the country at the new **Bikram Yoga NYC** studio on the Upper East Side, the 105-degree room temp that distinguishes the "hot" style of yoga comes from a low-wattage furnace using recycled-aluminum panels. (A purge system also wicks moisture and sweat from the air to help clear it of bacteria, germs, and allergens.) Bamboo, the definitive Earth-friendly wood, covers the floor, and non-toxic paint brightens the walls of the 4,000-square-foot loft. Bikram Yoga NYC East Side Studio, 173 East Eighty-third Street; (212) 288-9642; bikramyoganyc.com.

how to dress Polyester pales next to clothes woven of organic cotton or bamboo, two crops grown without pesticides or insecticides. Some of the most stylish yogawear comes from the designer behind **loyale,** Jenny Hwa, who proves that "eco-friendly," "chic," and "made in the U.S.A." belong in the same sentence (loyaleclothing.com). **Prana** makes sleek yoga capris, tanks, and hoodies stitched of organic cotton (prana.com).

what to bring The **Eco-Jute Dali Mama Roll & Go Yoga Mat** comes close to being perfectly green, made of jute fibers that are meshed with a phthalate-free plastic that's safer for the environment (thesucculentwife.com). Preferred by elite yoga teachers everywhere, the thick and dense **Manduka mat** offers cushioning, superb slip resistance, and stability—and is manufactured according to strict environmental guidelines (manduka.com).—**LAURIE DRAKE**

STEVEN SIMKO; Sittings Editor: Kathryn Retzer; hair, Cori Bardo at Celestine; makeup, Jeffrey Paul at Exclusive Artists; still life: ALEX CAO. Details, see In This Issue.