

writers on america

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*It avails not, time and place -- distance avails not,
I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or ever so
many generations hence,
Just as you feel when you look on the river and the sky, so I feel,
Just as any of you is one of a living crowd, I was one of a crowd,
Just as you are refresh'd by the gladness of the river and the bright
flow, I was refresh'd,
Just as you stand and lean on the rail, yet hurry with the swift
current, I stood yet was hurried,
Just as you look on the numberless masts of the ships and the thick-
stemm'd pipes of steamboats, I looked.*

Walt Whitman, from "Crossing
Brooklyn Ferry," 1856

This book originated as an intriguing suggestion by Mark Jacobs, a U.S. foreign service officer with our State Department staff who also happens to be a working novelist. If we were to ask a contemporary group of American poets, novelists, critics, and historians what it means to be an American writer, Jacobs proposed, the results could illuminate in an interesting way certain America values -- freedom, diversity, democracy -- that may not be well understood in all parts of the world.

In the spirit of trying an experiment, that is what we did. Choosing 15 writers who have attained a certain stature for their work, with the group as a whole reflecting the considerable diversity of American writing today, we commissioned each to write an essay. The assignment: In what sense do you see yourself as an American writer?



In some ways this approach recalls a long tradition of literary self-analysis in the United States. Michel Guillaume St. Jean de Crevecoeur famously posed the question in his *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782): "What then is the American, this new man?" In 1837, Ralph Waldo Emerson called for intellectual independence from "the courtly muses of Europe" in his address "The American Scholar." A century later, Ernest Hemingway defined American writing with his remark: "All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain, *Huckleberry Finn*." In a sense, we were asking each author to update the answer to Crevecoeur's question for the 21st century.

The first thing that strikes one about the responses is how varied these essays are. America refracted through these writers' minds is not one place but many. Perhaps it's not so surprising that one person's "American" experience is likely to be quite different from another's. Ask 15 creative individualists the same question, and naturally you will get 15 different answers.

On second glance, though, certain common threads appear among the essays. First, writing careers are rooted in the sensual memories of early childhood, of a particular time and place, a small town or a farm or a city neighborhood. "All politics is local," Tip O'Neill, a Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, once remarked. Our writers would amend that to, Everything begins at home. For Elmaz Abinader home is the smell of Arabic bread baked by her mother in a small Pennsylvania town. For Robert Pinsky it is the whispered stories he heard as a boy in a decaying New Jersey oceanfront resort. Michael Chabon finds the magic of youth in the whimsical place names of the new planned city that he grew up in. Historian David Herbert Donald finds his locus as a writer in the family story-telling traditions of the American South of his childhood.

Frequently, for this group of writers, the sense of home means an immigrant culture, with a parent or grandparent from another land. Often there is a "mixed marriage" that blends different religions or ethnicities into one family for generations after. For the writer with recent immigrant roots, it seems there are two rites of passage: first, recognizing both one's longing for and differences from the American mainstream, and then discovering the integrity of one's own culture. Sven Birkerts's memoir is an extended meditation on his youthful and largely subconscious infatuation with Midwestern America, followed by his rediscovery of his Latvian heritage through the literature of Europe. Julia Alvarez's story of her long journey from a Dominican dictatorship to American freedom culminates in a moment of bicultural song that mixes Spanish and English in one poem.

The central word about America for many of these writers is possibility. "Everything was possible in the United States," Naomi Shihab Nye writes of her Palestinian father's feelings about his adopted country. "This was not just a rumor, it was true.

He might not grow rich overnight, but he could sell insurance, import colorful gifts from around the world, start little stores, become a journalist. He could do anything."

At the same time, our authors recognize that American society was and is far from perfect. Abinader and Alvarez have never forgotten the schoolyard epithets hurled their way by classmates whose immigrant ancestors were not quite so recent. Thirty-five years after its birth, Chabon's boyhood home of Columbia, Maryland, founded in part as an experiment in interracial living, is said to have "crime and racial unrest." The American Indian poet Linda Hogan is well aware of the sad history of her people at the hands of the Europeans who colonized this nation.

The greater truth about America, however, for virtually all the writers in this collection would lie in the faith of the great-uncle of African-American novelist Charles Johnson. Born in the rural South in 1892, Johnson's Uncle Will moved north to found and run several businesses -- even as he preached continually the value of education. "He understood," Johnson writes, "and made us see through personal example, that while black people had endured often mind-numbing oppression, America was founded on principles, ideals, and documents?that forced it to be forever self-correcting. That, he knew, was the ground that nurtured black Americans. The opportunities denied him would be there for us, he said. But only if we were educated and hard-working."

Another common passage for our group of writers is a move beyond their personal experiences and communities -- even beyond their Americanness -- to a powerful sense of the universal. Bharati Mukherjee calls writers everywhere "a like-minded tribe. On the international level, I've found serious writers to be universally skeptical of authority, ironic, and sympathetic to the lost and baffled. They feast on incongruity and absurdity, they're quick to appreciate another's work and to recognize the different forces that shape it."

Richard Ford posits an unknown young writer in a distant country pondering what it means to be a writer. "And he's writing the same things I've written, or better things," Ford suggests. "Good, I say. For if all these years of being an American have only readied me to realize that my likeness, my kinship, my collegiality with someone I'll never know, made me able to live literature's most precious wisdom -- then being an American, and a writer no less, has served me very well indeed."

The voice that seems to lie just beneath the surface of many of these essays is that of the great American poet Walt Whitman (1819-1892). Poets Robert Creeley and Billy Collins cite Whitman as an influence; Julia Alvarez ends her essay by bursting into poetry with "I Too Sing America," an allusion to Whitman's enduring line "I hear America singing." Few have

ever connected the one -- the individual soul -- with the many
-- the souls of all Americans and all humankind -- more exultantly than Whitman.

The novelist Robert Olen Butler concludes his essay by evoking a connection that Whitman felt powerfully. "Artists of all the nations of the world pass each day through the portal of the personal unconscious and enter the depths of the collective unconscious," Butler writes, "and these artists emerge with visions of things that bind us all together. I am an American. I am an artist. I look at my country and I seek the human soul."

-- **George Clack**, Executive Editor

Just off Main Street

by **Elmaz Abinader**

I. Crossing the Threshold

When I was young, my house had a magic door. Outside that door was the small Pennsylvania town where I grew up. Main Street ran in front of our house bearing the standard downtown features: a bank, a news stand, the hardware store, the auto parts supply, and other retail businesses. Families strolled the streets, particularly on weekends looking at the displays of furniture in Kaufman's giant window, the posters for movies hanging behind the glass at the Rex Theatre, and the mannequins, missing hands or fingers, sporting the latest fashions in the windows of my aunt's clothing store. In those days, the early 1960s, the small businesses in a town like Masontown fed the community's needs for food, clothing, and shelter.

My family's shops took their positions on Main Street as well: Nader's Shoe Store, Nader's Department Store, and the Modernnaire Restaurant. From the face of it, our businesses looked like any others and we gratefully satisfied the local mother trying to buy church-worthy shoes for the children, the father in for a good cigar and the newspaper, and the after-school crowd, who jittered near the juke box on the restaurant tiles. My father and my uncle stood in the doorways of their establishments, perfectly dressed in gray suits and white shirts, ties, and glossy polished shoes.

At that moment, frozen in second grade, at the threshold of the store, I saw no difference between my father, uncle, and the people who passed by. Many of them too sent their children to Mrs. Duffy for piano lessons, shopped at the A & P, and bar-b-qed in the backyard on the Fourth of July. Many of my dad's customers had their children in All Saints School with



Elmaz Abinader is an Arab-American author, poet and performance artist whose work has been printed and performed throughout the United States and the Middle East. Her most recent volume, *In the Country of My Dreams...*, won the 2000 Josephine Miles PEN Oakland award for multicultural poetry. Her first play, *Country of Origin*, won two "Drammies" from Oregon's Drama Circle, and she is touring with her second performance piece, *Ramadan Moon*. *Children of the Roojme: A Family's Journey from Lebanon*, her first book (Norton, 1991; University of Wisconsin, 1997), is a widely acclaimed memoir of one family's immigration. She currently teaches at Mills College, Oakland, California.

After receiving an M.F.A. degree in poetry from Columbia University, where she studied with Philip Levine, and earning a Ph.D. in Creative Writing, Abinader won a post-doctoral fellowship in the humanities that led to work with novelist Toni Morrison on *Children of the Roojme*. Early in her writing career, she won an Academy of American Poets award. Most recently, she was a Fulbright senior scholar in Egypt.

Her poetry was first introduced to the public in *Grape Leaves, A Century of Arab-American Poetry*, edited by Gregory Orfalea and Sharif Elmusa (University of Utah Press, 1988). She has produced several commissioned pieces: two commemorating the centennial of Gibran Khalil Gibran and another honoring the works of musician Marcel Khalife. Many of her works have appeared in anthologies.

A creative writing teacher for years, Elmaz Abinader has focused on the work of young writers of color, particularly through her participation in the Hurston-Wright Writers' Week West and The Voice of Our Nations Arts Foundation.

me. Their daughters had shiny bikes with streamers flowing from the handlebars. The popular girls, Jeannie and Renee, wore freshly polished Mary Jane shoes every day, and discussed quite vocally their ever growing collection of Barbie doll paraphernalia. I listened with fascination to the descriptions of a house for Barbie, her car, and her wardrobe. Jeannie wrapped her finger around her blond pony tail as she described Barbie's ball gown. Renee pulled her spit curl into a C as she showed us pictures of her trip to Virginia Beach.

In these moments of social exchange, the illusion of similarity between me and the girls in my class floated away, bubble light. Despite sharing the same school uniform, being in the Brownies, singing soprano in the choir, and being a good speller, my life and theirs were separated by the magic door. And although my classmates didn't know what was behind that portal, they circled me in the playground and shouted "darkie" at my braids trying to explode into a kinky mop, or "ape" at my arms bearing mahogany hair against my olive pale skin. It was dizzying and my stomach squirrel-squealed in loneliness.

I dragged myself home to our gray-shingled house on Main Street feeling the weight of my book bag and the heaviness of the differences between me and the girls jumping rope just across the street. As I pulled on the silver aluminum handle of the screen door that led to the hallway of our house, the rust crumbled against my thumb. Nothing was particularly enchanting about this door, but when I entered, the context of the world changed.

Drawing me from the entrance, down the hall, to the dining room, was one of my favorite smells. It was Wednesday, the day of the week when my mother covered the table for eight with newspaper, dragged two large blue cans from the pantry, and lined up the cookie sheets. By the time I arrived home from school in the afternoon, the house smelled of Arabic bread and loaves and loaves of the round puffy disks leaned against each other in rows on the table. She made triangles of spinach pies, cinnamon rolls, and fruit pies filled with pears from the trees growing on our land. Before greeting me, she looked up, her face flour-smudged, and said, "There are 68 loaves. You can have one."

By now, my sisters have joined me at one end of the table where we pass the apple butter to each other to slather on the warm bread. When Arabic bread comes out of the oven, it is filled with air and looks like a little pillow; as it cools, the bread flattens to what Americans recognize as "pita" bread. Other bread was rarely eaten in our house; even when we put hot dogs on the grill, they were dropped into a half of "cohbs," then covered with ketchup.

The smell was hypnotic and mitigated the melancholy I carried home with my lessons to do that night. The revelry ended soon after we finished our treat. Each

child of the six of us had after-school duties. My three brothers reported to the store to clean and manage the inventory, and we three girls shared the demands of house and garden. In the summer, we weeded, watered, and picked the vegetables; in the fall, we reported to the basement where we canned fruits, beans, jams, and pickles. Between these seasons were endless piles of laundry, ironing, and cleaning to maintain the nine people who filled our little house. Barbies, coloring books, after-school sports were other children's worlds, not ours.

Behind the magic door, the language shifted as well. Mother-to-daughter orders were delivered in Arabic -- homework, conversations, and the rosary, in the most precise English possible. Three things dominated our lives: devotion to God, obedience to our parents, and good grades in school. A sliver of an error in any of these areas was punished with swiftness and severity. The reputation of our family relied on our perfection and my parents had no idea that their struggling-to-be-perfect daughters digested unsavory ridicule from their peers.

Our social interactions on the other side of the door had little weight inside the house. We had a different community who gathered on weekends and during the summer. Relatives from towns around Pennsylvania and Ohio filled our living room and dining room, circling the table crowded with my mother's fabulous array of Arabic dishes: *hummus*, chick bean dip, *baba ghanouj*, eggplant with sesame, stuffed grape leaves, shish kebob, *kibbee*, raw or fried lamb and bulgur wheat patties, a leg of lamb, a turkey stuffed with rice and raisins and platter after platter of side dishes. The famous Arabic bread sat skyscraper high on plates at either end.

My uncle, the priest, blessed the table, and the chatter of Arabic began as cousins dipped their bread, scooped up the tabouleh salad, and daintily bit the sweet baklava pastry. As the end of the meal approached, we pushed slightly away from the table, as my father told a story of the old days, or someone read a letter from Lebanon; or a political argument snarled across the empty dishes.

We girls cleared the table and Arabic music wound its way out of the record player. Before we knew it, someone started a line dance and others linked arms, and stomping and kicking and clapping shook the house. As children and as worker bees, we were busy, both cleaning dishes and bringing the adults anything they wanted, as well as standing up to having our cheeks pinched and our bodies lifted into the air.

My family scenes filled me with joy and belonging, but I knew none of it could be shared on the other side of that door. The chant of schoolyard slurs would intensify. Looking different was enough; having a father with a heavy accent already marked me, dancing in circles would bury me as a social outcast.

II. Making a Writer

In college, a school one hundred times larger in population than my home town, I walked the campus with a fascination. Past the line of the ginkgo trees, I entered the Cathedral of Learning, the skyscraper at the University of Pittsburgh where the English Department was housed. On the first floor of this beautiful building are the Nationality Classrooms. These rooms are designed to represent different cultural notions of classroom design. The English Room featured benches from the House of Commons, the Hungarian Room presented the paprika-colored panels of flower design set into the wall, and the Chinese Room, dedicated to Confucius, put the students in round tables without a sense of hierarchy. We had some classes in these quarters, often unhappy with the stiffness of the furniture or the care we had to take with our equipment. One room was locked and could only be seen by permission or during a tour. I studied the plaque outside the door. *The Syria-Lebanese Room*. Here again, a door dividing the outside "American" world from my world. Naturally, I made it a point to see the room, inviting my friends along.

At the moment we entered, our breath froze. The room was covered in Persian rug designs, glass multi-colored lights, brass tables, and cushions against the wall around the perimeter. It was lush and exotic and suddenly the pride of being associated with this palace worked its way inside of me. In charge of my own identity in college, I announced my heritage, wrote about my grandmother, cooked Arabic food for my friends, and played the music of Oum Kalthoum at gatherings at my house.

It wasn't long before I understood that my display of my Arab-ness served to exoticize me. In the curriculum, nothing of Arab writing was represented; on television, the only person associated with Lebanon was Danny Thomas; and *Lawrence of Arabia* became the footnote to my culture. Concurrently, the events in the Middle East clarified the sympathies in the United States as not pro-Arab; and as I grew, feelings toward Arabs became more negative and sometimes bordered on distrust, even from my own colleagues.

I persisted in my writing. A poem about my mother leaving Lebanon and making a home in the United States, a story about my grandfather living like a refugee during World War I, my father's adventures as a rubber trader in Brazil when he was a young man became my themes, and I intuitively released these stories and poems as if the whole history was bottled up inside of me.

Still, my writing was happening *inside* the door. Outside, in my classroom, in my bachelor's and master's program, some years later, the literature we read was as foreign to my natural sensibility as Barbie was to my childhood milieu. The models for writers included a substantial number of European-identified male authors who

wrote eloquently about mainstream American culture. In my writing corner of the world, I penned stories of children dying during the Ottoman siege of our village in Lebanon. I felt music in my poetry that was strange to American ears; my images gathered in a shiny brocade of detail, more lush than other writing of the 1970s.

I did not feel welcome outside the door.

But I persisted. Somewhere in my journey, I put my hand on a book that made the difference. The title first attracted me: *The Woman Warrior*, and the author had a name that was uncommon: *Maxine Hong Kingston*. Inside this book, I discovered a grandmother who talked stories, daughters who were too American for their family; a culture completely strange to the people around them. In essence, this writer knew, she knew, what was inside the door and she wrote about it. This book not only led me to the body of literature available in the Chinese-American canon, but I found African-American, Latino, Native American writers, whose voices resounded about some of the same issues: belonging, identity, cultural loneliness, community, and exoticization.

The strains of my music seeped through cracks and under the threshold, the stomp of the dance pushed the door out of the way. I listened to Toni Morrison in an interview answer the question, "Do you write because of racism?" She said, "I write *in spite of racism*." Writers were claiming their place not only in literature, but also in the perception of history.

Participating in activism had always been an important part of being a citizen of the United States for me. My years were marked with political causes for which I marched, protested, signed petitions, and organized committees. Now I began to understand: As a writer, I was also an activist. Telling a good story, writing a beautiful poem pierced the reader more deeply than any rhetoric could manage.

In addition, I found a community: American writers and artists of color often travel the same terrain as I do, living with dual sensitivities, negotiating where one culture I inhabit conflicts with my other culture, looking for a place that is home.

Times have been challenging for Arab-Americans because our countries of origin are often embroiled in conflict and political controversy. The more difficult it becomes, the bigger role *my good story* and *my beautiful poem* play in contributing to a perspective of the events and the people. Readers will often trust literature more than speeches or articles, and I find that my love of writing is interwoven with my responsibility to write.

I have a new small town. It's not anywhere in particular, or maybe it's everywhere. In this village, people live with their doors open, moving back and forth over the

threshold of what has been exclusive to what will some day be inclusive. As a writer, I make my life known and woven into the fabric of literature. As an activist, I look toward other young writers of color and let them know, they might have to lean with their shoulder, put their whole body into it, but if they push on that door it will eventually open.

I, Too, Sing América

by **Julia Alvarez**



A native of the Dominican Republic, **Julia Alvarez** came to the United States when she was young -- yet, her Spanish-speaking heritage has illuminated her literary work in English. Alvarez writes that, thanks to a grant from Phillips Andover Academy in 1980, "I took a summer off to try my hand at writing fiction, for my own Island background was steeped in a tradition of storytelling that I wanted to explore in prose," a decision that helped her become a writer of novels, as well as of prize-winning verse, and books for young readers.

Her published work includes *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, a novel (Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books, 1991), *In The Time of the Butterflies*, a novel (Algonquin, 1994), *The Other Side*, poems (Dutton, 1995), *Homecoming: New and Collected Poems* (New York: Plume, 1996), *¡YO!*, a novel (Algonquin: 1997), and *In The Name of Salomé*, a novel (Algonquin, 2000), and much other work.

Julia Alvarez received a B.A. degree from Middlebury College, in Vermont, in 1971, and a Masters in Creative Writing from Syracuse University in 1975. She has frequently taught on the staff of the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, and has held teaching positions at Phillips Andover Academy; the University of Vermont; George Washington University, Washington, D.C.; and the University of Illinois at Urbana. She is currently writer-in-residence at Middlebury College.

Alvarez was named "woman of

I would never have become a writer unless my family had emigrated to the United States when I was ten years old.

I grew up in the '50s in a dictatorship on the little Caribbean half-island of the Dominican Republic. Although it was a highly oral culture rich in storytelling, it was not a literary culture. I grew up among people who thought of reading as an antisocial activity that could ruin your health and definitely take the fun out of life.

Reading/studying was not an activity that was encouraged in my family, especially for us girls. My grandmother, who only went up to fourth grade, used to tell the story that she only picked up a book when she heard the teacher's donkey braying as it climbed up the hill to her house.

Boys had to make the *sacrificio* and get an education in order to earn a living -- but in moderation. My cousin was considered strange because he not only loved to read but as a teenager began to write poetry. "*Se va a enfermar*," my aunt would say, shaking her head every time she found Juan sitting in a chair, reading a book. "He's going to get sick."

the year" by *Latina Magazine* in 2000. In that same year she journeyed to the Dominican Republic to attend the inauguration of the new president, as part of the official U.S. delegation. *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* was picked by New York Librarians as one of 21 classics for the 21st century. *In the Time of the Butterflies* was selected a Notable Book in 1994 by the American Library Association, and was a Book of the Month Club choice in that year. Her poem "Bookmaking" appeared in *The Best American Poetry 1991*. In addition to many other awards and honors, Ms. Alvarez has been elected to the National Members Council of the PEN American Center.

"Because of my current involvement in a sustainable organic farm with a literacy center in the mountains of the Dominican Republic, I've become interested in children's literature," Alvarez writes. She has recently published "three books for young readers," including *The Secret Footprints* (New York: Knopf, 2000) and *How Tía Lola Came to Stay* (New York: Knopf, 2001).

I was also growing up in a repressive and dangerous dictatorship. In a social studies class, a student wrote an essay in which he praised Trujillo, the dictator, as the true father of our country. The teacher commented that certainly Trujillo was one of the fathers of our country, but there were others. The boy, the son of a general, must have gone home and told his father. That night the teacher, his wife, and his two young children disappeared. Intellectuals, people who read and questioned, were suspect. A book in your hands might as well have been contraband.

In 1960, my father's underground activities against Trujillo were discovered, and we were forced to escape the country in a hurry. The minute we landed on American soil we became "spics" who spoke our English with heavy accents, immigrants with no money or prospects. Overnight, we had lost everything, our country, our home, our extended family structure, our language, for Spanish was the language of home, of *la familia*, of self understanding. We arrived in the United States at a time in history that was not very welcoming to people who were different, whose skins were a different color, whose language didn't sound like English. For the first time in my life I experienced prejudice and playground cruelty. I struggled with a language and a culture I didn't understand. I was homesick and heartbroken.

My sisters and I, being young, soon rallied to the challenge. We learned the new language, the new music, the new ways to dress and behave ourselves. But our success on these fronts soon created another kind of problem in our family. My parents wanted desperately to keep us to the old standards, and yet they also wanted us to succeed in this new culture. How could we study hard and earn all A's and get ahead but be sweet and submissive and let Papi make all the decisions? How

could we remember our Spanish when we were forced to speak only English outside the home? How could we keep our mouths shut out of *respeto* for our parents when in school we were being taught to speak up and debate, if need be, with our teachers? How could we get along with our friends and yet never go over to their houses for parties and sleepovers because they might have older brothers or parents who allowed things my parents did not allow?

My sisters and I were caught between worlds, value systems, languages, customs. And this was our challenge, which is the challenge for many of us who are immigrants into a new world that is different from the old one of childhood: how to maintain a connection to our traditions, our roots, *and* also to grow and flourish in our new country? How to find creative ways to combine our different worlds, values, conflicting and sometimes warring parts of our selves so that we can become more expansive, not more diminished human beings?

But the problem was that no one was thinking like that back in those days. This was the United States of the early '60s, still locked in the civil rights struggles, pre-women's movement, pre-Equal Rights Amendment movement, pre-multicultural studies, pre-anything but the melting pot, that old assimilationist, mainstreaming model. Those were the days when the model for immigration was that you came to America, you assimilated, you cut off your ties to the past and the old ways, and that was the price you paid for the privilege of being an American citizen.

But sometimes it is these painful moments that can become opportunities for expansion and self-creation. I had become a hybrid -- as all of us who travel beyond an original self or hometown or homeland are bound to become. I was not a mainstream American girl and I wasn't a totally Dominican girl anymore. And yet I wanted desperately to belong somewhere. It was this intense loneliness and desire to connect with others that led me to books. Homesick and lonely in the USA, I soon discovered that the world of the imagination was a portable homeland where everybody belonged. I began to dream that maybe I, too, could create worlds where no one would be barred.

And so, it was through the wide open doors of its literature that I truly entered this country. Reading Mr. Walt Whitman, I heard America's promise and I fell in love with my new country. "I hear America singing, its varied carols I hear." As for melting all our variety into one mainstream model, Mr. Whitman disagreed: "I am large, I contain multitudes." This country was a nation of nations, a congregation of races. "I resist anything better than my own diversity."

Was this *allowed*? I wondered, looking over my shoulder. Wasn't this subversive? But Mr. Whitman's poems were printed in my English textbook where he was described as "the poet of America." He was saying what this country was really all about. Although America seemed to have forgotten its promises, its writers remembered and reminded us.

Slowly and not without struggle, America began to listen. As the 1960s progressed into the '70s, the country around me began to change. Under pressure from its own marginalized populations and from its growing number of immigrants, the nation was being forced to acknowledge its own diversity and become more inclusive. Citizens were challenging America to be true to its promises. The first time I attended a march in support of the Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution and was not

hauled off to be tortured in a dark prison chamber by the secret police, I understood that a free country was not one that was free of problems or inequalities or even hypocrisies. Such failures came with the territory of being a human being. Freedom was the opportunity to shape a country, to contribute to the ongoing experiment, never tried before, of making out of the many, one nation, indivisible with liberty and justice for all. The words were not just rhetoric. It was our right and responsibility to make the words come true, for ourselves and for others.

As the nation changed, our literature began to reflect these changes as well. Not only was there a Mr. Whitman, I discovered, but a Mr. Langston Hughes.

*I, too, sing America
I am the darker brother.
They send me to eat in the kitchen
When company comes,
But I laugh
And eat well,
And grow strong.*

*Tomorrow,
I'll be at the table
When company comes.
Nobody'll dare
Say to me,
"Eat in the kitchen,"
Then.*

*Besides,
They'll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed --*

I, too, am America.

Oh, that was music to my ears! I understood what Mr. Hughes was saying: he was claiming his place in the chorus of American song. This was an important voice for a young girl of another culture and language and background to hear.

But the publishing world dragged its feet. In the early '80s, when I started sending out my manuscripts, the major publishers and mainstream market were reluctant to take a chance on new voices. Until they noticed that Afro-American literature had become a serious component of many college curriculums. That readers were buying up copies of Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Oscar Hijuelos, Sandra Cisneros, Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan, Gish Jen. The complexion of literary Americans had changed.

In 1991 when I was 41 years old, after over 25 years of struggling, my first novel, *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, was published by a small publisher willing to take a chance on a new voice. Eleven years later the book has been adopted as a text in many high schools and colleges. I, too, am now singing America.

I tell this story of my struggle to become an American writer because it was a struggle I shared with a country that was also struggling to become a more inclusive and representative nation. I feel lucky and privileged to have been part of this historical process. America gave me the gift of helping me discover and cultivate my talents. I would not have become a writer had I not come to this country as a young girl in 1960.

But as President Kennedy said, a few months after our arrival in this country, "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country." My debt to my country is to pass on that opportunity to others. "The function of freedom," Toni Morrison has said, "is to free someone else." My work as well as my vote contribute to the richness and diversity of the whole. By our active and committed presence as citizens of different ethnicities, races, traditions, and linguistic backgrounds, we challenge America to expand its understanding and compassion and thus grow stronger as a nation. We infuse its literature with new energy. We sing new rhythms, inflections, stories, traditions into the whole.

But my responsibility does not stop within the American borders. Unlike the old model of immigration, many of us immigrants continue to go back to where we originally came from. With the vast migrations and mobility of the second half of this passing century, most of us no longer fit the tight definitions of identity we were born into. Last year in California I met an Afro-Dominican-American who had married a Japanese woman and had a little baby. Their son is an Afro-Dominican-Japanese-American. My Dominicana sister is married to a Danish man; her kids know Danish, English, and Spanish, and you know what they love to eat, *arroz con habichuelas* with pickled herrings. We are becoming a planet of racial and cultural hybrids. We need an open mind and a big heart and a compassionate imagination to allow for all the combinations we are becoming as a nation and as a human family. Mr. Whitman's words remind us: "The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem. . . Here is not merely a nation but a teeming nation of nations. . . and the American bard shall be kosmos. . . glad to pass any thing to any one."

To create this kind of nation is to present a model of a world where we all belong. But this America can only be achieved if each person is free to be the rich and complex person he or she is. The dangers to be reductive are tempting, to hole down in our racial and ethnic bunkers and forget that out of the *pluribus* we have to make *unum*, one human family.

I would go even further and say that to embrace our selves in all our complexity and richness and also to embrace the multiplicity of selves out there -- that is our challenge not just as Americans but as human beings. Robert Desnos, the French poet who died in a concentration camp, once said: "The challenge of being a human being is not only to be oneself, but to become each one." Terrence, the Roman slave who freed himself with his writing, put it another way, "I am a human being," he said. "Nothing human is alien to me." By becoming all we can individually be and by never forgetting our responsibility of helping each other achieve that same goal, we can create a nation and a world where everyone belongs and where each and every one of us has our song.

In this spirit, I see myself more and more as an American writer, not just in the national but in the hemispheric sense. With my roots in the southern part of the Americas (my stories, my history, my traditions, my Spanish and Caribbean rhythms)

and my training and experience and flowering in the northern part of the hemisphere,
I am truly an all-American writer:

I, Too, Sing América.

*I know it's been said before
but not in this voice
of the plátano
and the mango,
marimba y bongó,
not in this sancocho
of inglés
con español.*

*Ay sí,
it's my turn
to oh say
what I see,
I'm going to sing America!
with all América
inside me:
from the soles
of Tierra del Fuego
to the thin waist
of Chiriquí
up the spine of the Mississippi
through the heartland
of the Yanquis
to the great plain face of Canada --
all of us
singing America,
the whole hemispheric
familia
belting our canción,
singing our brown skin
into that white
and red and blue song --
the big song
that sings
all America,
el canto
que cuenta
con toda América:
un new song!*

*Ya llegó el momento,
our moment
under the sun --
ese sol that shines
on everyone.*

So, hit it maestro!
give us that Latin beat,
¡Uno-dos-tres!
One-two-three!
Ay sí,
(y bilingually):
Yo también soy América
I, too, am America

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The Compulsory Power of American Dreams

by **Sven Birkerts**



Described by one commentator as "the modern master of the literary essay," **Sven Birkerts** has published a number of well-received volumes on literary and cultural topics. His major works include *An Artificial Wilderness: Essays on 20th-Century Literature* (Morrow, 1987); *The Electric Life: Essays on Modern Poetry* (Morrow, 1989); *American Energies: Essays on Fiction* (Morrow, 1992); *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age* (Faber & Faber, 1994); *Readings* (Graywolf, 1998); *My Sky Blue Trades* (Graywolf, 2002). Birkerts' essays and reviews have appeared in the *New York Times Book Review*, the *Atlantic*, *Harper's*, the *New Republic*, the *Nation*, the *American Scholar*, and other publications.

In *The Gutenberg Elegies*, he writes "Our growing immersion in interactive electronic communication" may be "cutting us off from the civilizing powers of the written word" and that "electronic books and interactive videos will leach away our capacities for reflection." Such a concern comes as no surprise from a literary intellectual who writes in the essay below how reflection and reading, of the most recondite nature, helped him discover his own identity and define his relationship to the American commercial culture that has surrounded him since he was born in 1951, the child of European immigrants, in Pontiac, Michigan.

Birkerts' awards include the Citation for Excellence in Reviewing from the National Book Critics' Circle (1985); a Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Foundation grant

For the past four years I have been working on a coming-of-age memoir, the original point of which was to explore from a number of vantages how I factored my way through the ancient Freudian equation of love and work to arrive at a sense of my vocation as a writer, but which turned out, far more than I could have imagined, to be an account of my struggle with my sense of heritage, an exploration of how my densely grown Latvian root-system could have produced a growth so yearningly American. And if I felt, when I recently finished, that I had at last come to grips with the major issues of identity formation, I also discovered as soon as I let my parents and siblings read the result that however much I had achieved resolution on the page, in the family realm -- the force-field of origins -- I had only confirmed my troubled apostasy. The question of how being an American informs my life as a writer remains in many ways as charged as it has ever been.

(1991); and a Guggenheim Foundation grant (1994).

From 1994 to the present, Birkerts has been a member of core faculty at the Bennington Writing Seminars, and from 1997 he has been a lecturer at Mount Holyoke College. Literary journals with which he has had significant connections include *Wigwag*, *Mirabella*, *Esquire*, and, as editor, *Agni*.

Some background: I was born in Pontiac, Michigan, in 1951 to Latvian parents, both recently immigrated from displaced-persons areas in Germany where they had found themselves at the end of the war. Both sides of the family claimed artistic pedigree. My mother's father was a landscape painter trained at the Moscow Academy, while my father's parents were both literary intellectuals -- his mother a folklorist, philologist, and teacher, and his father the author of many books of psychology, sociology, and folklore studies.

While Latvian culture -- and the Latvian language in particular -- were sacrosanct in our household, my parents themselves were not, unlike many of their fellow Latvian-Americans, cultural preservationists. Rather, they saw themselves as riding the wave of emancipated modernism and were keenly attuned to the contemporary. My father, a highly ambitious young architect, worked at Eero Saarinen's legendary firm in Bloomfield Hills, sitting elbow to elbow with young designers like Kevin Roche, Robert Venturi, Cesar Pelli, and Charles Eames. Here was the gospel of the new, of an international language of form, even as, in my father's case, it was cut across with, if not at some level contradicted by, a deep rootedness in the powerful folk culture of the homeland.

Myself, I knew no division of loyalties-not consciously, anyway. My ruling obsession through all the years of my growing up was to shed every trace of foreignness -- otherness -- and to become a full-fledged American. And in this I suffered deeply and decisively. I knew so clearly what I wanted. I wanted to be cut to the pattern of the kids around me, in the neighborhood, at school. I wanted to be an easy athletic guy named Bob or Mark, or nicknamed "Chip," with a normal crewcut (I was cursed with thick curly hair) and acceptably normal-acting parents; I wanted the shine of a new Ford (my parents bought foreign cars), and an oiled mitt for playing catch in the yard with my Dad (who after all these years -- he is in his late 70s -- has never to my knowledge had a hand inside a baseball glove).

It was not a tall order, as dreams go, but I might just as well have asked to be a Ninja warrior or a gaucho from the Argentine pampas. For whatever things may have looked like from the outside, from my tyrannical perspective we could not even begin to fit in. We were strangers from a strange land. My father's name, not Jack or Ted, was Gunnar, my mother's, Sylvia. I was, God help me, Sven, though I contested the roll call every year on the first day of school and announced that I was Peter -- "Pete" -- which was my middle name. I could do nothing about the fact that we spoke Latvian at home, and that my parents had no qualms whatsoever about speaking the language when we were all together in public. I went through every family outing preemptively tensed against the inevitable eruption of the mother tongue. As for our house, it was all edges and glass inside, without a single concession to coziness. I kept my friends away.

As I ached with all my being for an American normalcy and blazed with ill-concealed shame at the slightest mark of our difference, I went through my days playing a role, imitating my fortunate friends, wearing one mask after another, simulating in my least mannerism, my every slangy turn of phrase, a belonging I never felt for a moment. "Hey Rick, are you guys gonna hang around here?" And: "Naw, I can't, my dad wants me to do some stuff around the house -- see ya." It was a complete charade, and it persisted, changing only its subtler inflections, well into my late teens, when the counterculture explosion suddenly made it permissible, even desirable, to be "weird" and "different."

From the first, then, my deepest sense of what it meant to be American was shaped by these fantasies of the unattainable other. There was nothing ecumenical, nothing remotely melting-pot, about any of it, no place for anything beyond stick-figure simplicity: the limber gods of the baseball diamond, their booster dads station-waggoning to games, their pert mothers hanging fresh-looking sheets on the line in the yard and filling shopping carts with hamburger buns and corn.

I was startled, years later, when I read Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969), to feel a deep jolt of recognition in Alex Portnoy's fantasies about the essence of goyishness, embodied here in his fantasies of the perfect *shikse* ice-skater:

"But who wants character? I want Thereal McCoy! In her blue parka and her red earmuffs and her big white mittens -- Miss America, on blades! With her mistletoe and her plum pudding (whatever that may be), and her one-family house with a banister and a staircase, and parents who are tranquil and patient and *dignified*, and also a brother Billy who knows how to take motors apart and says "Much obliged," and isn't afraid of anything?"

And:

"I too want to be the boyfriend of Debbie Reynolds -- it's the Eddie Fisher in me coming out, that's all, the longing in all us swarthy Jewboys for those bland blond exotics called *shiksies*?" In my case the energy of longing was identical -- it simply had as its target a whole imagined thing called Americanness. Though of course the imagined, the fantasied, is as *real* in its effects as any set of concrete circumstances.

What a drama of self-hatred -- Roth's ethnic, mine -- what, *cultural*? Where did it originate? For me it was less a matter of overtly despising my origins -- though for many years I believed this to be the case -- than it was of somehow believing, "buying," the rightness of the images beamed at me from all directions -- from billboards and magazine ads, from our newly acquired black-and-white TV set with its streaming constant revelation of effortless American perfection, what we now all recognize as the kitsch of *Ozzie and Harriet*, *The Donna Reed Show*, *My Three Sons*, and the like. Through my daily jarring collisions with what I was not, I built my picture of authentic exalted Americanness.

This desire to assimilate could not have served for much in my literary formation, as a writer, except insofar as it deepened my self-evolved intuition of difference, of being somehow deeply alien, of not truly possessing those "inalienable" rights advertised in the Constitution. And certainly this latter awareness became the seedbed of various writerly longings. But the sense of difference, especially when one is young, does not exult in itself. It looks for connections, corroborations, anything that will cut against the feeling of being separate. And when that is not immediately available in the surrounding world, one searches by proxy. I found what I needed in books -- almost right from the start. First via escapism and fantasy projection -- living vicariously the perfectly American lives of the Hardy brothers, Frank and Joe, or the various athletes and heroes who bulked up so convincingly in the boys' books I devoured.

But these immersions were as nothing compared with what happened in my early teens when the first reversal happened. My reading shifted, became literary. Through *The Catcher in the Rye*, then *A Separate Peace*, and Thomas Wolfe's Eugene Gant novels, I encountered the voice of alienated adolescence. Now the plots quite literally thickened, and I experienced a major, route-altering swerve in my orientation to things. Hearing the voice of Holden Caulfield was like coming home. I understood that I was not alone in my view of the world. The universe of print was suddenly alive with possibility. Reading, and by extension writing, became a mission of rescue.

My feelings of disaffection and difference connected directly with the expressed outsidership of my new literary heroes, and when this combined with the tectonic shifts in American cultural life -- the burgeoning of rock & roll, of hippiedom, of protest, of everything that would get brewed together as the counterculture of the late 1960s -- a very different take on what had been my American "ideal" resulted. Now, indulging my frustration, my accumulated rage at the years of perceived

exclusion, I inverted everything. The square-jawed, right-thinking American, my former ideal, was abruptly recast in my mind as the embodiment of the "hawk" mentality -- he (my heroes had all been male) became the target of my most withering scorn. I mocked the very figures I had so fervently admired before. At the same time, I struggled to make a place for all of those I had formerly ignored -- the minorities, the poor, all of those apostrophized by Allen Ginsberg in "Howl," my revisionist American Bible. I was drawn to LeRoi Jones' *Blues People* and Franz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* -- if only for the suggestion of the titles.

How has being American affected my thinking, my work as a writer? Better, maybe, to ask how being Latvian has affected my sense of what it means to be American. By young manhood, after the long frenzied interlude of the '60s, the most powerfully formative years behind me, I believed I had left that ancient vexation behind. I would even say I had stopped thinking in those terms, didn't question my Latvianness or Americanness. I had no room for the big generalities. I was too busy with the high-resolution immediacies of finding work, finding love, and trying to find a way to become a writer. The collapse of the counterculture and the prolonged sense of public ennui that followed had everyone tending their own gardens -- so it seemed.

But of course the issues, the questions never went away. I simply stopped seeing them. When they resurfaced, it was covertly, and it would be years before I realized what was happening.

The change, the awakening, came when I was in my late 20s. I was living in Cambridge, barely supporting myself working as a bookstore clerk, profoundly depressed by the collapse of a long relationship, and utterly stalled in my efforts to write fiction. If there was any light, any sanity, in my life, it was reading. Always a reader, I went at it with a genuine fervor during this period. Days, weeks, months marched by outside the window while I sat in a cheap sling chair in my little room in the apartment I shared with a young would-be poet, smoking cigarettes and reading novels. More specifically, I read foreign novels, novels in translation, European novels. I read Knut Hamsun and Thomas Mann and Max Frisch and Heinrich B?and a dozen others, the more obscure the better. I found myself powerfully drawn to the settings of these novels, the moods, to everything that made them different from the domestic fiction I had been reading for years. I had no sense, though -- none that I recall -- of being drawn toward anything that felt like my own culture of origin. I just read and steered my daydreaming self through these strangely kindred atmospheres.

Then I had my breakthrough. In the course of my peregrinations, I fell into the extraordinary world of Robert Musil's great epic of pre-war Viennese life, *The Man Without Qualities*. And now, along with the more familiar sensations of psychological kinship came something new. Reading began to tip me back toward writing. Only

now it was not fiction that compelled me, but reflection. I experienced a deep compulsion to get closer, to annex my various feelings and reactions by writing about them.

I labored for long weeks over an essay on Robert Musil and his unfinished masterpiece. I read everything that had been translated; I read books about the culture of Vienna in the early decades of the century. I projected myself at that world with great intensity, imagining the narrow streets, the public gardens, the cafes, the ritualized social lives of the Viennese bourgeoisie. I seemed to see it all so clearly, the rituals and tonalities of that old world. The only thing I didn't see was the obvious, and this did not come to me until, decades later, I was in the last stages of writing my memoir.

I mean: In living for so long inside this vividly imagined world, I was, in essence, connecting with the story-world I had grown up with. Musil's Vienna -- the times, the culture, the brooding baroque *mise en scene* -- was in many ways a filter for Riga, for the lives of my grandparents and, to a lesser degree, my parents in the childhoods I had dreamed for them. The images I drew upon were the images I had, in spite of myself, stored from the earliest days of my childhood. There was, I realized, a continuum, a direct flow of energy between everything I had absorbed of family lore, the photographs and postcards I had pondered (never mind my insistent desire to assimilate as a regular American boy), and the settings and atmospheres that held me in thrall in Musil's novel. That Europe was deeply familiar to me; it was an intimate saturation that compelled me in every way.

The writing of that first essay led to others, many if not most of them on European subjects, and one day -- ever slow about these recognitions -- I saw that I had staked out a particular literary terrain: I was the critic who would broker between American literary culture and the great richness of literature in translation, mainly European. My first book was *An Artificial Wilderness: Essays on Twentieth Century Literature*, followed, two years later, by *The Electric Life: Essays on Modern Poetry*. It was not until my third collection, *American Energies: Essays on Fiction*, that I was ready to take on the writers of my own culture.

I linger thus over my literary resume because it makes what suddenly seems like an obvious point, though one that I was oblivious to for years: that the whole path of my life -- writing life included -- has been profoundly conditioned, first by the determined rejection, and then the veiled acceptance of my culture of origins, and that this dynamic has been conditioned at the deepest root level by a very powerful, if distorted, sense of what it means to be American.

I am talking here about the primitive, almost pre-logical compulsion I felt as a son of recent immigrants to merge myself with the world I saw around me, a world which,

owing to accidents (or fates) of place and time, took on an absolute aspect. Interestingly, though, it was not just my chimera. This America I sought mapped almost perfectly to the stereotype that is to this day prominent, if not dominant, in the global image culture: the prosperous, athletic, decent, white all-American. In buying the American Dream, which I did with such zealous intensity, I was really buying a fantasy spun for me by Madison Avenue.

It took the '60s to jolt me from those complacencies. Then, driven by the contrarian emancipatory energies of the counterculture and the encounters of experience, as well as by the recognitions of an ever-widening grasp of domestic and global reality - - I set myself against the tyranny of that stereotype. I fought to reject these most deeply planted residues, and flattered myself -- don't we all? -- that I had succeeded. And indeed, I like to think that whatever I now comprehend as American has everything to do with notions of ethnicity and diversity (obligatory buzz-phrase though it is), and that transformed awareness exerts pressure on my thinking and writing at every turn. But, truth be told, it is not formative in the same way; it is laid on top of the other, the visceral. I might wish this otherwise. A different core awareness, a less obsessive investment in these fantasies of WASP normalcy might have made my passage easier, less painful. Alas, intriguing as these surmises can be, they lead us exactly nowhere. We are shaped by what we dream, and there we have no control.

A Postcard from America

by **Robert Olen Butler**



Robert Olen Butler has published 12 books since 1981, 10 novels - *The Alleys of Eden, Sun Dogs, Countrymen of Bones, On Distant Ground, Wabash, The Deuce, They Whisper, The Deep Green Sea, Mr. Spaceman* and *Fair Warning* -- and two volumes of short fiction -- *Tabloid Dreams* and *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain*, which won the 1993 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction.

His stories have appeared widely in such publications as *The New Yorker, Esquire, the Paris Review, Harper's, GQ, Zoetrope, Hudson Review, the Virginia Quarterly Review, and the Sewanee Review*. They also have been chosen for inclusion in four annual editions of *The Best American Short Stories*, seven annual editions of *New Stories from the South*, and numerous college literature textbooks from such publishers as Simon & Schuster, Norton, Viking, Little Brown & Co., Houghton Mifflin, Oxford University Press, Prentice Hall, and Bedford/St. Martin. His works have been translated into a dozen languages, including Vietnamese, Thai, Korean, Polish, Japanese and Greek.

A recipient of both a Guggenheim Fellowship in fiction and a National Endowment for the Arts grant, Butler also won the Richard and Hinda Rosenthal Foundation Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters and was a finalist for the PEN/Faulkner Award. His short story "Fair Warning" won a 2001 National Magazine Award in Fiction, which and is the basis for his new novel of the same name. He was also a charter recipient of the Tu Do Chinh Kien Award given by the Vietnam

The picture postcard is nearly ninety years old. It is an original photograph, taken by someone with the newly invented Kodak Brownie camera and then printed onto a stiff piece of cardboard with a postcard back. This was a common practice in the early 20th century in America. People took photos of every aspect of their daily lives and sent the images through the mail to each other. This particular image is of an achingly fragile biplane, in the perilous early days of aviation, flying solitary before an empty sky. If you look closely you can see the right end of the upper wing beginning to tear away. The message on the back of the card simply reads: "This is Earl Sandt of Erie Pa. in his aeroplane just before it fell."

Veterans of America for
"outstanding contributions to
culture by a Vietnam veteran."

Since 1995, he has written feature-length screenplays for New Regency, Twentieth Century Fox, Warner Brothers, Paramount, Disney, and Universal Pictures and two teleplays for Home Box Office. He is the Francis Eppes Professor holding the Michael Shaara Chair in Creative Writing at Florida State University in Tallahassee, Florida. Butler is married to the novelist and playwright Elizabeth Dewberry.

I have been collecting old American postcards for more than a decade. My collection focuses to some extent on the images on the fronts of the cards -- this one, certainly, was extraordinary -- but even more so on the messages on the backs. Before telephones were common, people would not infrequently speak their hearts on the backs of postcards.

As a writer -- a writer whose work, I feel, is deeply rooted in the spirit of America -- I am enchanted with these messages. An artist of any nationality is keenly attuned to nuance and innuendo and subtext, to the revelation of personality and the deep yearning in every human heart. And these fragments of voices of Americans who have long since passed away are profoundly resonant not only of the individual lives pulsing behind the words but also of the preoccupations and character of this nation in the early years of what would be an extraordinary century.

I am now beginning to write a book of short stories based on my collection of American postcards from the first two decades of the last century. There will be two dozen or more stories, with the front and the back of each card reproduced as a kind of found epigraph. I will take on the voice in the message on the back of the card or the voice of the recipient, or perhaps even seek out the voice of someone mentioned in the message.

In another private photo card, a woman sits beside a female friend in a 1906 Mitchell automobile and she has written a poem beneath the image: "No chord of music has yet been found/ to even equal that sweet sound/ which to my mind all else surpasses/ an auto engine and its puffing gasses." She added, writing to the friend who sat beside her, "Don't this recall many pleasant rides over the beautiful Drive Way?" The town she wrote from was Quanah, Texas, named after a Comanche chief, Quanah Parker, who was the last to bring his people into the reservation in the Texas Staked Plains and who later became a successful businessman, a hunting companion to Theodore Roosevelt, and the deputy sheriff of Lawton, Oklahoma.

The story I have already written from this card chronicles the two women slipping off, while their husbands are at a horse auction, and taking the automobile out for a spin themselves, an assertion of independence which brings them face-to-face with the town's namesake. This nation, built on the preservation of the rights of minorities, has sometimes been slow to apply those rights fully. But this card captures an early 20th-century moment in the process of the further opening of American society. A Texas town honors in its name a Native American chief who led a protracted struggle against the very establishment of such a town but who then adapted successfully to a new world. A woman delights with another woman in the technology of a male-dominated society perhaps sensing that this very technology would one day help transform that society into something even more egalitarian.

An image of the building that held the U.S. War, State, and Navy Departments in Washington, D.C., bears this message: "For my darling Jojo: As a memento of the pleasant hour spent standing in front of the U. S. War, State, & Navy Department (on a chilly day) waiting for the procession to move up to the White House where we shook hands with President Roosevelt, New Year's Day 1908. From her own baby Deedee." This card, like many of those that contain the most personal of messages, has no stamp. It had been placed inside an envelope for mailing to preserve its privacy. Two women, quietly connected in an unconventional way, nevertheless were proud to wait to exercise their rights to shake the hand of the President of the United States.

On the Fourth of July in 1906 an anonymous young man sent an image of the Saco River flowing through the White Mountains of New Hampshire to a man in Shelburne Falls, Massachusetts, perhaps his father. The postmark indicates that the young man was staying at one of the grand resort hotels of the White Mountains, the Crawford House. "This is a quiet 4th," he wrote. "There are 220 in the house. When the flag was raised this morning they gathered on the piazza and took off their hats and gave three cheers. Going to pitch tomorrow." The card is very moving to me in its understatement. Nearly a hundred years ago everyone in this great old hotel came out into the yard, mostly strangers to each other, and cheered their devotion to an America that so closely bound them together. Then the next day our young man went off and participated in that very American game, baseball, united yet again with others, this time in play.

Still another private photo was clearly taken on the entrenched front lines in World War I, with tree trunks stacked against the deeply dug dirt walls and the fleeting image of a doughboy up above, moving away. Standing on the dirt floor of the excavated position is a stout, matronly woman in a dark gabardine dress and a narrow-brimmed hat with her pocket watch pinned to her chest on a chain and with a faint, thin-mouthed, you-better-be-taking-care-of-yourself smile. The handwritten

caption simply says, "Mother in the trenches." This very American mother has come to the front lines to check on her son.

A mass-produced card shows an artist's image of a woman looking forlorn. The card's printed sentiment says: *heartbroken*. On the message side, someone has written these simple words to a man in Attleboro, Massachusetts, with no salutation and no signature: "We'll meet in death." This at first sounds like a bitter break-up of two lovers. But a closer examination of the man's address shows that he is in a sanitarium. He is dying of tuberculosis. The relationship drastically shifts in one's imagination and becomes complex indeed -- particularly with the absence of any words of endearment or even identity in the message. In an age when so many diseases readily turned fatal, a woman has stripped down her words to the essence of belief that she shared with the dying man she loved.

There is something in this woman's faith and pragmatism and courage that seem particularly American to me. As do the Texas woman's impassioned engagement with technological progress and the Washington couple's pleasure in the openness of a representative government and the young man's comradeship with his unknown compatriots and the mother's strength and protectiveness and ability to abandon convention for a higher goal. But, of course, all these qualities are universal, as well.

And it is important to understand how the particular and the universal are wedded in art. A work of art does not come from the artist's mind. It does not come from the rational, analytical faculties. It does not come from ideas. Art comes from the place where the artist dreams. Art comes from the unconscious.

The unconscious is a scary place. The great Japanese film director Akira Kurosawa once said, "To be an artist means never to avert your eyes." And if the artist truly does that, if she goes into her unconscious, day after day, work after work, and does not avert her eyes, she finally breaks through to a place where she is neither female nor male, neither black nor white nor red nor yellow, neither Christian nor Muslim nor Jew nor Hindu nor Buddhist nor atheist, neither North American nor South American nor European nor African nor Asian. He is human. And if he happened by birth or choice to call the United States of America home, he looks about him at the particulars of this place and culture and finds those aspects of it that resonate into the universal humanity we all share on this planet.

This past fall, I undertook a writing project using the Internet in order to teach this basic tenet of the artistic process. My students had long heard me speak of the origins of art being in the unconscious, and of the corollary that works of art are fundamentally sensual objects that comprehend and articulate the world in non-analytical ways. The paradox of teaching this art form, however, is that one

inevitably ends up using analytical discourse, as in these very sentences, to reject analysis.

So on October 30, 2001, I began a Webcast under the auspices of the Web site of Florida State University, where I teach. I would write a literary short story on the Internet, for two hours each night, until it was done. Students could see the artistic process directly, in its moment-to-moment fullness. I began with a simple concept, and with no other preparation, I created the story in real-time. My viewers saw every creative decision, down to the most delicate comma, as it was made on the page. Every misbegotten, awkward sentence, every bad word choice, every conceptual dead end was shared and worked over and revised and rewritten before the viewers' eyes.

I waited until the morning of October 30 to open myself to an inspiration so that I would not have a chance, even unconsciously, to pre-plan the story. I wanted the whole process to be shared on the Webcast. So I went to my postcard collection on that morning in search of the card that had the strongest story hovering about it. And the one that leaped out at me held the image of Earl Sandt's biplane.

When I'd bought that card at a postcard convention the previous January, I'd known that one day I would write a story inspired by it. I'd always assumed, however, that the story would be in the voice of Earl Sandt, the doomed pilot. That changed on October 30. I took up this antique postcard, and my artistic unconscious, my sense of myself as an American, and my larger identity as a human being all powerfully converged. Instantly I knew that I had to write the story in the voice of the man who watched.

Because on September 11, 2001, we were all the ones who watched. From my dreamspace I wrote this story about America of the early 20th century, and in doing so I realized something crucial about that terrible day in America of the early 21st century. The man who snapped the photo and wrote the postcard ninety years earlier felt the same thing that we all did on September 11, and I came to understand that the most profound and abiding effects of that day have very little to do with international politics or worldwide terrorism or homeland security or our unity as a nation. Those issues are real and important too, of course, but it seems to me that the deepest experience of 9/11 happened for us one soul at a time in an entirely personal way. We each of us viewed the fall of an aeroplane under stunning circumstances for which we had no frame of reference, and as a result, the event got around certain defenses that we all necessarily carry within us. And we confronted -- one by one by one -- in a way most of us never have -- our own mortality.

Artists of all the nations of the world pass each day through the portal of the personal unconscious and enter into the depths of the collective unconscious, and

these artists emerge with visions of the things that bind us all together. I am an American. I am an artist. I look at my country and I seek the human soul.

Maps and Legends

by **Michael Chabon**



The prolific literary output of novelist and short-story writer **Michael Chabon** recently culminated with the publication of *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* (Random House, 2000), an ambitious novel charting the adventures of two cousins who arrive in New York in the 1930s and get into the comic book business. *Kavalier & Clay* won the 2001 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, and Chabon is currently pressing ahead on a number of other major projects and publications.

His published work includes *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh*, a novel, (1988) and *Wonder Boys*, a novel, (1995) as well as two collections of short stories, *A Model World and Other Stories*, (1990) and *Werewolves In Their Youth* (1999). His writing has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Harper's*, *Esquire*, and *Playboy*, and in a number of anthologies, among them *Prize Stories 1999: The O'Henry Awards*. Much of his writing can also be found on his ingenious Web site, www.michaelchabon.com.

A graduate of the University of Pittsburgh, Chabon subsequently enrolled in the master of fine arts writing program at the University of California, Irvine. Chabon submitted the manuscript of a novel as his MFA thesis, and it was soon published in 1988, as *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh*, when Chabon was in his 20s. *The New Yorker* called *Mysteries* "a nearly perfect example of the promising first novel," and other reviewers compared Chabon to such worthies as F. Scott Fitzgerald and J.D. Salinger. His next novel, *Wonder Boys*, was a bestseller, and became a movie starring Michael Douglas.

In 1969, when I was six years old, my parents took out a Veterans Administration loan and bought a three-bedroom house in an imaginary city called Columbia. As a pediatrician for the Public Health Service, my Brooklyn-born father was a veteran, of all things, of the United States Coast Guard (which had stationed him, no doubt wisely, in the coast-free state of Arizona). Ours was the first V.A. housing loan to be granted in Columbia, Maryland, and the event made the front page of the local paper.

Columbia is now the second-largest city in the state, I am told, but at the time we moved there, it was home to no more than a few thousand people -- "pioneers," they called themselves. They were colonists of a dream, immigrants to a new land that as yet existed mostly on paper. More than four-fifths of Columbia's projected houses, office buildings, parks, pools, bike paths, elementary schools, and shopping centers had yet to be built; and the millennium of racial and economic harmony that Columbia promised to birth in its theoretical streets and cul-de-sacs was as far from parturition as ever. In the end, for all its promise and ambition, Columbia may have changed nothing but one little kid. Yet I believe that my parents' decision to move us into the midst of that unfinished, ongoing act of architectural and social imagination, altered the course of my life and made me into the writer that I am.

In the mid-1960s, a wealthy, stubborn, and pragmatic dreamer named James Rouse had, by stealth and acuity, acquired an enormous chunk of Maryland tobacco country lying along either side of the old Columbia Pike, between Baltimore and Washington. Rouse, often referred to as the inventor of the shopping mall (though there are competing claims to this distinction), was a man with grand ideas about the pernicious nature of the suburb, and the enduring importance of cities in human life. The City was a discredited idea in those days, burnt and poisoned and abandoned to rot, but James Rouse felt strongly that it could be reimagined, rebuilt, renewed.

He assembled a team of bright men -- one of countless such teams of bright men in narrow neckties and short haircuts whose terrible optimism made the '60s such an admirable and disappointing time. These men, rolling up their sleeves, called themselves the Working Group. Like their patron, they were filled with sound and visionary ideas about zoning, green space, accessibility, and the public life of cities, as well as with enlightened notions of race, class, education, architecture, capitalism, and transit. Fate, fortune, and the headstrong inspiration of a theorist with very deep pockets had given them the opportunity to experiment on an enormous scale, and they seized it. Within a relatively short time, they had come up with the Plan.

Chabon's essay "Maps and Legends," in this volume, stems from the circumstance of being born in 1964 in Columbia, Maryland, one of the very few planned towns in the United States. His luxuriant imagination, Chabon has avowed, stems in part from his high level of exposure to comic books in childhood, which were brought to him by his father. His father's father, in turn, was a printer who printed many comic books and brought them to his son. Echoing many critics, Saul Austerlitz writes on the "Central Booking" Web site, "Michael Chabon is one of the most enjoyable, in addition to being one of the most acclaimed, writers to emerge in American fiction in the past decade?. He also avoids many of the games of his postmodern peers, preferring instead the simple, old-fashioned virtue of a story well-told. His books leave readers with the recollection of powerful, well-shaped characters and a gift for sharply pointed dialogue."

Chabon lives in Berkeley, California, with his wife, Ayelet Waldman, and their children.

My earliest memories of Columbia are of the Plan. It was not merely the founding document and chief selling point of the Columbia Experiment. It was also the new town's most treasured possession, the tangible evidence of the goodness of Mr. Rouse's inspiration. The Plan, in both particulars and spirit, was on display for all to see, in a little building (one of Frank Gehry's first built works) called the Exhibit Center, down at the shore of the manmade lake that lay at the heart of both plan and town. This lake -- it was called, with the studied, historicist whimsy that contributed so much authentic utopian atmosphere to the town, Lake Kittamaqundi -- was tidy and still, rippled by the shining wakes of ducks. Beside it stood a modest high-rise, white and modernistic in good late-'60s *Star Trek* style, called the American City Building. Between this, Columbia's lone "skyscraper," and the Exhibit Center, stretched a landscaped open plaza, lined with benches and shrubbery, immaculate, and ornamented by a curious piece of sculpture called the People Tree, a tall dandelion of metal, whose gilded tufts were the stylized figures of human beings. Sculpture, benches, plaza, lake, tower: On a sunny afternoon in 1970 these things had an ideal aspect; they retained the unsullied, infinite perspective of the architect's drawings from which they had so recently sprung.

My parents, my younger brother, and I were shown those drawings, and many more, inside the Exhibit Center. There were projections and charts and explanatory diagrams. The famous Covenant -- the common agreement of all Columbia's citizens and developers to abide by certain rather strict aesthetic guidelines in constructing and altering their homes -- was explained. And there was a slide show, conducted in one of those long-vanished 1970s rooms, furnished only with carpeted cubes and painted the colors of a bag of candy corn. The slide show featured smiling children at play, families strolling along wooded paths, couples working their way in paddleboats across Kittamaqundi or its artificial sister, Wilde Lake. It was a bright, primary-colored world, but the children in it were assiduously black and white. Because that was an integral part of the Columbia idea: that here, in these fields where slaves had once picked tobacco, the noble and extravagant promises that had just been made to black people in the flush of the Civil Rights movement would, at last, be redeemed. That was, I intuited, part of the meaning of the symbol that was reproduced everywhere around us in the Exhibit Center: that we were all branches of the same family; that we shared common roots and aspirations.

Sitting atop a cube, watching the slide show, I was very much taken with the idea -- the Idea -- of Columbia, but it was as we were leaving the Exhibit Center that my fate was sealed: as we walked out, I was handed a map -- a large, fold-out map, detailed and colorful, of the Working Group's dream.

The power of maps to fire the imagination is well known. And, as Joseph Conrad's Marlow observed, there is no map so seductive as the one, like the flag-colored schoolroom map of Africa that doomed him to his forlorn quest, marked by doubts

and conjectures, by the romantic blank of unexplored territory. The map of Columbia I took home from that first visit was like that. The Plan dictated that the Town be divided into sub-units to be called Villages, each Village in turn divided into Neighborhoods. These Villages had all been laid out and named, and were present on and defined by the map. Many of the Neighborhoods, too, had been drawn in, along with streets and the network of bicycle paths that knit the town together. But there were large areas of the map that, apart from the Village name, were entirely empty, conjectural -- nonexistent, in fact.

The names of Columbia! That many, if not most of them, were bizarre, unlikely, and even occasionally ridiculous, was a regular subject of discussion among Columbians and outsiders alike. In the Neighborhood called Phelps Luck, you could find streets with names that were anglo-whimsical and alliterative (Drystraw Drive, Margrave Mews, Luckpenny Lane); elliptical and puzzling, shorn of their suffixes, Zen (Blue Pool, Red Lake, Spiral Cut); or truly odd (Cloudleap Court, Roll Right Court, Newgrange Garth). It was rumored that the naming of Columbia's one thousand streets had been done by a single harried employee of the Rouse Company who, barred by some kind of arcane agreement from duplicating any of the street names in use in the surrounding counties of Baltimore and Anne Arundel, had turned in desperation from the exhausted lodes of flowers, trees, and U.S. presidents to the works of American writers and poets. The genius loci of Phelps Luck -- did you guess? -- was Robinson Jeffers.

I spent hours poring over that map, long before my family ever moved into the house that we eventually bought, with that V.A. loan, at 5179 Eliots Oak Road, in the neighborhood of Longfellow, in the Village of Harper's Choice. To me the remarkable thing about those names was not their oddity but the simple fact that most of them referred to locations that did not exist. They were like magic spells, each one calibrated to call into being one particular stretch of blacktop, sidewalk, and lawn, and no other. In time -- I witnessed it with my own eyes, month by month, year by year -- the street demanded by the formula "Darkbush Terrace" or "Night Roost" would churn up out of the Maryland mud and clay, begin to sprout houses, trees, a tidy blue-and-white identifying sign. It was a powerful demonstration to me of the incantatory power of names and naming.

Eventually I tacked the map, considerably tattered and worn, to the wall of my room, on the second floor of our three-bedroom, two-and-a-half-bath pseudo-colonial tract house on Eliots Oak Road. In time the original map was joined, there, by a map of Walt Disney World's new Magic Kingdom, and by another of a world of my own devising, a world of horses and tall grass which I called Davoria. I studied the map of Columbia in the morning as I dressed for school (a school without classrooms, in which we were taught, both by racially diverse teachers and by the experience of simply looking around at the other faces in the room, that the battle for integration

and civil rights was over, and that the good guys had won). I glanced up at the map at night as I lay in bed, reading *The Hobbit* or *The Book of Three* or a novel set in Oz. And sometimes I would give it a once over before I set out with my black and white friends for a foray into the hinterlands, to the borders of our town and our imaginations.

Our Neighborhood of Longfellow was relatively complete, with fresh-rolled sod lawns and spindly little foal-legged trees, but just beyond its edges my friends and I could ride our bikes clear off the edge of the Known World, into that unexplored blank of bulldozed clay and ribboned stakes where, one day, houses and lives would blossom. We would climb down the lattices of rebar into newly dug basements, dank and clammy and furred with ends of tree roots. We rolled giant spools of telephone cable down earthen mounds, and collected like arrowheads bent nails and spent missile shells of grout. The skeletons of houses, their nervous systems, their subcutaneous layers of insulation, were revealed to us as we watched them growing from the inside out. Later I might come to know the house's eventual occupants, and visit them, and stand in their kitchen thinking, *I saw your house being born*.

In a sense, the ongoing work of my hometown and the business of my childhood coincided perfectly; for as my family subsequently moved to the even newer, rawer Village of Long Reach, and then proceeded to fall very rapidly apart, Columbia and I both struggled to fill in the empty places, to feel our way outward into the mysterious gaps and undiscovered corners of the world. In the course of my years in Columbia, I encountered things not called for by the members of the Working Group, things that were not on the map. There were strange, uncharted territories of race and sex and nagging human unhappiness. And there was the vast, unsuspected cataclysm of my parents' divorce, that redrew so many boundaries, and created, with the proverbial stroke of the pen, vast new areas of confusion and dismay. And then one day I left Columbia, and discovered the bitter truth about race relations, and for a while I was inclined to view the lessons I had been taught with a certain amount of rueful anger. I felt that I had been lied to, that the map I had been handed was a forgery. And after all, I would hear it said from time to time, Columbia had failed in its grand experiment. It had become a garden-variety suburb in the Baltimore-Washington Corridor; there was crime there, and racial unrest.

The judgments of Columbia's critics may or may not be accurate, but it seems to me, looking back at the city of my and James Rouse's dreams from 30 years on, that just because you have stopped believing in something you once were promised does not mean that the promise itself was a lie. Childhood, at its best, is a perpetual adventure, in the truest sense of that overtaxed word: a setting forth into trackless lands that might have come to existence the instant before you first laid eyes on them. How fortunate I was to be handed, at such an early age, a map to steer by, however provisional, a map furthermore ornamented with a complex nomenclature

of allusions drawn from the poems, novels and stories of mysterious men named Faulkner, Hemingway, Frost, Hawthorne, and Fitzgerald! Those names, that adventure, are with me still, every time I sit down at the keyboard to sail off, clutching some dubious map or other, into *terra incognita*.

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What's American About American Poetry?

by **Billy Collins**



Billy Collins is the author of six books of poetry, including *Sailing Alone Around the Room* (Random House, 2001); *Picnic, Lightning* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1998), which won the Paterson Prize; *The Art of Drowning* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1995); *The Apple That Astonished Paris* (University of Arkansas Press, 1988); and *Questions About Angels* (William Morrow & Co., 1991), which was selected by Edward Hirsch for the National Poetry Series Competition.

A new collection, *Nine Horses*, will appear later this year. Collins' poetry has appeared in anthologies, textbooks, and a variety of periodicals including *Poetry*, *the American Poetry Review*, *Harper's*, *the Atlantic Monthly*, *the American Scholar*, *the Paris Review* and *The New Yorker*.

He has received fellowships from the New York Foundation for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation. He has also won the Bess Hokin Prize, the Frederick Bock Prize, the Oscar Blumenthal Prize, the Wood Prize, and the Levinson Prize -- all awarded by Poetry magazine.

Billy Collins received his B.A. from Holy Cross College and his Ph.D. from the University of California at Riverside. He is Distinguished Professor of English at Lehman College, City University of New York; a visiting writer at Sarah Lawrence College; and an adjunct professor at Columbia University. He was appointed United States Poet Laureate for 2001-3. He lives with his wife Diane, an architect, in northern Westchester County, in

I never really considered myself a particularly American poet until I went to England some years ago to give a series of readings. I had put the tour together

New York state.

myself, and it looked it. The odd range of venues included a sixth form class, a jazz club in Brighton, a college of Sheffield University, and a community center in a small Yorkshire village. It was at this last site, by the way, that an elderly, agrarian-looking man rose from the audience during a question-and-answer session to ask: "Mr. Collins, are *all* your poems written in prose?" But regardless of the audience or the venue, each reading left me with the same small but nagging realization: that my poems were written not in English but in American. At every reading I could sense dead spots occurring when I would utter a phrase such as "eggs over easy" or "sweat the final." I became convinced that the mention of "a state flower" in one of my poems must sound to the British ear like "estate flower." I was discovering that idiomatic American is difficult to translate not only into French or German, but into English. Just as one cannot understand what it is to be an American until one leaves the country, I was not aware of my own American voice -- my written accent, so to speak -- until I had faced several audiences of British listeners.

I was especially surprised to discover how steeped many of my poems were in the American idiom, because for years I had consciously avoided using fad dialects or making references to contemporary culture. I knew that a phrase such as "frequent flyer," "hatch-back," or "Jello shot" would in time make a poem sound dated and thus could drastically shorten its shelf life. "Shelf life" is probably another example. I had tried to favor a more universal vocabulary, not a purely elemental diction of "rock," "cloud," "sky," and "tree," but a diction that leaned in that direction and was reluctant to allow in the linguistic news of the day. Ezra Pound put it most succinctly when he defined poetry as "the news that stays new." And I admired Mary Oliver's advice regarding a poet's notion of an audience: "...write for a stranger born in a distant country hundreds of years from now." I wanted to include that stranger of the future in my audience, and I did not want him to have to consult a footnote for "Wonder Bread" or "Big Mac."

America, of course, is greater than the sum of its idioms, but if you selected a few poets from an international pool and asked them about the relationship of their poetry to their nationality, most would place their mother tongue at the center of their responses. Czeslaw Milosz might cite the expressive possibilities of Polish; Yannis Ritsos might discuss the feel of writing in demotic Greek. But American poets can claim no exclusive, nationalistic rights to a mother tongue, for the language they write in is shared by the rest of the English-speaking world, which at this time is the most rapidly expanding language community in the world.

So where does American-ness lie for a writer if not in his native tongue? D.H. Lawrence opens his seminal *Studies in Classic American Literature* by putting that question in the form of a challenge: "Where *is* this new bird called the true American? Show us the homunculus of the new era. Go on, show us him. Because all that is visible to the naked European eye, in America, is a sort of miscreant European." I

find it odd that Lawrence calls the European eye "naked," for, if anything, compared to the bookish lenses covering the European eye, the American eye was the naked one; and the first poet to look at America with that naked eye -- and, indeed, to appear naked before us -- was Walt Whitman.

Lawrence recognized Whitman as the pioneer of a new American literature. He called him "the greatest and the first and the only American teacher ... the first white aboriginal" though in the same breath he mocks Whitman's universal gesturing and accuses him of bogus sympathy. Surely, Whitman was the first poet to try to get his arms around the continent so as to hold the lumberjack and the secretary and the Eskimo in one loving cosmic embrace. A Long Islander and a New Yorker, he refused to define himself as regional the way some American poets and ever more American novelists have done ever since. But the true aboriginal stroke was Whitman's breaking loose from the iambic collar of traditional English poetry. *Leaves of Grass* moves to the cadence of the Bible, not the British iambic two-step. The long poem was such a radical departure from customary meter and form that it triggered a critical debate as to whether it was really poetry, a debate which should have ended when one professor observed, "If this is not poetry, it is something greater than poetry."

Strangely, it took a long time for anyone to follow Whitman's liberating lead. As Lawrence put it, "Ahead of Whitman, nothing. Ahead of all poets, pioneering into the wilderness of unopened life, Whitman." Eventually, American poetry caught up with Whitman but not until his century had run out. By the early 1920s when Lawrence was making his assessments, many of the now canonical modernist poems were appearing, and whatever else defined their veerings away from convention, their freedom from the box of the stanza and the harness of the iambic was the most common evidence of their experimentations.

These days, of course, "free verse" is not the exciting license it once was; more often than not, it is simply an excuse to produce untidy, flat-footed poems, an excuse in no way limited to poets in America. The more powerful, more difficult, yet abiding lesson of Whitman lies in his outrageousness. The audacity of lines like "It is time to explain myself -- let us stand" and "I sound my barbaric yawp over the rooftops of the world" make possible Ginsberg's "American, I am putting my queer shoulder to the wheel" and with some added coyness, Frank O'Hara's "ah lunch! I think I am going crazy." Whitman's fearless, unheard-of voice shattered the glass of European gentility and eventually emboldened later generations of American poets to speak out in wilder tones.

If a writer is the sum of his or her influences, then my own poems are unavoidably the result of my exposure to the sounds and styles of both British and American poetry. I even find myself playing one diction off against another, usually for ironic

effect. But more specifically, in thinking about myself as an "American poet," and thus committing the dangerous act of auto-literary criticism, I find that a number of my poems seem determined to establish an American rootedness distinct from European influence. "American Sonnet," for example, is a rejection of the Italian and English sonnet models in favor of the American postcard which, like the sonnet, limits expression to a confined space and, in addition, combines the verbal on one side with the pictorial on the other. Like the traditional love sonnet, the traveler's postcard has acquired its own ritualized conventions. The poem opens with an uncharacteristic "we," as if I were speaking for all American poets.

AMERICAN SONNET

We do not speak like Petrarch or wear a hat like Spenser
and it is not fourteen lines
like furrows in a small, carefully plowed field

but the picture postcard, a poem on vacation,
that forces us to sing our songs in little rooms
or pour our sentiments into measuring cups.

We write on the back of a waterfall or lake,
adding to the view a caption as conventional
as an Elizabethan woman's heliocentric eyes.

We locate an adjective for weather.
We announce that we are having a wonderful time.
We express the wish that you were here

and hide the wish that we were where you are,
walking back from the mailbox, your head lowered
as you read and turn the thin message in your hands.

A slice of this faraway place, a width of white beach,
a piazza or carved spires of a cathedral
will pierce the familiar place where you remain,

and you will toss on the table this reversible display;
a few square inches of where we have strayed
and a compression of what we feel.

The ironic literary play of the first part of the poem gives way to a small drama of separation, distance, and longing. The poem tries, but of course fails, to mix irony and emotion with such equality as to achieve a perfectly ambiguous tone.

Another poem titled "Consolation" pretends to celebrate the pleasures of spending the summer at home in the States rather than embarking on the traditional European holiday. "How agreeable it is not to be touring Italy," the poem opens; then goes on to express the ease of staying put on native soil, cruising "these local, familiar streets,/ fully grasping the meaning of every road sign and billboard/and all the sudden hand gestures of my compatriots." "Instead of slouching in a cafe ignorant of the word for ice," the speaker prefers "the coffee shop and the waitress known as Dot" where he will not have to have his photograph taken with the owner or figure out the exchange rate when the bill arrives. For him, "It is enough to climb back into the car/as if it were the great car of English itself/and sounding my loud vernacular horn, speed off/ down a road that will never lead to Rome, not even Bologna." The poem is a mock-rejection of literary Euro-centricism delivered by a speaker whose modest tastes echo the sweet provincialism of the Wallace Shawn character in the film *My Dinner with Andre*.

"Lines Written Over Three Thousand Miles from Tintern Abbey," as the title implies, provides another example of this process of "Americanization," as Wordsworth's famous autobiographical lyric is imported into the speaker's American, and again, domestic, life.

I was here before, a long time ago,
and now I am here again
is an observation that occurs in poetry
as frequently as rain occurs in life.

The fellow may be gazing
over an English landscape,
hillsides dotted with sheep,
a row of tall trees topping the downs,

or he could be moping through the shadows
of a dark Bavarian forest,
a wedge of cheese and a volume of fairy tales
tucked into his rucksack.

But the feeling is always the same:
it was better the first time.
This time is not nearly as good.
I'm not feeling as chipper as I did back then.

Something is always missing --
Swans, a glint on the surface of a lake,

some minor but essential touch.
Or the quality of things has diminished.

The sky was a deeper, more dimensional blue,
clouds were more cathedral-like,
and water rushed over rock
with greater effervescence.

From our chairs we have watched
the poor author in his waistcoat
as he recalls the dizzying icebergs of childhood
and mills around in a field of weeds.

We have heard the poets long dead
declaim their dying
from a promontory, a riverbank,
next to a haycock, within a shadowy copse.

We have listened to their dismay,
the kind that issues from poems
the way water issues forth from hoses,
the way the match always gives its little speech on fire.

And when we put down the book at last,
lean back, close our eyes,
stinging with print,
and slip in the bookmark of sleep,

we will be schooled enough to know
that when we wake up
a little before dinner
things will not be nearly as good as they once were.

Something will be missing
from this long, coffin-shaped room,
the walls and windows now
only two different shades of gray,

the glossy gardenia drooping
in its chipped terra-cotta pot.
And on the floor, shoes, socks,
the browning core of an apple.

Nothing will be as it was
a few hours ago, back in the glorious past
before our naps, back in that Golden Age
that drew to a close sometime shortly after lunch.

The revisionist speaker's disenchantment with the Romantic theme of loss is evident in his lumping together all the complaining poets of the 19th century, both English and German. The domestication of this pattern of loss begins with the homely images of the garden hose and the match. Time is compressed from an autobiographical span to a few hours between lunch and dinner, and the dated landscape of "promontory," "haycock," and "copse" is compressed into an ordinary room-scape with its drooping flower and strewing of shoes and socks. Romantic agony is reduced to reader fatigue. The Golden Age lies irretrievably behind us in an earlier part of the afternoon.

What makes poetry American can be measured in the kind of steps it makes away from the poetry of the "Old World" as the schoolbooks used to say. Poetry can also be American because of its idioms, its landscape, its irreverence toward the European past, its audacious egotism, its ironic stances, its freedom of fixed cadences, but most of all because of its immense variety. This last quality -- its democratic expansiveness and inclusiveness -- was best expressed in a short poem by Louis Simpson, who, for the moment, deserves to have the last word on the subject.

AMERICAN POETRY

Whatever it is, it must have
A stomach that can digest
Rubber, coal, uranium, moons, poems.

Like the shark, it contains a shoe.
It must swim for miles through the desert
Uttering cries that are almost human.

Note: "American Sonnet" and "Consolation" appear in Billy Collins's *Sailing Alone Around the Room* (Random House, 2001). "American Poetry" is from *At the End of the Open Road*. Copyright ? 1963. Reprinted by permission of Louis Simpson.

America's American

by **Robert Creeley**



Veteran poet **Robert Creeley** has a worldwide reputation, having been recognized as a seminal American poet for many decades. He has published more than 60 volumes of poetry, including *Just in Time: Poems 1984-1994* (New Directions, 2001), *Selected Poems 1945-1990* (London and New York, 1991), and many other volumes going back to the 1950s. He has published a novel, *The Island* (1963), and more than a dozen books of other prose and essays. He has edited the poetic works of Charles Olson, and collections of Robert Burns and Walt Whitman. His work has appeared in many magazines, including *Poetry*.

Honors include the Frost Medal, the Shelley Memorial Award, as well as grants and fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the Guggenheim Foundation. Since 1989, he has been Samuel P. Capen Professor of Poetry and Humanities at the State University of New York, Buffalo. He was elected a chancellor of the Academy of American Poets in 1999.

Born in Arlington, Massachusetts, in 1926, Creeley, as a boy, was awarded a scholarship to a small private school in New Hampshire, an event he feels salvaged his formal education. He entered Harvard University in 1943, and worked for the American Field Service in Burma and India in 1944 and 45. He began publishing poetry in 1946. In the late '40s and early '50s, he undertook correspondences with William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound, and a lengthy exchange of letters with the poet Charles Olson. In 1954, he joined Olson at Black Mountain College, an experimental arts college in North Carolina, where he edited the *Black Mountain Review*. Considered part of the

*Breathes there the man with soul so dead
Who never to himself hath said,
This is my own, my native land!
Whose heart hath ne'er within him burned,
As home his footsteps he hath turned
From wandering on a foreign strand?
If such there breathe, go, mark him well;
For him no minstrel raptures swell;
High though his titles, proud his name,
Boundless his wealth as wish can claim,
Despite those titles, power, and pelf,
The wretch, concentred all in self,
Living, shall forfeit fair renown,
And, double dying, shall go down
To the vile dust from whence he sprung
Unwept, unhonored, and unsung.*

-- Sir Walter Scott,
"Breathes There the Man"

Albeit an Englishman wrote that deathless poem, it was nonetheless one who might well have claimed honorary U.S. citizenship for fact of his having caught the national sentiment so fairly. "We are the last first people," the poet Charles Olson writes in his compactly moving study of Herman Melville, *Call Me Ishmael*. It is as if the United States were, in its sense of its own reality, that place to which all others in the world hoped to come because it argued so intently a chance for renewal, for a fresh start far from all fact of contesting history, all the old habits and values of the world thus left. It is as much the dream of those of us who live here, like they say, as of any aspiring immigrant. We all believe in the future as that place we will always come back to.

Growing up as I did in the classic New England small town wherein my mother was the town nurse (my father, a doctor, had died when I was four), I felt marginal in many respects. First, we did not come from the town but, rather, had come to it from what would be called now the Boston area. Though the distance to Boston was only some 25 miles, it was an implacable space to manage culturally. Even Concord, some eight miles distant, was far away from the habits and persons common to my childhood. So being thought a person from the other world of greater Boston in the small farming town where, in fact, my own real life was first significantly located meant a good deal of confusion for all concerned. A few years ago I went back to see my old cronies of that time on the occasion of our 50th high school reunion and there we mostly all were, curiously "children" again in that the lives we had managed with whatever means were now, by and large, over. We faced a new time once again --

modernist school of literature exemplified by Pound and Williams, Creeley has been linked in tone and technique to his contemporaries Olson, Robert Duncan, Allen Ginsberg, Denise Levertov, Edward Dorn, and other poets.

Creeley's life, as well as his work, tends to express the particularly American literary "counterculture" that arose among the intelligensia in the 1950s and '60s. His childhood was marked by the loss of his father before age 5; undaunted, Creeley spent the rest of his life indulging a vast curiosity about other places and cultures. Rather than settling down in a city and pursuing a lucrative career, Creeley preferred, at various times, subsistence farming in New Hampshire, publishing poetry in Mallorca, teaching high school in New Mexico, tutoring on a Guatemalan plantation, teaching in British Columbia, and practicing the craft of writing in Bolinas, California, among other journeys.

In its article on Creeley, the *Oxford Companion to Twentieth-century Poetry in English* writes: "Creeley's poetry is predominantly concerned with love and the emotions attending intimate relationships. Among his strongest influences he lists not only poets [including Allen] Ginsberg, who reassured him that 'you can write directly from that which you feel,' but also jazz musicians, who demonstrated that feelings could be expressed no less powerfully for eschewing prescribed forms."

old age -- and we were as fledgling in its circumstance as we had been entering our own first adulthood, with all the attendant, tentative paraphernalia of sex and earning a living.

I left my hometown completely by chance in my 14th year. My sister had gone to Northfield Seminary for her final year of high school and her close friend there had a younger brother at Holderness, a small Episcopalian prep school in New Hampshire. So my sister got the application forms, persuaded my mother to fill them out and submit them, and finally I was given an admissions test, did well enough for a scholarship, and off I went. Even now I can recall the searing homesickness I felt, keeping my mother and sister's letters unopened till there might be chance to read them and to cry sans witnesses. But the teaching proved extraordinarily apt and whatever education I can be said to have I got there. Some was curious indeed -- as 'translating' parts of James Joyce's great collection of stories, *Dubliners*, into Basic English. Much was classically solid -- the language study, for example, Latin and German -- and much simply the useful acquisition of a basic ability to read and write, to make clear, in William Carlos Williams' phrase, "what subsequently I saw and what heard." Although college must have had some information for me, it was got mostly from peers, the transforming impact of the Second World War and the first defining love I had.

Despite I could hardly know it starting out, writing was to prove the one constant in a life marked with endless shiftings of place and relationship. I married at 20. By 28 I was single again but then remarried within a year. Then separated again 20 years later, then married again, and so continue to be. Is that an American habit, I wonder? A few years ago Buckminster Fuller pointed out that a number of Americans representing one-fifth of the country's population leave home each year. What else might we say of ourselves? That we think we need know no language but English (although in obvious fact we know *many* -- more languages are being spoken in New York at this moment than anywhere else on earth!) -- that we need know nothing about opera *or* poetry, and I am sure the list goes on -- and still we'll be completely at home in our company. Is it an embarrassment to be discovered *liking* such things or having such skills? That catch phrase, "a good read," comes with the same inference as "a fun place" or "have a nice day." One never wants to take the arts, any of them, too seriously.

Robert Graves wrote that poetry is that art for which no academy exists, meaning, as I understood him, that there is no place one can go, so as to learn whatever the practice of poetry might be. But Graves had a tradition of some real kind for his own instruction and support. How different that "half-savage country, out of date," which Ezra Pound was born into and which, it would seem, many American poets as myself still choose as our condition, fearful that the far more secure model of English verse might displace altogether the small imaginal place we can call home. My generation

was for years divided between those who followed T.S. Eliot's instance and so looked to a classically developed poetry in the English tradition and those as myself who doggedly followed Dr. Williams. When he was asked where it was he had got his "diction," he answered curtly, "Out of the mouths of Polish mothers." We wanted, much as Charles Olson puts it, "to leave the roots on." We wanted our writing to be fact of our own social body, evidence of our own collective family person, our Polish, Irish, Italian, German, Chinese, African, French, Russian mothers and fathers, uncles, cousins, and neighbors. To gain an admission and use for that source of our ways of speaking, our various rhetorics, was a long and often displacing battle. We didn't talk right, as one says, we were vulgar. So we were the "raw" in contrast to the "cooked" in Levi-Strauss' formula, and that was entirely our pleasure.

America, whatever it is, cannot be taken to be a single place. Yet I know I stay fixed in New England in my own mind as much as if I had spent my whole life there, perhaps even more so than one who has. It is my *imago mundi*, that picture of world I carry with me as its imagination. Almost doggedly as I have moved from the east to the west, north to south, traveling at times two to three thousand miles in each direction several times a year, I have still stayed "home," in my mind at least, still thought it must be snowing now in Boston or how pleasant it must be in Maine with the fall leaves turning color. That's where I was, however changed it seemed all was around me.

What otherwise might matter is still much as Whitman had it, that the country needs to embrace its poets. "To have great poets, there must be great audiences too." But that is remarkably simple to say but seemingly almost impossible to realize. Poets are so very low in the ranking of public performers or those providing the body politic with material of their interest and desire. If the sad events of September 11, 2001, provoked a remarkable use of poems as a means wherewith to find a common and heartfelt ground for sorrow, it passed quickly as the country regained its equilibrium, turned to the conduct of an aggressive war, and, one has to recognize, went back to making money. Is poetry of such little consequence in this country because it does not "make money," can be hardly called a "profession" or even a sensible "vocation," seems most aptly undertaken by adolescents and older, emotional women? Does poetry "tell" us anything of any relevance? What does it *mean*? All those questions have clear and very simple answers -- but they will not be found here. Rather, one wants it recognized that, in America, poetry prompts a response much as Marianne Moore's ironic first line, "Poetry? I too dislike it." Another artist once said, "Poets are like harmonica players. Terrific, but not much use for them."

So that's a sad condition to work in, like bad air, poor light, long hours. Who would ever think to be a poet in this country if he did not feel literally that he had to be? Someone told me of a fledgling doctor who, in the middle of his medical studies, unexpectedly inherited a large sum of money from a recently dead aunt. So he quit

then and there, having, as he felt, no further reason to be a doctor. I knew another, met in a bar by accident after he'd given me a place to sit down, who said he couldn't stand the way people looked and smelled. He was repulsed. When I asked him how he'd ever got through medical school without learning that fact of his feelings, he said it was the training doctor he was paying attention to. He was following that person's lead, doing what he or she determined, and the patient was only present abstractly. In his own examining room, however, there was the absolute patient, all real, all flesh and adamant bone.

If I am any instance, American poets will go to their respective graves still wondering just what they are doing, and why they were doing it, and, if for anyone, for whom. "Is that a real poem or did you just make it up yourself?" But there is probably nothing one can so do that finds such remarkable response and affection, yet is based, as Williams writes, "solely [on] air." American poets have a freedom rare indeed in the common world. They can write what they want to in a manner almost impossible to conceive of in other countries and cultures. So Pound, quoting Remy de Gourmont, "Freely to write what he chooses is the writer's sole pleasure," makes clear what our nationality has given us, at least in some sense. Not only can one write in that useful sense of "freedom" despite its obvious limits, one can also take words from a dazzling range of rhetorics -- high, low, professional, domestic -- with all their consequent tones and emphases. In contrast, a German friend once pointed out to me that Gunter Grass could not be understood by the very persons his brilliant novels were a "voice" for, the common workers. The rhetorical base in his writing was a "literary" German. The workers spoke a vernacular, which separated them entirely. In England Wyndham Lewis wrote of being "branded on the tongue." Class, education, and the ranks so defined made a very large difference to the possibilities of the aspiring poet in his time, and so continue to without significant change.

Perhaps I most respect the intense localism that being from New England -- and America -- has given me as a writer. Maybe the better phrase would be self-preoccupation, which is at its best in that *tour de force* which Whitman creates in "Song of Myself," so much and so revealingly a poem of this country. Or, in like sense, it is the quiet way Emily Dickinson writes with her magnificent clarity of the life we live daily in the minds and bodies we've been given. She grew up in Amherst, Massachusetts, some 70 miles to the west of Acton, my hometown. Then there was Henry Thoreau, who said of where he lived, "I have traveled much in Concord" -- just down the road.

It's been the genius of this country to have made a lyric poetry of unique diversity and power. There are poets in other countries, perhaps, who have equaled its authority, but no community of poets has ever so written, with such a range and distinction, as have those of my world. If one is one -- and in the U.S. one *must* be, person or poet -- with all the attendant independence and individuality our culture so

insists upon despite the painful isolation it effects, then the lyric poem -- that poem of singular, passing existence -- must also be his or her greatest resource. So I have lived with its abiding masters all my life -- with Williams, with Dickinson, with Pound, with Whitman, with Poe, with H.D., with Stevens, with Louis Zukofsky, with Charles Olson, with Robert Duncan, with Allen Ginsberg, Denise Levertov, Edward Dorn. The list goes on and on. Whether or not so intending, it was America gave me these enduring friends of my heart and mind. It was here we all lived.

On Being an American Historian

by **David Herbert Donald**



David Herbert Donald is Charles Warren Professor of American History and Professor of American Civilization Emeritus at Harvard University.

A native of Mississippi, David Herbert Donald has spent most of his life writing and teaching about the American Civil War era. He has been a professor at Columbia University, Princeton University, Oxford University, and the Johns Hopkins University, in addition to Harvard. He has twice won the Pulitzer Prize in biography, for *Charles Sumner and the Coming of the Civil War* (1960) and *Look Homeward: A Life of Thomas Wolfe* (1987), but he is perhaps best known for his *Lincoln* (1995), a biography which appeared on the best-seller list of the *New York Times* for 14 weeks.

Among his other books are *Lincoln's Herndon* (1948; revised edition, 1989); *Divided We Fought: A Pictorial History of the War, 1861-1865* (1952); *Inside Lincoln's Cabinet: The Civil War Diaries of Salmon P. Chase* (1954); *Lincoln Reconsidered: Essays on the Civil War Era* (2001); *The Civil War and Reconstruction* [with Jean Harvey Baker and Michael F. Holt] (2000); *The Politics of Reconstruction, 1863-1867* (1965); *Charles Sumner and the Rights of Man* (1970); and *Lincoln at Home* (1999).

Mr. Donald was born in Goodman, Mississippi, on October 1, 1920, the son of Ira Unger Donald, a cotton planter, and Sue Ella (Belford) Donald, a former schoolteacher. After attending local schools, he went to Holmes Junior College in the same town. Then he attended Millsaps College, in Jackson, Mississippi, from which he graduated with the highest honors

When I was completing my biography of Abraham Lincoln, my literary agent approached several British publishers with a view of issuing an English edition of the book. None expressed much interest. Finally one of the famous old London houses agreed to take on the book, but with a notable lack of enthusiasm. I should not expect much in the way of sales in the British Isles, the editor-in-chief wrote me. He warned that in England a book on Abraham Lincoln would probably sell about as many copies as a life of Lord Shaftesbury would sell in the United States.

I was furious. After all, the book that I had written was not about some worthy but obscure 19th-century American figure, like Thomas Hart Benton or Benjamin Harrison. It was about Abraham Lincoln, arguably the greatest American President. In leading the North to victory in the Civil War, in abolishing slavery, and in preserving peace with the European powers during that conflict, he became a figure not merely of national but of international importance, admired by men as varied as Winston Churchill and Martin Luther King, Jr.. Leo Tolstoy called him "a Christ in miniature, a saint of humanity."

After brooding over my insult for several weeks, I grudgingly Conceded -- though only to myself -- that my snobbish London editor did have a point -- one which, unhappily, the miserable sales of the book in England reinforced. The problem with interesting a large foreign audience in a book on Lincoln was not, as the editor had thought, so much the subject as the presuppositions I had made in writing it. Addressing primarily an American audience, I had tacitly assumed some acquaintance with important events in U.S. history, like the Missouri Compromise and the Dred Scott decision, or at least a willingness to explore the intricacies of such issues as the Emancipation Proclamation or the Thirteenth Amendment. These expectations proved unrealistic.

I thought I had written about these matters as a historian, one who belonged to an international fraternity, which held a common set of assumptions and practiced much the same techniques, just as scientists of all nations do. I discovered instead that I was writing as an American historian. Indeed, I have concluded that all my books have shared this same trait: They are American books, written by an American historian.

It is not easy to define exactly what makes my writings distinctively American. The most obvious way is to point out that, with hardly an exception, they are about American subjects: the struggle between nationalism and sectionalism in 19th-century America; the American Civil War; the process of Reconstruction after that war. And all of my biographies have been about Americans, some of whom have had

in 1941. He received his graduate training in history and sociology from the University of North Carolina and the University of Illinois, which awarded him the M.A. degree in 1942 and the Ph.D. degree in 1945. At the University of Illinois, he was research assistant to the great Lincoln scholar, J.G. Randall. After a series of teaching appointments, he came to Harvard University, where he taught until his retirement in 1991.

Married to Dr. Aida DiPace Donald, the recently retired editor-in-chief of Harvard University Press, Donald resides in Lincoln, Massachusetts.

reputations so local that it is hard to think that they could interest any except American readers. William H. Herndon, Abraham Lincoln's colorful law partner and one of his earliest biographers, was a minor figure. Salmon P. Chase had only limited fame as an antislavery Ohio politician until he became Abraham Lincoln's Secretary of the Treasury. Charles Francis Adams had perhaps a larger reputation as U. S. minister to Great Britain during the Civil War, but even he is remembered, if at all, as the son and the grandson of American Presidents. Charles Sumner, the powerful Massachusetts abolitionist Senator, longed to resemble a British aristocrat, but few Englishmen today could be expected even to recognize his name.

Still, the choice of a subject does not necessarily reveal a historian's nationality. After all, one of the best early biographies of Abraham Lincoln, which still has value, was written by an Englishman, Lord Charnwood. And Basil Liddell Hart, Colin Ballard, and G. F. R. Henderson -- all Englishmen -- have written some of the best military studies on the American Civil War. A massive work by an Italian historian, Raimondo Luraghi, is one of the best general histories of the Civil War.

Perhaps my use of language is a better indication that I not merely write about American subjects but that I am myself an American. I hope that I mostly use standard English -- but when the occasion arises I delight in distinctively American words and phrases. For instance, Lincoln in one of his messages to Congress spoke of secession as "rebellion sugar-coated" and said that in a certain engagement Confederate troops "turned tail and ran." Senator Sumner scolded him for debasing the English language -- but I quoted his lapses with great pleasure. I also take delight in some American neologisms. When Herndon wrote of Lincoln's complicated courtship of Mary Todd and of their off-and-on-again plans for a wedding, he headed his chapter "The Marriage Embrigglement." I have always thought that a better, and more distinctively American, word than "imbroglio," and I used it repeatedly. Similarly, whenever I can, I like to quote the vernacular language of uneducated Americans, which often has a force and a clarity that would be lost if they followed the rules of English grammar. I find something direct and compelling in a statement like that of Dennis Hanks, Lincoln's country cousin, who instructed Herndon on what to include in his Lincoln biography: "Now William Be Sure and have My Name very Conspikus and the work will gaw [i.e., go] of well."

II

In yet another way my American upbringing has affected the way I write history. An impartial observer, given the unenviable task of reappraising my long list of publications, which stretch from the 1940s to the present, might reasonably conclude that there has been no clear, coherent pattern in my books. In my early days as a historian, I was fascinated by the possibility of linking my discipline to sociology, and in a series of essays, published as *Lincoln Reconsidered*, tried to analyze the social

origins of 19th-century American reform movements and of the Southern defense of slavery. Then I became deeply interested in psychology, and especially psychoanalysis, with the result that my biography of Charles Sumner became what one reviewer called the most completely Freudian biography he had ever read. About this time, though, I was attracted to new developments in quantitative history, and in *The Politics of Reconstruction* attempted to chart that period in a sequence of graphs. After this, I began reading literary criticism and wrote my biography of Thomas Wolfe, the 20th-century Southern novelist. Some of my colleagues have found these repeated shifts in subject matter and methodology confusing and even disturbing. My dear old friend, Arthur S. Link, who spent his entire distinguished scholarly career retracing the career of Woodrow Wilson, once chided me for frivolously changing my point of view. "David," he gently scolded, "your problem is that you are not a serious historian."

To this charge I must, to some extent plead guilty, because I have written about whatever interested me, using whatever tools came to hand, and I have written what I enjoyed writing, not what I -- or anybody else -- thought ought to be written. That, I think, is a distinctively American attitude. In my case it stemmed from my experiences on a prolonged bus trip, made during my years as a graduate student. Starting on the East Coast, I rolled and jostled along for hour after hour, day after day, as the bus took me and my fellow passengers across the Appalachian Mountains, through the industrial cities of the Middle West, across the interminable Great Plains, into the fantastically beautiful mountain country, until at last we arrived in California. From that adventure I date my love affair with the American landscape, in all its variety. The long trip forced me to understand the enormous expanse of our country and, in my meetings day after day with my fellow travelers of all races and both sexes, from all parts of the country, I came to recognize the infinite diversity of American life.

That diversity has extended to me -- as, of course, it has to so many other American writers -- enormous room for experimentation, in subject matter, in theme, and in method. There is no single dominant historiographical tradition; there is no one route that all aspiring historians need to follow. The very diversity of my writing is the best indication of how being an American has affected my career as a historian.

III

Yet within that diversity there is, I think, a hidden unity, which is also distinctively American -- or, at least, distinctive to the Southern United States, where I was born and raised. Whatever my method or subject matter -- whether I am attempting a quantitative study of the Reconstruction Congress or a literary deconstruction of the novels of Thomas Wolfe -- I have always attempted to tell a story that readers would find absorbing, with actors that they would think believable.

This tradition of story-telling has always been strong in the South. Nearly every family in my native Mississippi had its story-tellers -- its archivists, so to speak, of family memories and legends. Often, these were elderly women, whose recollections seemed to stretch back to almost the beginning of time. They knew all the family stories: how great-great grandfather had brought his wife and three children across the Appalachian Mountains into the Mississippi Valley, barely escaping marauding Indians; how great-grandfather had enlisted in the Confederate Army and had fought until he was wounded at the battle of Chickamauga; how grandfather had shocked the family by marrying a Yankee -- so called because she was born north of the Mason-Dixon line. As I was growing up, I listened to the epics the narrators recited, recounting -- in minute detail and always in the same words -- precisely what each figure in the story had worn, had said, and had done.

These early, unrecognized practitioners of oral history were story-tellers who related their tales with enormous flair and great gusto. They did not simply list facts; they constructed their stories with artistry, leading always to a dramatic climax. It was this powerful oral tradition that underlay so much of the best of modern Southern literature. It provided the basic structure for William Faulkner's greatest novels. And it was this same tradition that gives verisimilitude to Eudora Welty's best short stories.

Inevitably this tradition affected my own approach toward history -- as it has affected so many of the best historians of the South. Though I was trained in the best "scientific" methods of historical research, taught to deal with vast impersonal forces like "class," "caste," "capitalism," "feudalism," and the like, I found that when I actually sat down to write, my mind slipped into the old patterns of narration, of making readers see and understand real-life figures in the past.

Even in the mechanics of writing I find myself influenced by this distinctively American -- perhaps Southern American -- way of telling a story. I compose at the keyboard of my computer, pausing as I complete each sentence to read it aloud, making sure that both the sound and the sense convey the meaning that I want. If I have failed, I delete the offending sentence and start again. Sometimes I may sound out a dozen versions of a phrase or sentence before I get it just right. Occasionally this practice has led to amusing results. Once, when I was in my study writing my biography of Thomas Wolfe, two friendly carpenters were making repairs in an adjacent room. Presently they took a coffee-break in the back yard, just out of my sight but not quite out of my hearing.

Asked the older carpenter in a worried tone: "Do you think he's all right?"

"I guess so," replied the younger, "but he does sit at that machine for hours and hours talking to himself."

I may not be "all right" -- but I like to think that my story-telling carries on a great tradition. And it is a distinctively American tradition.

How Does Being an American Inform What I Write?

by **Richard Ford**

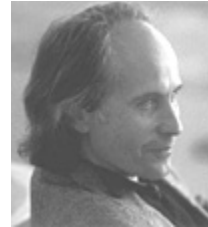
Of course, it's a tail-chasing question to begin with, a literary chicken-or-egg riddle. You have only to raise the stakes sublimely to see what I mean: How did being Russian influence Chekhov? How did being a woman affect Virginia Woolf? How did being a pint-sized sailor determine the public pronouncements of Popeye, who finally knew the answer and said it best: "I am what I am. That's all that I am."

To break this logic I have to dream up an answer, not find one that's already there. This is generally the novelist's assignment: to go beyond the obvious toward the new, create a fresh awareness, add to the sum of available reality, crack open the frozen sea within us -- however you imagine the new to be achieved.

Two preliminary matters need disposing of right away, both pertaining to matters un-American. In reply to the question posed by the title *How does being an American inform what I write?*

-- one might want to say: "Well, being an American means I felt free to write whatever I chose, and so I did. Q.E.D." But, couldn't I have done as much in Denmark, Canada or Britain, and been one of theirs? It's true of the U.S., but it's not uniquely true. And second, while being an American may have made me a writer and stamped my efforts indelibly, it hasn't necessarily made me a better writer than some other country's. A look into world literature tells us that. For all I know, I might've been better as a Frenchman.

I don't remember when I first realized I was an American. Pledging allegiance to the flag at age six. Registering for the Selective Service at eighteen. Joining the Marines at twenty. I'm certain, though, that long before any of these happened I was made quite aware that I was first, a Mississippian -- a Jacksonian in fact -- a southerner, a *son* of parents who were not themselves Mississippians, but Arkansans, and so slightly different from me. All these unique local identities, of course, presume me to be an American, since the Republic, the country and principles it embodies *contain* all the others. Thus, anything about me and my productions that I might attribute to



Richard Ford was born in Jackson, Mississippi, in 1944, and was raised there and in Little Rock, Arkansas. He attended public schools, Michigan State University, The University of California, and Washington University Law School. He is the author of five novels, including *The Sportswriter*, *Wildlife*, and *Independence Day*, and three books of stories, including *Rock Springs* and *A Multitude of Sins*. He has written many essays, and is a frequent contributor to *The New Yorker* magazine and to the *New York Times*.

Mr. Ford's work has been honored with the Award for Merit in the Novel of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, of which he is a member. His work has, as well, received The Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, The PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction, and The PEN/Malamud Award for Excellence in the Short Story. His novels and stories have been translated into 23 languages. From France, he received the Ordre des Artes et des Lettres. He is married to Kristina Ford and lives in New Orleans.

being a southerner, etc., can also be attributable -- by radiating logic -- to being an American.

But when I was growing up in Mississippi, in the 1940s and '50s, the mood pertaining to the South's allegiance to the larger American nation was noticeably equivocal. The Depression and World War II were not long past. A cousin I knew was at Pearl Harbor (my family talked about it at dinner). The Korean War was under way. Communism was perceived as a threat to what most southerners felt was our national security, if not in fact our entire identity. My parents voted. Roosevelt and Truman were our Presidents. I pledged allegiance. America was ours, and we belonged to it -- at least for the purposes of preserving and defending it.

And yet, where other, important socio-political issues were concerned -- particularly race, voting rights, equal opportunity, free access to the American bounty, and that quaintly-American constitutional cornerstone called Federalism, known regionally as "states' rights" -- one felt that many in the South might've preferred to be attached to another mother country entirely: South Africa or Paraguay for many whites; France or Sweden if one were black. From any side of these life-bending issues, being an American, believing in the nation's expressed goals of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, became tumultuous, disharmonious, debatable and occasionally dangerous to one's health.

Self-consciously acknowledging one's national identity and speaking it to oneself is, obviously, only one manifestation of having an identity. Indeed, much about our identity we Americans traditionally prefer to take for granted, in order to concentrate more intensely on the *fruits* of belonging. It's an implicit aim of our republican form of government that citizens not be so preoccupied with the mechanics and philosophy of citizenship, but rather that we concern ourselves with *acting* -- even if blithely -- as citizens. National identity is, thus, a means to the end of individual freedom, not an end to itself.

But for me, in Mississippi, in the South, in my formative years between 1950 and 1962, being an American and assuming my national identity, meant being pre-occupyingly (not at all blithely) immersed in an impassioned, publicly argued, and quite grave welter of sentiments and competing ideas about American citizenship. The heart of this debate was: How do I reconcile belonging in this country of my birth when this country seems bent on oppressing what I believe are my most fundamental and necessarily unalienable individual rights? To white segregationists, this supposed right was the one that entitled them to segregate those different from themselves away from themselves; whereas to blacks and integrationist whites the opposing right was the one that freed them to move wherever and associate however they pleased without fear of harm when they did so. In this commotion and in the disputation surrounding it -- a long disputation called the American Civil Rights

Movement -- many people lost their lives in order that justice and right should prevail, which it did, if not perfectly.

I've never felt comfortable judging any attitude, persona, behavior, character quality, experience or belief to be "typically American." When I'm in another country and someone who reads my books asks me if a story I've written is typically American, I demur. And then I say: Think of flying over an American suburb in a helicopter, and seeing a man in a pork-pie hat out mowing his lawn. Surely, this would be the typical American. Who is he? (We might think we know.) But, when we come for a closer look, gently lift the hat off the man's head, we discover he's a Pakistani, an immigrant, or a third-generation Ghanian or Chinese-American. And the route that has brought him to his lawn, in this town, on this day dispels most notions of typicality and exposes its tendency to blur or exclude specific qualities that don't fit. Generality is in this way proved unreliable by specificity -- which is the point most great literature seeks to prove: We can see most clearly by looking most closely -- and we should.

Whether my experience growing up in Mississippi in the '50s could be said to be any more typically American than the Pakistani immigrant's experience is, of course, moot. I am, as he is, an American. Our experience is the American experience or part of it: tumult (in my case), a complicated and ambivalent experience of citizenry, national identity and divisive regionalism, all incompletely reconciled by a large political idealism which comprehends much while it attempts to oppress and coerce as few as possible. (Maybe I should agree that the immigrant and I have more in common than I imagined.)

And so, how does my experience inform the books I've written?

Better, probably, to say how *might* it have informed what I've written, since tracing literary expression from one side of the human imagination to the other, from the side where it's nothing but randomness and sensation, across to the side where it becomes something (a story), is speculative, often specious. Indeed, my own inadequate ability to distinguish my intentions from my actual accomplishments, my willingness to inflect what I've already written to "prove" an influence, and my entire authorial understanding of what I've written as distinct from a reader's understanding -- all these make me not the most disinterested or discerning of self-critics.

Therefore I feel safe saying only a very few things.

The Czech novelist Milan Kundera, in a letter to his American colleague Philip Roth, wrote that "the novelist teaches the reader to comprehend the world as a question.... In a [totalitarian] world built on sacrosanct certainties, the novel is dead." And so,

consonant with my American experience (not at all totalitarian, but contested, complex, ambiguous, diverse, often disharmonious to the point of profound unsettlement), I have always *tried* to write stories and novels that testify to the nature of human kind as it is displayed by the purifying heat of adversity and disharmony and interrogation -- lovers seeking but failing to find intimacy, mutual understanding, sympathy, consolation; fathers and sons, sons and mothers viewing one another longingly but imperfectly across gaps of misunderstanding, struggling with inexact expressions of affection, trying to meet the *other* face to face in order to say what needs to be said. These were the circumstances -- tumultuous, rivalrous, thorny, proprietary -- under which I came to recognize what it meant to be an American: civil rights' struggles and Viet Nam, each of which divided families; the McCarthy purges, which divided the nation; the aftermath of the Depression, followed by world war and the prosperity of the Fifties.

As a second matter, I have -- and apropos of my native experience -- acted on the need and freedom to write about and adopt diverse personas, ones that aren't my own (women, other races, other nationalities, children) in an effort to answer the fundamental American question specifically posed by my citizenship: How are we so different, yet so alike? I've written stories so as to make such ambiguity tolerable, interesting, even pleasant and beautiful.

I have also engaged politics *small*, in the intimate, ground-level lives of its human participants. It was surely at that level, locked away in a small family, in a small American city, far from the centers of power and public rhetoric, that I first saw right and wrong enacted. Though, indeed, at some moment I couldn't have planned for, I left the South as a subject-home, following only my curiosity, and assuming that my local intelligence would translate to a larger American audience, and tried to take the entire country as my setting, and more hopefully as a subject.

And finally -- and in this I don't have to speculate about what informs what -- as a writer I've always trusted America to be a setting within which universally *human* events and actions and their motives and moral consequences can be portrayed and understood as important from any vantage point on the planet. American human experience, while not a model for the rest of the world, has seemed at least a plausible experience, and worthy of notice.

Ascribing one's influences is always heady, squeamishly self-important business. And I come to this end now bemused, thinking yes, had these influences not worked on me all these years, nothing of me or mine would be the same. Though, of course, nothing of me would be at all. You can't remove a crucial term from the equation and have the same equation. Popeye can't be a jet pilot or a bond salesman and be the Popeye we love.

Today there's a writer in Chechnya writing about the influence of, well...Chechnya on his body of work. And he's writing the same sort of things I've written, or better things. Good, I say. For if all these years of being an American have only readied me to realize my likeness, my kinship, my collegiality with someone I'll never know, made me able to live literature's most precious wisdom -- then being an American, and a writer no less, has served me very well indeed.

For Life's Sake

by **Linda Hogan**

I was a shy girl, quiet, never aspiring to be a writer, never thinking to assert my Native identity, an identity always clear to my sister and I when we were in Oklahoma with our Chickasaw grandparents. We come from horse and wagon grandparents, and it was not so very long ago. The smell of the pecan trees, the black walnut with flesh I can still smell. Then, in the '50s and '60s, my uncle in Denver took me to powwows, then held in small school gymnasiums. But for the most part we didn't think of our Indian life as something significant. History didn't interest us. We lived in other worlds and places. And yet, within me, I held traditional values. I didn't know then that I would become a traditionally-minded Native woman. I grew into it the way a person grows into their shape, the way a tree grows, without intention, without plan, into a tree.

I didn't know, either, that I would become a writer, and the fact that I come from another America has, from the beginning, been the root of my writing.

As a girl, even though I was shy, not given to argument, I was one day able to say to the Sunday-school teacher, who believed we were in the house of the Lord, that I felt God when I sat under a tree. It was there, with the tree, that I felt the love of the earth, smelling the soft soil, the blades of grass growing even as I sat.

I was a child when I first used words to argue for a tree. It was my first argument, maybe the first one of my otherwise quiet life. Now I know that we also grow into our words.

And, writing this, I sit beneath a tree. Sitting here, I have so far watched a hummingbird mating ritual, the honey bees at the balm tree, the unusually marked bees in flowering chives. A skinny fox sits on the hill above.

I didn't know, when I thought God was a tree, that my ancestors, on the night of their removal from Mississippi to Oklahoma along the Trail of Tears, were witnessed



Linda Hogan is a Chickasaw writer. She is the author of several books. These include *Dwellings; A Spiritual History of The Natural World* (W. W. Norton, 1995), a novel entitled *Power* (W.W. Norton), as well as novels *Mean Spirit*, and *Solar Storms* (Simon and Schuster). *Mean Spirit* was a finalist for a Pulitzer, and *The Book of Medicines*, a collection of poems, was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award.

Hogan has received numerous awards, including a National Endowment for the Arts grant, a Guggenheim fellowship, a Lannan Foundation award, the Five Civilized Tribes Museum playwriting award, and in 1998, the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Native Writers Circle of the Americas. She has written a documentary narrative about the history of American Indian Religious Freedom, *Everything Has A Spirit*, seen now on PBS. She is one of three Indian writers hired by the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian to co-author a book for the museum's grand opening. Hogan's section is on tradition and how it has been carried into recent times. She was also a co-editor, with Brenda Peterson, of *Intimate Nature: The Bond Between Women and Animals*, from Ballantine, and *The Sweet Breathing of Plants*, from Farrar Straus and Giroux. Two other new books will be out in June of 2000, *The Woman Who Watches Over The World: A Native Memoir*, from W. W. Norton; and *The Mysterious Journey of The Gray Whale*, (National Geographic Books). She is presently working on another novel, a book of poems, and two horses.

touching the leaves of the trees, the trunks, crying. *Their old friends, the trees*, is how the observer wrote about their removal to Oklahoma, Indian Territory.

In this mystery of human growing became, within me, a history contained, memory carried from far back, ancestral knowledge.

Looking back, I can say that I was a poet by heart; I didn't need words at first. I was an observer. I only grew into a writing life. My work was, and still is, a way of being in the world. It is an acknowledgment that we live in a sentient world. With my work, I try to see the world whole again. My novels, especially, give Indian people dignity, reality in a world of stereotypes, and spiritual wholeness. I show us present, fully present, in front of, and before, the background of America. I always acknowledge the intelligence of the elders, and honor the world. It is work of hope, and I try to hold within it the Indian traditional understanding of the cosmos, one that contains constellations called Swimming Ducks, Buffalo, different than the Western constellations. I also know the importance of the tiniest root of a plant, that it contributes to our world. My writing is larger than I am. It comes from some other place I can't name. I am grateful for it. In it there are the undercurrents of earth, waves of ocean, discoveries unknown to me:

Once, in the redwood forest, I heard the beat, something like a drum or heart coming from the ground and trees and wind. That underground current stirred a kind of knowing inside me, a kinship and longing? I think of the people who came before me and how they knew the placement of stars in the sky, watching the moving sun long and hard enough to witness how a certain angle of light touched a stone only once a year. Without written records, they knew the gods of every night, the small, fine details of the world around them and of immensity above?. It is a world of elemental attention, of all things working together, listening to what speaks in the blood. Whichever road I follow, I walk in the land of many gods, and they love and eat one another. Tonight, I am listening to a deeper way. Suddenly all my ancestors are behind me. Be still, they say. Watch and Listen. You are the result of the love of thousands.

(Excerpt from "Walking")

I became one who would find her way into the world through writing. I reached for the language of a larger-than-merely-human world, and through this reach, my work as a writer has been in constant movement and change, between poetry, essay, and story. Stories have become increasingly important to me, as has my continuing study of ceremonial literature from many different tribes, each containing an enormously complex knowledge, understanding of the world, and values.

In all traditions, in the views of aboriginal peoples all over the world, there is a known, remembered, relationship between humans and the cosmos. The placement

of the human is merely a part of the Great Mysterious. Cultures that have survived 20,000 to 60,000 years can't be too wrong, I have decided.

But most importantly, I have had to learn how to wait, listen, and follow, as in the essay above. I have had to learn, as now, sitting under a tree, for the work to reveal itself, to come to me.

In my novel, *Power*, the main character has to choose between worlds she can inhabit, the world of the elders and their great knowledge, or the world of America. She knows geometry, English, the American world, yet she must decide whether to leave this world for

that of her elders who live in their own community, with their own ways:

At school we hear about imploding stars, stars that fall inward the way I am falling, but there is no place ever to touch down, there is no bottom to inward falling? I whisper to myself as I walk and the moonlight touches me, "I leave this world. I leave war and fear. I leave success and failure, owned things, rooms of light that was once a river, and is now reduced."

This book began as a research project. I had been on an all-Indian working committee for the reauthorization of the Endangered Species Act. There was a controversial case where a Seminole man killed an endangered Florida panther. I went to Florida to read the court records, planning to write an article for a law quarterly. But what came to me as I was in the Everglades was the voice of that main character, Omishto, one of those voices writers hear, and I followed what she wanted to say.

My writing becomes a search in this way, and finding a language, words for what can't be said in ordinary language; shades of meaning, degrees of love, moments of wisdom that do not come from me, but from thousands of years of learning and being. When I made my first unlearned words on the page, I did so to give a voice to and for the voiceless, whether it is an endangered animal of the book *Power*, or historical figures such as the woman Lozen, the military strategist of Geronimo, in *The Woman Who Watches Over the World*. I want them to be known in this world, to be important here, to be remembered.

This morning as I sit beneath a tree, the newly hatched spiders are leaving. The sun shines on their strands of silk. The barn swallows are flying back and forth from mud to their clay nests in a world of their maps. I can hear the deep breathing of the horses behind the trees. On one of them the letters U. S. are frozen into the fur, followed by symbols that will always define her, declare her, tell her story. She, too, is another part of America, a rounded-up creation from the wild. And the Indian

horses have a history not unlike our own. The military, trying to round up the tribes and move them all into Oklahoma, tried to cripple their movement by killing all their horses, sometimes by the thousands. It's a part of history that also makes me write:

AFFINITY:

Mustang

Tonight after the sounds of day
have given way
she stands beneath the moon,
a gray rock shining.
She matches the land,
belonging.

She has a dark calm face,
her hooves like black stone
belong to the earth
the way it used to be,
long grasses
as grass followed rain
or wind laid down the plains of fall
or in winter now when
her fur changes and becomes snow
or her belly hair turns
the color of red water willows
at the creek,
her legs black as trees.

These horses
almost a shadow,
broken.

When we walk together
in the tall grasses, I feel her
as if I am walking with mystery,
with beauty and fierce powers,
as if for a while we are the same animal
and remember each other from before.

Or sometimes I sit on earth
and watch the wind blow her mane and tail
and the waves of dry grasses
all one way

and it calls to mind
how I've come such a long way
through time
to find her.

Some days I sing to her
remembering the Kiowa man
who sang to cover the screams
of their ponies killed by the Americans
the songs I know in my sleep.

Some nights, hearing her outside,
I think she is to the earth
what I am to her,
belonging.

Sometimes it seems as if we knew each other
from a time before our journeys here
In secret, I sing to her, the old songs
the ones I speak in my sleep.

But last night it was her infant that died
after the kinship and movement
of so many months
Tonight I sit on the straw
and watch as the milk streams from her nipples
to the ground. I clean her face.
I've come such a long way through time
to find her and
It is the first time
I have ever seen a horse cry.

Sing then, the wind says,
Sing.

I love the world. I love everything that lives upon it. And so I write, like this morning under the tree. It is a world of mystery and beauty; this is what gives me words, and those words come from the earth, the language of the land, the re-membering the dismembered of the world, as writer Meridel LeSueur called it. I write to be one person who helps to put the world, the lives of humans and non-humans back together, to make them whole again. I do this for the future. I do this for life's sake.

Both Sides of the Border

by **Mark Jacobs**

There is an intimate link between writing and being stubborn. I remember the sense of satisfaction I felt waking out of my first and only trilingual dream. It happened after I returned from Paraguay, where I'd spent two years as a Peace Corps volunteer living in an isolated village of cotton farmers. Paraguayans are bilingual; everyone speaks both Spanish and Guarani. In my dream, each of the three languages had its own feeling-tone, its own distinct resonance. The dream had to do with the pleasure of translating, and the satisfaction came from being able to balance disparate realities. It took two years of my life to get there. It's taken a lot more stubborn effort than that to write what I began, in Paraguay, to see.

English, of course, articulated my American identity, the world I was born into. Spanish represented a kind of bridge, a way of crossing over into a new but knowable place. Years before a physical bridge existed, my wife and I took a ferry across the Parana River in southern Paraguay to Posadas, Argentina, where she bought me a paperback collection of the poetry of Borges, the first writer outside my own American culture whose work I tried to understand (I'm still trying). Guarani was different. It was local, rural, an impenetrable thicket. The language belonged to Paraguay, and it guarded its secrets. Only a few times - - listening to a Chaco War veteran describe his own personal horror in the desert; or drinking *mate* with a farmer while it rained too hard to go to the fields; or sharing a glass of cane whiskey with a restless dreamer planning a horse race to make travel money -- did I come close to the wall that kept me outside the culture their Guarani protected.

It's no accident that the one place where the three languages came together seamlessly was a dream. Outside of dreams, it's the grinding at the edges where cultures intersect that has fascinated, even obsessed



A Handful of Kings, **Mark Jacobs'** fourth book, is forthcoming from Simon and Schuster. The novel is set in Madrid, where Jacobs served as cultural affairs officer in the U.S. embassy. Robert Olen Butler wrote about it, "No writer is as brilliant as Mark Jacobs at exploring the rich fictional realm of the American abroad. He blends the literary traditions of Henry James and Graham Greene in work that is truly his own and truly wonderful. *A Handful of Kings* is his best book yet."

Jacobs' previous books include *A Cast of Spaniards* (Talisman House, 1994), which *Atlantic Monthly* editor C. Michael Curtis called "a remarkable debut of an accomplished, passionate, politically astute new writer"; *Stone Cowboy* (Soho Press, 1997), about which *The Washington Post* wrote, "Every once in a while, when you least expect it, you stumble across a novel that reminds you of fiction's capacity to delight and to amaze"; and *The Liberation of Little Heaven* (Soho Press, 1999), including the story "How Birds Communicate," which won the 1998 *Iowa Review* Fiction Award.

Jacobs has also published over 60 short stories in a range of commercial and literary magazines including *The Atlantic Monthly*, *The Southwest Review*, *The Southern Review*, *New Letters*, and *The Kenyon Review*. He has worked in Turkey, Paraguay, Bolivia, Spain and Honduras as a foreign service officer. He was also a Peace Corps volunteer in rural Paraguay. He speaks fluent Turkish and Spanish as well as some Guarani.

me. It's probably the reason I joined the foreign service. It became the primary material of my writing life. And it started a long way back, years before Paraguay. It started when I did.

My parents came from very different American places. My mother's family in Pennsylvania were rural. They fished and hunted. They were good with machinery; they fixed tractors, lawn mowers, cars; anything with a motor. They played country music on the stages of fire halls and bars. They were Protestant, and mostly laconic, and suspicious of the kind of people who lived in my father's world, which was urban and in specific ways antithetic to my mother's. My father's family worked in factories, for the most part. They were Catholic, and in Niagara Falls they lived in neighborhoods still divided by ethnic groups (you could be Irish and live in a Polish neighborhood, you could be Lebanese and marry an Italian, but you knew who you were regardless, and you knew who they were). My father's people talked more than my mother's family did, and they spoke a different American idiom. They told stories. Some of the stories they told were true; most of them were entertaining. Their music was swing, their style was looser. On the gurney at Niagara Falls Memorial Hospital in the middle of a heart attack, when medical personnel asked my father whether he had any allergies, he responded, "Just country music."

It's too much of a stretch to say that my parents came from different cultures. The Shumways and the Jacobs inhabited, bespoke, and defended different forces of the same big, noisy, messy and conflictual American culture. But it's not too much to say that watching the complicated intersection of those different dimensions of American life is what drew me both to the foreign service and to writing about borders and the people who cross them.

We lived in Niagara Falls but spent a lot of time in Pennsylvania, on my grandparents' farm in Towanda. Moving back and forth between one place and the other was a lot like crossing a border. One consequence is that, in a real way, my brothers and I grew up comfortably bicultural. Because we had to, we learned to understand both worlds, to speak both American idioms. We listened to the music, read the road signs, stood at the intersections where the two families did not quite come together.

All of that helped. Beginning with two years in Potrero Yapepo, in Itapua, Paraguay, I lived a series of useful cultural dislocations. They were useful because they unsettled my sense of identity, which in my case seems to have been a good way to jump-start the imagination. In Paraguay, I bought a small portable typewriter and began writing stories set in that country almost before I could speak the language(s). Imagining the lives and circumstances of people whose experience was so remote from my own was an almost unbearably arrogant thing to attempt, and I knew it. I failed much more often than I succeeded. But I thought when I began and think

more fervently now that imagining other lives, distinct realities, experience foreign to one's own, is not only possible, it can be the obsession of a life.

There are ways and ways to approach a culture foreign to one's own, and some of them are full of potholes. The complexities involved in trying to understand and represent in words a foreign culture stand out with sometimes painful clarity in the writing of Joseph Conrad. It's hard to argue with the Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe's bitter indictment of the author of *Heart of Darkness* as a racist, but it seems to me that there is more nuance and more valuable ambiguity in some of Conrad's work than Achebe is willing to grant him.

In fact, "Karain: A Memory" shows another Conrad. In "Karain," the narrator, a white gun-runner, relates the story of a Malay tribal leader with a complex and shifting set of emotional reactions ranging from powerful sympathy to a distancing condescension that falls back on the easy assumptions of English superiority. The story moves giddily through a series of transitions the narrator makes between those conflicting extremes. When it's over, the narrator brings the story to what seems, on first read, a stolid, reassuring London scene speaking for the triumph of British civilization over the imaginative exuberance, the flash and color and exotic excess of "the East." But there has been too much back-and-forth movement in the course of "Karain" to fix the story on that bustling, self-satisfied London street. Here is one way of constructing the world, Conrad's narrator subtly suggests, and there is another, and the truth of experience is to be found in the nervous traffic between them. The reader walks away from "Karain" wobbling and wondering, drawn into the cultural confrontation in a profoundly unsettling way.

What is it about Conrad that allows him to stand, if not with a foot in another culture, then right up next to it, observing what's there to observe with an intelligent and curious eye? One of the most perceptive Conrad critics, Edward Said, talks about the "aura of dislocation, instability and strangeness" in the writer, the result of Conrad's exile and alienation, his "loss of home and language." Conrad's experience was extreme. It inflicted permanent changes on the man. He left and lost his home, his language, and his culture for good. There was no going back to Poland. Writing in Polish was useless. With an effort of will that defies comprehension, the sailor-writer-would-be-adventurer grasped for and appropriated a new home, an alien language, a foreign culture. One effect of doing that was to make him intensely aware -- some might say neurotically aware -- of what we would probably today call cultural relativity.

In the United States, we sometimes speak almost casually about reinventing ourselves. The possibility of reinvention has been a staple of our sense of who we are beginning with the discovery-cum-conquest of the American continent. It runs consistently through our culture from the Pilgrims' conviction that they were

establishing a "city on a hill" through Emerson's most provocative essays to Bob Dylan's changing the changes album by album. Often, though, we say we have reinvented ourselves when what we really mean is that we've changed something about ourselves: our job, or where we live, the way we dress or pay our bills or entertain ourselves. It's easy to forget that reinvention begins with an act of destruction: The old self has to go to make room for the new one. Conrad knew that because he lived it. And he lived it because he had to, not because he thought it would be an interesting intellectual exercise.

Peace Corps and the foreign service do not come close to that kind of profound experience of remaking oneself. Every time I left the United States, I figured I was coming back. Although I acquired new ones, I kept my own language. I stayed plugged into my own culture; with today's technology, and the noise it generates, it's harder to unplug than it is to stay connected. So despite living outside of my home culture for 15 years, I was not reinvented. Other valuable things did happen to me, though. In the course of living and working in other countries, I was dislocated. I was challenged and provoked. I was sometimes humbled and frequently surprised. I wasn't reinvented, but I think it's fair to say I was enlarged.

Writing fiction set in the places that I lived in, I was drawn to certain kinds of narrators. Tourists of any kind, including those on cultural junkets, did not interest me much. I looked for people whose voices had the range to express a different sort of engagement with the culture in which they found themselves. Journalists, especially foreign correspondents, were particularly attractive because reporters tend to be curious and irreverent and to have a strong sense of outrage, however well channeled they keep it. They spend their time trying to figure out what's going on in a place they were not born in. In order to write an accurate story, they have to decipher the cultural codes. They move on, but while they're there, the good ones -- and there are lots of good ones -- engage intensely with the country they cover.

Temporary or permanent expatriates, certain (but definitely not all) diplomats, aid workers and missionaries, adventurers and spies -- all of them offer the right kind of character for writers interested in the intersections of cultures. One thinks of the cast of characters from Graham Greene's many novels. For an American writer, the expats are in a sense the easy part of the mix. At least it is relatively easier to depict them with the combination of sympathy and accuracy that good fiction demands regardless of its subject matter. The American characters come from the writer's own world of experience. Observed outside their element, they stand out.

Much trickier, and more likely to fail in the attempt, is the development of characters from the countries and cultures in which the story takes place. Greene was aware of the difficulty of doing imaginative justice to the characters he developed that were not British. Writing about the Mexican policeman who tracks down the whiskey priest

in *The Power and the Glory*, he frankly says he made up the character from whole cloth. The novel needed the intense, rigorous, and puritanical lieutenant to balance the sloppy, weak, and dissipated priest. The author's trip through Mexico did not turn up a human model, so he worked from scratch but was not, one senses, completely satisfied with the result.

Writers like Achebe and Said have pointed out how easy it is to "orientalize" a foreign culture, to use it as an exotic background on which to paint characters from one's own culture. When that happens, the appropriated culture at best provides local color. At worst, the story dehumanizes people in the horrific way that Achebe asserts *Heart of Darkness* as doing through Marlowe's depictions of black Africans.

There's no single word ample and accurate enough to describe the world that has succeeded the colonial era whose bloody end Conrad's work foreshadows. Postcolonial? Sure. The world we inhabit is certainly that, but the word suggests where we've come from more than where we're going. It doesn't do justice to the depth of change in people's perceptions that has taken place since, say, the 1950s. There are days when it's depressingly difficult to remain aware of that change because of the violence that keeps happening, too often, in too many places. But the colonial worldview is dead regardless. Those who upheld it and those who resisted it are dead. Something else will take its place.

It's probably too soon to give it a name. We're in a transitional stage, and calling it the postcolonial era will have to do for a while longer. But there are encouraging signs that what emerges will be better than what we're leaving behind. In the case of literature in English, it has already been incalculably enriched by writers from Africa, from India, from the Caribbean and elsewhere.

Less noticed, less important but still worth thinking about, is another change that's going on at the same time. When they travel outside the United States, American writers are trying to do imaginative justice to characters who are not American: the Paraguayan cotton farmer, the Honduran human rights activist who hides incriminating documents in a broken refrigerator, the Kenyan investigative journalist with scars and secrets, the Spanish intelligence officer whose father entertained tourists with card tricks for shots and cigarettes.

Before she died in a plane crash, the American novelist and aid worker Maria Thomas worked with passionate intensity to describe the complex interactions between Africans and Americans by creating characters from both cultures of equal complexity and credibility. At its best, Thomas' fiction radiates that elusive combination of sympathy and accuracy that Greene was conscious of needing in his own work. Other writers are trying to do the same. Norman Rush, Paul Eggers, and

Marnie Mueller all work to do imaginative justice to relationships across cultures in the postcolonial world.

The 19th-century English critic Matthew Arnold once wrote that to truly appreciate the literature of one's own culture, it was necessary to know that of another. He was talking about how important it was to know French to understand English. Today, the notion of paying careful attention to a culture not one's own is even more compelling. It's also more of a challenge. The Borges I pick up tonight is not the Borges I read while living in a converted meat market in Encarnacion. Fortunately, American writers writing fiction set in cultures not their own have a tremendous resource available to them, the literature of the countries about which they want to write. Maybe it's true that wherever you travel, the way to the writing is still through the reading.

An American Milk Bottle

by **Charles Johnson**

Under a glass globe in my living room there is a remnant of my family's four centuries of history on the North American continent. I'm sure everyone who has visited my home must feel it is the strangest of heirlooms, an indecipherable piece of the American past, a tissue of time and forgotten lives. On it I often perform a private hermeneutics, peeling away its layers of meaning as one would a palimpsest. I try to imagine (as archaeologists do with tools from Pompeii or shards of pottery from the Incas) the African-American world of hope, struggle, heroism, and long-deferred possibilities that background this 80-year-old object.

What rests mysteriously under glass is a thick, cloudy milk bottle, very scarred, that bears in relief the inscription "*One Pint. This Bottle Property of and Filled by JOHNSON DAIRY CO., Evanston, Ill. Wash and Return.*"

The venerable Johnson who owned that bottle was my late, great-uncle William. He was born in 1892 in rural South Carolina at the end of Reconstruction, near the little town of Abbeville, and just three years before Booker T. Washington's Atlanta Compromise address (and the publication of H.G. Wells's *The Time Machine*). His people lived close to the land. They farmed, spent their winters hunting, and produced everything they needed. Their water came from a well. Answering nature's call in the middle of the night meant a lonely walk outside to a foul-smelling outhouse, one's feet stepping gingerly to avoid snakes. They put their children to work at age five, making them fetch things for the adults and older children as they worked. In their daily lives nothing came easily, or was taken for granted, and I am convinced that as a boy Uncle Will was mightily influenced by Booker T. Washington's famous program of self-reliance and his "philosophy of the toothbrush" (cleanliness and meticulous care in all things personal and professional). That, and perhaps Thoreau's challenging boast in *Walden*: "I have as many trades as fingers."

Like many black people who migrated to the north after World War I, he traveled to Chicago and settled in Evanston, a quiet suburb, bringing with him nothing more



Charles Johnson, a 1998 MacArthur Fellow, received the National Book Award for his novel, *Middle Passage*, in 1990, and is a 2002 recipient of the Academy Award for Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. He has published three other novels -- *Dreamer* (1998), *Oxherding Tale* (1982), and *Faith and the Good Thing* (1974) -- as well as two story collections, *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* (1986), and *Soulcatcher* (2001).

Among his many books are *King: The Photobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (co-authored with Bob Adelman, 2000), *Africans in America: America's Journey Through Slavery* (co-authored with Patricia Smith, 1998), *Being and Race: Black Writing Since 1970* (1988), *Black Men Speaking* (co-edited with John McCluskey Jr., 1997), and two books of drawings.

Johnson's work has appeared in numerous publications in America and abroad, and has been translated into seven languages; he has received the Lifetime Achievement in the Arts Award from the Corporate Council for the Arts as well as many other awards. In 1999, Indiana University published a "reader" of his work entitled *I Call Myself an Artist: Writings By and About Charles Johnson*. A literary critic, screenwriter, philosopher, international lecturer, and cartoonist with over 1,000 drawings published, he is the S. Wilson and Grace M. Pollock Endowed Professor of English at the University of Washington in Seattle. You may visit his author's homepage at www.previewport.com.

than a strong back, a quick wit, and a burning desire to succeed against staggering racial odds during the era of Jim Crow segregation. In Evanston, he discovered that white milk companies did not deliver to blacks. Always an optimist, a man who preferred hard work and getting his hands dirty to complaining, building to bellyaching, Uncle Will responded to racism by founding the Johnson Dairy Company, an enterprise that did very well, thank you, delivering milk each morning to black Evanstonians until the Great Depression brought his company to an end.

When that business failed, Uncle Will worked on a construction crew until he learned the ropes, then he started his second venture, the Johnson Construction Company, which lasted into the 1970s and was responsible for raising churches (Springfield Baptist Church), apartment buildings, and residences all over the North Shore area -- places where today, long after my great-uncle's death in 1989 at the age of 97, people still live and worship their god. In fact, once this second business took off, he was able to promise his brothers in the South jobs for their sons and daughters if they came north. My father accepted his offer, and met my mother shortly after relocating to Evanston, which began the chain of causation that leads 54 years later to this meditation on how being an American has shaped my life as a novelist, short story writer, literary critic, philosopher, college professor, and professional cartoonist. (For example, my great-uncle is portrayed in Chapter 7 of my last novel *Dreamer* as the fictitious, black contractor Robert Jackson, whose architectural triumphs are inescapable in Evanston.)

Put simply, I grew up in a town where every day I saw or entered buildings that were produced by the ingenuity, sweat, and resourcefulness of my great-uncle's all-black construction crew, which once employed my father and uncles. And so, as a child, I never doubted -- not *once* -- the crucial role my people have played since the 17th century colonies in the building of America on *all* levels -- the physical, cultural, economic, and political. (On my mother's side, I can trace our family back to Jeff Peters, a New Orleans coachman born around 1812.) Growing up in Evanston, and attending schools integrated since the 1930s, I knew -- thanks to my parents, elders, and teachers -- that American democracy was a "work-in-progress," as well as an invitation to struggle (as I believe Benjamin Franklin once phrased it): an open-ended experiment in freedom which, like a torch, was passed from one black generation to the next for its refinement and realization. My elders taught me that racism was atavistic, destined for the trash heap of human evolution, and *beneath* anyone who truly understood the real spirit of America.

As for Will Johnson, well this: I remember him as a bald, dark-skinned, potbellied, suspender-wearing family patriarch (a role my father later assumed) who had a pew reserved just for him in our A.M.E. church (he tithed heavily), watched the evening news on his black-and-white TV as if it was the oracle of Delphi (every victory during the Civil Rights Movement made him cheer the progress blacks were making in the

1950s and early '60s), and loved to see his brother's kids and his great-nephews and nieces come over for dinner in the two-story apartment building he had designed and built himself (he lived, naturally, on the top floor; he rented the first floor to a beauty parlor and barber shop, and he had his office, filled with maps, blueprints, and mysterious [to me] surveying equipment, in the basement). I remember him once singing to me the nifty jingle he created for his milk company. To this day I kick myself for having forgotten it. But I thank whatever powers that be for delivering to me that lonely milk bottle, which was sealed inside the wall of a building in downtown Evanston in the '30s (whoever had it *didn't* "wash and return"). A white photographer who collected curios discovered it when the building was being remodeled in 1975; he kept it and ultimately returned it to me as a gift in 1994 in exchange for a signed copy of my novel *Middle Passage* after I gave a commencement address at Northwestern University (they first asked President Clinton, but when he didn't reply, they asked me), one covered by the photographer, who when I mentioned my great-uncle, thought to himself, "Say, I *have* that bottle at home!"

Whenever I walk through my living room, passing Uncle Will's milk bottle, I can hear the urgency that entered his voice when he counseled his great-nephews and nieces to, "Get an education. That's the most important thing you can do. Lacking that is the only thing that slowed me down." He understood -- and made *us* see through his personal example -- that while black people had endured often mind-numbing oppression, America was founded on principles, ideals, and documents (the Declaration of Independence and Constitution) that forced it to be forever self-correcting. That, he knew, was the ground that nurtured black Americans. The opportunities denied him would be there for us, he said. But *only* if we were educated and hard-working.

His vision of America, I later learned, is shared by most, if not all, the recent African, Russian, and Asian immigrants to this country that I've been privileged to meet and converse with. I did not fully appreciate the way foreigners view the positive features of American life, or see that it echoed the beliefs of my own family, until I went away to college and met a journalism major, a Ghanaian student named Fortunata Massa, who in the late 1960s said to me, "The thing I like most about America is that no matter what you want to learn, there is someone here who can teach it to you." With those words my African friend summed up nicely the life of this native son. (And well might he have added other virtues of American life, such as this nation's support for research that leads to almost weekly discoveries in science and technological innovations; a political system the rest of the world admires; and a healthy promotion of competition that urges us always to be the best we can be.)

In elementary school my talent was for drawing. Writing I did for fun. I've kept a diary, then a journal since I was 12; and I published my first two short stories in

1965 in my high school newspaper's literary supplement. But it was drawing that fired my imagination and brought the greatest praise from my teachers. At age 14, I declared to my parents that I intended to be a cartoonist and illustrator, a fact that alarmed my father, who was concerned that this impractical decision might ruin my financial future. In his gravest voice, he told me, "Chuck, they don't let black people *do* that." I knew, of course, that he was wrong. My father only had a fifth-grade education (unlike my mother, who finished high school and was a voracious reader who belonged to three book clubs) so he knew nothing of black artists like the great political cartoonist Ollie Harrington, E. Simms Campbell whose work appeared in *Esquire* and *Playboy*, Morrie Turner, or George Herriman, the creator of *Krazy Kat*. (Few people, in fact, knew Herriman was black because all his life he passed for white.) My father's words, conditioned by his Jim Crow childhood, prompted me to fire off a letter to a New York cartoonist I'd read about in *Writer's Digest*, Lawrence Lariar. He was the cartoon editor of *Parade* magazine in the 1960s, a former Disney studio "story man," editor of the annual *Best Cartoons of the Year*, and the author of more than 100 books, some of them best-selling mystery novels. I told him what my father said. Within a week Lariar mailed me a spirited reply: "Your father is *wrong*. You can do whatever you want with your life. All you need is a good teacher." To shorten a long story, Lawrence Lariar, a liberal Jewish man (he changed his last name in the '40s) who frequently infuriated his neighbors by inviting black artists to his Long Island home, where he instructed them, became my teacher. (My dad, after seeing Lariar's letter, backed off and paid for my lessons.) Two years later I was publishing illustrations for the catalog of a Chicago company that sold magic tricks, and I won two awards in a national competition, sponsored by a journalism organization, for high school cartoonists. Over the next seven years, between 1965 and 1972, I published over 1,000 cartoons and illustrations; two books of comic art, *Black Humor* (1970) and *Half-Past Nation Time* (1972); and while earning a bachelor's degree in journalism at Southern Illinois University, I created, hosted, and co-produced an early, nationally televised PBS series called "Charlie's Pad" (1970) on which I taught others how to draw -- the series ran on public TV stations around the country and Canada for about a decade. The best of this juvenalia has been anthologized, and can be seen in Paul Mandelbaum's *First Words: Earliest Writing From Favorite Contemporary Authors* (1993), Tonya Bolden's *Tell All the Children Our Story* (2001), and in John McNally's *Humor Me: An Anthology of Humor by Writers of Color* (2002).

The insight of Fortunata Massa and my great-uncle was proven again when, in 1970, I began seriously writing novels, producing six in two years before I decided I needed to find a good teacher, one who would understand my desire to explore and expand the 20th century tradition of American philosophical fiction. As luck would have it, as I was finishing a master's degree in philosophy and starting my seventh novel, *Faith and the Good Thing*, the late novelist and writing teacher John Gardner,

himself a philosophical writer, became my mentor, providing me with brilliant literary guidance and friendship from 1972 until his death in a motorcycle accident ten years later. As a teacher for 26 years, I know -- as I know nothing else -- that since the 1960s the availability of knowledge is the single greatest feature of American democracy, one that empowers and liberates its citizens.

It is a gift I have never taken for granted, not after promising my great-uncle that, yes sir, I would "get an education." I relied on this virtue of Yankee life when in 1967 I began training in the Chinese martial arts at a *kwoon* in Chicago, then at other schools in New York, San Francisco, Seattle, and co-directed with a friend our own Choy Li Fut kung-fu studio for ten years; when I earned a doctorate in philosophy at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, devoting my dissertation, *Being and Race: Black Writing Since 1970*, to the creation of a phenomenological aesthetic for black fiction; and, finally, when -- after receiving a MacArthur fellowship four years ago -- I decided to deepen my life's long devotion to Buddhism by learning Sanskrit, not at a university but instead by studying the holy texts of Hinduism and Advaita Vedanta in the original Devanagari script with a Vedic priest who lives in Portland, Oregon, and offers private instruction. As Fortunata put it, *whatever* you want to learn, there is someone in America who can teach it to you. Yet with this freedom comes a footnote: Because we enjoy such liberty, we are obliged all our lives to give in even greater measure to others.

So I've always seen my American life as an adventure of learning and growth and service. In this country no individual or group, white or black, could tell me not to dream. Or censor me. Or prevent me from laboring until those dreams of artistic creation and self-improvement became reality. Some tried, of course, but in America I knew that our passions define our possibilities. Sometimes when I'm working late at night, and walk from my second-floor study downstairs to the kitchen for a fresh cup of tea, I see his milk bottle on an end-table, and I try to imagine how Will Johnson must have looked, early in the morning before sunrise, carrying clinking bottles like this down empty, quiet streets from one Negro family's doorstep to another, hustling to get ahead, to carve out a place for himself and his loved ones against the backdrop of the New Deal and a world careening toward war. I wonder how tightly the dreams of this tall, handsome, industrious black man were tied to these tiny pint containers. Did other black men tell him he was foolish to try competing with the white milk companies? Did he stay up nights wondering, like any entrepreneur (or artist), if he might fall on his face with nothing to show for his sweat and sacrifices except spilled milk? If so, then that was just all right. For America guaranteed that he would have the chance to dream again.

On Being an American Writer

by **Bharati Mukherjee**



Bharati Mukherjee, author and professor of English at the University of California, Berkeley, is well known both as a writer of fiction and as a social commentator. Her most recent novel is *Desirable Daughter* (Hyperion, 2002). Her other novels are *The Holder of the World* (1993), *Jasmine* (1989), *Wife* (1975), and *The Tiger's Daughter* (1971). Her short stories are to be found in *The Middleman and Other Stories* (1988), and in *Darkness* (1985). Nonfiction includes *The Sorrow and the Terror: The Haunting Legacy of the Air India Tragedy*, with Clark Blaise (1987), and *Days and Nights in Calcutta*, with Clark Blaise (1986).

Mukherjee earned a Ph.D. in English and comparative literature from the University of Iowa in 1969. In the '70s, she taught at McGill University, Montreal, Canada. She moved to the United States in 1980, taught at various colleges, and has been teaching at the University of California, Berkeley, since 1989. Much of her writing chronicles various facets of the immigrant experience.

Born in 1940 in Calcutta, India, to a professional family, Mukherjee received a classical education, as she writes in the essay below, in the British tradition. Between 1948 and 1951, she lived with her family in England. She graduated from the University of Calcutta in 1959, and received a Master's Degree in English and Ancient Indian Culture in 1961. A visit to the University of Iowa in 1961 to attend the Writer's Workshop changed her life and focused her intently on what she

I published my first short story when I was a teenager in Calcutta. It concerned Napoleon's final days on St. Helena. That story was followed by Marie Antoinette awaiting the guillotine, then others featuring assorted figures from Roman history. Those first "gleanings" were testimonies to the inflexible standards of British schooling for girls from "elite" families attending an Irish convent school. The Overseas Cambridge curricula transcended borders and continents; we could have been in Hong Kong, Johannesburg, Adelaide, or Port-of-Spain -- wherever local standards were considered slack or non-existent -- and turned out the same.

had dreamed of becoming: a professional writer. Mukherjee had planned to return to India; however, while at Iowa she met and married Clark Blaise, the Canadian/American writer, a decision that guaranteed that, thereafter, her life would be part of two worlds. One critic writes: "Mukherjee has established herself as a powerful member of the American literary scene, one whose most memorable works reflect her pride in her Indian heritage, but also her celebration of embracing America."

The whole point was, Calcutta (or wherever) did not exist. We did not have interesting lives. Our own cultures were vaguely shameful, and certainly not fit subjects for serious literature.

We read Jane Austen, of course, and Virginia Woolf. We became masters of Victorian literature and some of us had much of Shakespeare down by heart. For recreation, we read the Russians and French, and for guilty pleasures we dipped into the lending-library fiction favored by our mothers. Think Monica Dickens and Daphne du Maurier. "American literature" was an oxymoron. Americans were the ultimate aliens, too busy churning out movies to bother much with books.

Then, perhaps inevitably, one book, *Dubliners*, broke through. This was a different kind of appeal, something urgent and disturbing. A door had opened, and I had to enter. Writing (unlike reading) was not just safe and decorative. Suddenly, I wanted to do for Calcutta what Joyce had done for Dublin. My Calcutta seethed with hypocrisy and suppressed misery. Out with Napoleon, in with Narendra.

I mention these long-ago embarrassments only to make the point that I considered myself a writer from an early age. I don't doubt that I would have been a writer if I had married the "suitable boy" selected by my father and had never left India. The kind of writer I became, however, has more to do with coming to America and the Writers Workshop at the University of Iowa, marrying a fellow student (an America-born Canadian) and moving with him to Canada for 14 years. We returned to the United States when we were both 40 years of age.

My Iowa thesis was titled "The Shattered Mirror," every story an "Araby"-inspired study of Calcutta disenchantment, carefully arranged as to epiphanies. One of them was published in an American quarterly, and merited a letter of inquiry from a Boston publisher. By then, I had a baby and a full load of doctoral classes. As soon I got the degree, I told the editor, I would write her a novel. What followed was *The Tiger's Daughter*, brought out by Houghton-Mifflin in 1972. I thought of it then as the

beginning of my American writing career, but in truth it was the end of that long-nurtured Indian "project."

Because of American visa restrictions, there were very few Indians in America in 1961 when I'd arrived as a student, and because of Indian government restrictions on foreign exchange, there were practically no Indian women in the arts. As hard as it might be to imagine today, there was no Indian community, no models, no readers, and no editors ready to receive work from an Indian immigrant writer. A dozen years later, my second agent told me I had no future as a writer if I insisted on writing about downscale immigration in New Jersey and not upper-class exotica in Calcutta.

That's the reason, perhaps, that I have clung so fiercely to the notion of my un-hyphenated, mainstream place in American writing. Perhaps it's too great a stretch for critics and reviewers to see me, and writers like me, as anything other than "Indian," "Indo-American," or "Asian." I'm far more impatient with hostility from Indian and India-born American scholars in "post-colonial" disciplines who instinctively disparage anything with an American provenance. (Their mantra seems to be that if America or the West in general set themselves up as the pinnacle in social and political evolution, then it is the duty of all children of colonialism to oppose them "asymmetrically," that is, in any way they can.) The nuns in my old Calcutta convent-school were equally dismissive and asymmetrical, without benefit of post-Marxist theory.

My second novel, *Wife* (Houghton-Mifflin, 1975), was written while I was on sabbatical leave in Calcutta. I was then a Canadian citizen living in Montreal, a professor at McGill University, but also writing my half of a journal, *Days and Nights in Calcutta* (Doubleday, 1977) with my husband, Clark Blaise. We spent 1974-75 living inside my joint family in Calcutta, surrounded by all my relatives, speaking my native language for the first time in a dozen years -- and I came to a profound conclusion. I was no longer Indian in mind or spirit.

The weight of tradition, even the multifarious tyrannies of a loving family, was no longer tolerable to me. In endless conversations with my old school friends, my parents and sisters, I realized that I had slipped a cog or two. It became clear to me -- another door opening -- that I was an immigrant writer in the tradition of other, older (European) immigrant groups. I had learned more from Henry Roth (*Call It Sleep*) and the novels and stories of Bernard Malamud than from any Indian writer. And more to the point (since Canada had begun to react against the sudden presence of so many Indians in its midst), I valued the civil rights protections of the American Constitution over the lack of such guarantees at that time in Canada and the U.K.. We moved to the United States in 1980.

Although becoming an American has come at a cost (my husband and I have not been able to teach in the same city at the same time with anything like comparable jobs, as we had in Montreal), becoming an American writer has finally granted me the voice and authority to speak from a community, and for an emerging consciousness. During the 14 years I'd spent in Canada, a viable, even thriving, Indian community had arrived in the United States. In 1985, I published my first book of stories, *Darkness* (Viking-Penguin), a series of portraits of Indians-in-transition between the pride of cultural retention (exile/expatriation), and the fear of cultural surrender (immigration). In that book, I stumbled upon my true subject matter, my personal "great theme": transformation, in all its grotesque glory. Immigration often involves dislocation and social demotion. Immigrants carry the bruises, and often the scars, from missed signals and misread signs. They've traded their certain place (sometimes humble, sometimes exalted) in a fixed society for a crazy chance at something elusive called personal happiness. I don't say they'll find it; it's enough that they try.

In that spirit, I wrote a second volume of stories, *The Middleman* (Grove, 1988) and a novel, *Jasmine* (Grove-Weidenfeld, 1989). By the time of that second volume of stories and the novel that followed it, the theme of "transformation" had freed me to write from inside disparate characters and backgrounds. My concerns were now with a two-way transformation, the sometimes painful recognition on the part of America's native sons and daughters that their identity had been changed by these new "exotic" immigrants, as much as American influence had wrought unpredictable transformations upon its latest newcomers from the subcontinent, the Middle East, Latin America, the Philippines, and southeast Asia.

My three novels of the past decade, *The Holder of the World* (Knopf, 1993), *Leave It to Me* (Knopf, 1997) and *Desirable Daughters* (Hyperion, 2002) take up questions that seem to me a logical continuation of the same thematic concern. Now that a highly visible "new America" has established itself on this continent, how does it accommodate itself to the deeper rhythms of America, even to an American history that seems, on the surface, to have denied their very existence? The first of those novels is set contemporaneously and in the colonial America of the 1650s, restoring a bit of Mugal tapestry to the prevailing gray of Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*. The second takes up the legacy of Vietnam from the Asian orphan's point of view, and the latest, the unintended consequences of globalization, as it plays out in the hundred-year history of a representative Indian family, both here and in the homeland.

I want to clear the air of unmerited disparagement of American writing, this time not from Irish nuns or Indian intellectuals, but from many well-intentioned indigenous progressives. My defense may sound harsh and open me to misunderstanding. In the 1970s and 80s we heard a lot of criticism from the reading public (the high-minded

sorts who routinely endorse Nobel Prize selections) that American writers -- with a few obvious exceptions -- have ignored the mammoth horrors of the 20th century.

We, American writers, are criticized for being concerned with little more than agonizing over questions of identity. And when our novels do address forms of suffering, we are accused of acting out oppression-envy. Authors and readers from countries where a book can result in the author's imprisonment or exile demand how the over-privileged can speak with authority on poverty, injustice, and corruption. What do American writers know of oppression from tradition, from family, religion, the state, and foreign invasion? Americans can settle injustice in a lawsuit. We can escape domestic brutality with a divorce. We can vote the rascals out of office. We can buy state-of-the-art medication to relieve our anxieties and enhance our self-worth.

Even the partially sympathetic critic from Latin America or post-colonial countries -- the critic who doesn't expect a Marquez or a Solzhenitsyn to pop up from our shopping malls, who doesn't scorn the U.S. publishing industry's obsession with mega-dollar advances and circus-like book tours -- is heard asking, "America, where are your concerned writers with stricken conscience?" Aren't you ashamed that you have no equivalents of post-War Germans like Grass and B? white South Africans like Gordimer and Coetzee, Israelis like Grossman and Oz, and those marvelous Australians like Malouf and Keneally? (The short answer is we have many, and for the most part, the weight of social and historic injustice has fallen upon them personally, and asymmetrically. The longer answer is, look under the bland, well-tended surface. The mini-acreage of disenchantment might hide a mother-lode of injustice.)

In other words, what have you, as a writer, done for societies lacking democratic institutions and traditions, a loyal opposition, a free press and independent judiciary and an honest civil service? As a fiction writer, what responsibilities do you feel for countries that have been oppressed by colonial powers, war, pestilence, religious and tribal intolerance, corrupt police, judges, politicians and journalists, and for societies that are overcrowded, undereducated, unsanitary, and psychologically wounded? The answer to that is: very little. As an essayist, as a concerned citizen, as a world-traveler, I'm well aware of my country's influence in the world for good and evil. I acknowledge the long history of American involvement and encouragement of global forces that often result in widespread devastation (or silence and active discouragement which have the same effect), and try to speak, act and vote accordingly. In countries that have no reliable instruments of redress, writers are often pressed into service as the first witness, or last resort. But in liberal democracies with well-established institutions, fiction writers can afford a modicum of vigilant trust, freeing themselves to celebrate the impacted glories of individual consciousness. That's why Joyce and Proust and Woolf and Borges and Nabokov

never got the Nobel Prize. Probably it's why Vargas Llosa and Kundera and Oates and Updike and Roth will wait in vain.

It's not that we're navel-gazing cowards or lacking in conscience; writers are, with some exceptions, a like-minded tribe. On the international level, I've found serious writers to be universally skeptical of authority, ironic, and sympathetic to the lost and baffled. They feast on incongruity and absurdity, they're quick to appreciate another's work and to recognize the different forces that shape it. Nadine Gordimer once remarked she'd wanted to write comedies of manner -- it's the oppressive South African situation that made it impossible. The Bengali filmmaker, Satyajit Ray, wanted to make fantasies, even science-fiction films, but Calcutta with all its problems and all its charms would not permit it. The quest for relevance and engagement takes from a writer as least as much as it gives.

About the time I arrived in the United States 40 years ago as a graduate student at the University of Iowa, the precocious Philip Roth published his celebrated essay, "Writing American Fiction." The contents of that essay remain pertinent, for in it he laid out the dominant concerns of a new generation of American writers: How does the private imagination compete with the frivolity, the prodigious absurdity, vulgarity, violence, and exuberant replicability of American culture? Its sheer weirdness threatens to mock any attempt at inventing it. And here we have a major difference between American fiction and nearly everyone else's: Nothing here is a given, nor is it permanent; everything is mutable, challengeable. There is no history, there are no barriers, no taboos, no fatwa can be launched, and no secret police will knock on your door. (Or, anticipating the objections those colonial theorists will raise to such blanket assertions -- if they knock on your door, and no one says they haven't in the past and will try it again -- you at least have means of redress.)

Many writers in the world suffer an excess of givens, inherited realities of unforgiving consequence, of narrow possibilities and constricted horizons. It enriches their fiction, lengthens the odds, and raises the stakes. American writers express bafflement in a wilderness of freedom, a vast realm of spontaneous improvisation where the chances are very good that your best stab will not measure up to the next news squib on CNN. What mad satirist thought up the 2000 election in which a poorly designed ballot played a pivotal role in determining the next American president? Is such a comic turn even conceivable anywhere else in the world? And what would have been its bloody consequence?

American fiction is written in a context of relative innocence, a reality that is both limiting and liberating. If American fiction has relevance in the world it is for the odd innocence it celebrates. And this is particularly true of Indian-immigrant fiction, since many of us arrived after the cultural and political wars of the '60s and never experienced the civil rights battles or the Vietnam resistance. We are the

beneficiaries of much suffering and heroism, and we've not been called on to pay our dues. Until we do, our innocence is provisional, our freedom is still qualified.

I have been fortunate that my writing-life has corresponded with the arrival of others like me -- and that I was here just a little earlier, in time to greet them. I began my career writing in the comic mode -- a reflection of my inheritance from the norms of Indo-British schooling -- because the early years of Indian life on this continent seemed fresh and exuberant, greedy, ambitious, loving, and awkward. I seemed to be witnessing a blessed interval, the generation or two in the life of an immigrant community, before memories of the Old World entirely vanish, and with them, the codes and norms that have regulated and restricted self-expression for thousands of years. I know when it changed for me. In 1985, an Air India flight from Toronto and Montreal carrying 329 passengers and crew was bombed from the skies 110 miles off the coast of Ireland. Until the bombing of the World Trade Center, it was bloodiest terrorist act of the modern era; it is still the deadliest single air-assault. Nearly all of the victims were Canadians of Indian origin. So were the Khalistani (Sikh-secessionist) perpetrators. We knew some of the victims, the majority of whom were mothers and children heading home for the summer. The cream of a generation, the Canadian first-born, perished in that crash. Indian immigrants, the low-crime, high-achievement "model minority," were the first in the recent wave of modern brutality to suffer a massive act of terrorism on this continent.

My husband and I wrote an investigation of the tragedy, *The Sorrow and the Terror* (Viking-Penguin 1987), and in the process of interviewing the bereaved, the police and lawyers, even the killers and their supporters, my understanding of the stakes in immigration changed forever. It's not just comic, not just literary; it's a big story and one that Americans will be writing for decades to come.

This Crutch That I Love

by **Naomi Shihab Nye**

A Writer's Life, Past and Present

I.

In the center of the United States, in the middle of the 20th century, many people had come from somewhere else, and were figuring out how to put things together.

The French Canadians had traveled south to St. Louis in a large, rattling car filled with children and sweaters. The friendly Italian family had planted small, rounded trees in their yard. They told newcomers where to buy the best vegetables and seeds. On a cracked street without sidewalks, families set up humble households, unpacked their spoons and sewing machines, mingling outside before sunset. Everything felt softly dreamy right before dark, the air full of accents, and fragrances. The organic farmers up the street described their grandparents, immigrants from Germany, who had dreamed of owning land in the New World.

I looked around. Was this new? Everything always felt old to me.

I started writing poems at age six to see what was already there. Savory accents and blends.

Where were the Indians? Someone was always missing. I felt them in the stones and trees, the deep river called Mississippi, an Indian name, tumbling silently past.

My Palestinian father had journeyed to the United States on a ship in 1951, throwing his faded trousers from Jericho into the water just before the boat docked in New York City. If he was starting a new life, why did he need old pants? A university scholarship student, he'd requested a school "in the middle of America," thinking the location would give him easy access to everywhere. Little did he realize how big the country was. It would be many years before he saw California.



Naomi Shihab Nye grew up in St. Louis and Jerusalem and currently lives in San Antonio, Texas with her husband, photographer Michael Nye, and their son. A graduate of Trinity University, her recent books include *19 Varieties of Gazelle*, *Come with Me: Poems for a Journey*, and *Fuel* (poems); and *Habibi* (a novel for teens that won 6 Best Books awards). Daughter of a Palestinian father and an American mother, she has edited six prize-winning anthologies of poetry for young readers, including *This Same Sky*, *The Tree is Older than You Are*, *The Space Between our Footsteps: Poems & Paintings from the Middle East*, *What Have You Lost?* and *Salting the Ocean*. She has worked as a visiting writer in schools and communities for 28 years, traveling abroad numerous times for the Arts America program of the former United States Information Agency. A recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship and a Library of Congress Witter Bynner Fellowship, she is currently a member of the National Council of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

He had no idea he would marry an American (of German/Swiss descent) when he arrived. The United States was full of surprises.

Although he would miss his homeland deeply and always be dreaming of it, he dove into his new life with enthusiasm. He told funny folk tales from the Middle East and sang in Arabic. We ate *hummus* while the neighborhood ate hamburgers and spaghetti. My father loved the United States for its optimism, and for welcoming him as it had welcomed millions of immigrants before him.

Everything was possible in the United States -- this was not just a rumor, it was *true*. He might not grow rich overnight, but he could sell insurance, import colorful gifts from around the world, start little stores, become a journalist. He could do *anything*. This was the great shared pleasure of the land and he held it in his heart and guarded its trust. He stood up for the United States and was proud to become a citizen, even though he had not planned to become a citizen when he first came over. After a while, a very quick while, the United States got into your skin and your blood, it became part of your own sweet melody and history, and you wanted to belong to it, the way it let so much belong to you.

My mother, who had been raised in an American home with a strict Lutheran father, and a shy, repressed mother, was ready to taste the flavors of a wider world herself -- New Recipes, New Ideas! She went to art school and studied with some of the great artists of the 20th century. She took us to Quaker meetings and the Vedanta Society where we loved Swami Satprakashananda, eating rice pudding with him on his birthday for years. We attended an inclusive, modern church called Unity that said every path was an honorable path. My father visited these halls of worship with us, though he had been raised Muslim.

My parents agreed on the most important issues -- there were many paths to truth. There were, in fact, many truths. Why pretend otherwise? No way was the only way. Anyone who said a single religion or culture was the only "right one" was delusional and ridiculous. The days of tribalism and righteous exclusiveness were over, obsolete. They *had* to be over. All the world's citizens were mixing themselves together by now, in order to survive reasonably. Along the way, we would learn to respect everyone else, *especially* the people who weren't just like us. It was obvious, essential.

Though integration was still under way in the United States, many people had known for a long time that we were all connected. That you couldn't say "equal rights" and "due process" and not mean everybody. It just took the official systems longer to catch up. I would return to that modest neighborhood many times over the years to find it TRULY mixed by now, black and white families living side-by-side the way I'd wished it was when I was little too.

It was always hard to understand where people drew their lines.

Perhaps I started writing simply to see *where we were* -- my beautiful group of passionate characters -- needing, hoping, planting, waiting -- in their central plot in their central city. Central was even the name of the school we attended. It stands to this day, red brick solemnity, ancient and proud. George Washington's solemn face still hangs in the hallway. I would stare into his eyes and wonder. *Are you happy with your land?*

What did it mean to be in the middle of everything? I told myself, *this is only one country, this is not the world! Stop thinking you are so important!*

But the details of every minor day felt crucial and precious to me in their sweet brevity. Tiny things other people overlooked seemed like treasures and clues. I wrote them down, so I would not forget them. I did not begin writing because I imagined "a future career."

No one ever said to me, *You cannot say that thing. You cannot say that thing that way.*

I wrote with yellow pencils on tablets of paper, the backs of paper sacks. Sometimes I shared poems with other people. A teacher told us, "Your voice will be your greatest tool," and I believed her. I went to school and came home to find words waiting for me. Soon I would begin writing in the margins of workbooks, on the edges of mathematics papers. I played with words, stacking and rearranging them. Poetry was beautiful to me because of all the space around it. Writing was a way to have an anchor, to see what held you down.

In the neighborhood, that savory brew of a place, that fragrant mixture of histories, people wished each other well, trading news, imagining good things would happen in days to come. No one had much money, but everyone had hope. And I had the library, which was better than a trunk full of gold. Rabindranath Tagore, the great Bengali poet, had written about placing his words in a small boat, sending them floating down a stream, wondering if anyone in some "far place" might read them and know who he was.

"I do!" I shouted back across the sea. "I know you and I like you! I am your far-away friend!"

I shouted the same response to Margaret Wise Brown, Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman, Carl Sandburg, Langston Hughes, William Blake, Louisa May Alcott, the Japanese poet Basho. The list would grow and grow. I was always searching hungrily for voices from over the ocean, those mysterious and important worlds we heard

about. My horizon through reading felt much wider than the spatial horizon. What it meant to discover magazines that invited writing by children was -- someone you don't know is listening out there. If they print your poem, your world will grow beyond anything you can see.

But the writing itself was the power, the daily declaration of independence, saying, I am part of all this magnificent diversity and intricate texture, but I am *not* this. I am more than this. *So are you*. Everything was possible on the page.

I would stand outside the circle to see what went on. I would be the onlooker, documentarian of the miniature and forgotten. What was said and lost would linger in my ears.

Writing was a way to slow time down, to claim a moment and a space on the earth, to look INTO things, not just at them. If we only looked at outer surfaces of situations, we could easily feel separate from others. Contemplating deeper meanings or implications, the metaphorical possibilities of any scene, one might find endless shining and connected cords.

The details I recorded did not have to be significant or dramatic -- they might be the secret hide-away between pine trees, the cedar scent of my grandmother's closet, the sad, forgotten alleyways, my friend's mother in a wheelchair who talked to me about bravery, the blossoming redbud trees, the buckets of cherries we baked into pies, the teacher who loved her students for more than 50 years and told us to never stop believing in our voices, the boy in the next house who was told, when he was seven, he would not grow. We were there when his parents announced this to the neighborhood. *He will not grow*. He was standing right with us when they said this and I saw the depth of his sorrowful eyes.

Where would you put such information if you did not write?

In your memory, to be sure, but I wanted to be able to go back to it, think about its resonances, hold it in my hands, look at it.

I needed to find out more about the hard things: unfulfilled longing, depression, disappointment, fear, conflict.

If writing was a crutch, I needed help walking.

II.

It is so long since I was a child, but I still feel closer to children than to adults. What is it about that early way of seeing that continues to guide us, even when our eyes

are tired, even when we have heard enough bad news to make us lie down and curl up into a ball?

Have people lived up to their best dreams of what human beings could be? Have we helped one another enough? How often do we really listen to others? Are we always too interested in giving our own opinions, even while others are speaking? Does greed guide too many decisions?

Shouldn't we discover at least one new voice every week?

American writers travel around the United States a lot. We travel around other countries too, talking, listening, discovering writers we need to know more about. Who would ever have thought writers would be such nomads? We are invited to speak to students, give speeches, attend conferences.

I visit a wonderful school in Bahrain where a little girl writes me the best letter I've received in a long time. She says, "What is hard for you?" It takes me almost a whole day to answer her.

An unwillingness to communicate feels hard. We must keep encouraging one another to use our voices in hard situations. If people believed more in the Power of Voice, would we have so much violence in the world?

American writers feel lucky that anyone wants to listen to us -- we have such a short history, after all. We feel lucky to sit around with our pencils and papers, staring and mulling. This was always my best dream for the future. My dream did not have computers in it, but those too have become our allies.

To this day, no one has ever said to me, *You cannot say that thing*. They may have said, *Thank you, but we do not wish to publish this thing, or, This thing could certainly be improved upon*, but they have not said, *You cannot say it*.

Freedom of speech is the greatest gift America has given us all and I will treasure it forever and continue to remind people about it because sometimes if you have had it forever, you don't realize you have it.

We feel responsibilities to speak for ourselves and for communities we care about. Translation has opened so many worlds between countries -- it is our privilege and responsibility to read each other.

Everywhere is central.

We must remember that and live accordingly.

In recent years many American writers have written or edited books about cultures that were not their own to begin with. Living in a primarily Latino neighborhood in downtown San Antonio, Texas, gave me a culture that was not mine by blood, but one I care greatly about. Perhaps I had to live in a Latino city to learn what it really meant to be Arab-American -- how precious the spectrum of flavors, how many ways they intersect and blend.

Recently, an African-American journalist ended his newspaper column about a series of local Korean tragedies by saying, "We must remember: we are all Korean."

A scene, from a few weeks ago.

Setting: The second Skagit River Poetry Festival, La Conner, Washington, an hour and a half north of Seattle, along the shining watery channels leading out to the islands called San Juan, and the traveling whales.

The Swinomish tribal members (Native Americans -- the so-called American Indians I was always looking for as a child) are hauling large dry logs to the giant fires in their sacred smoke-house where hundreds of people sit on wooden bleachers to listen to poetry readings.

Tonight, the Native American tribe has barbecued fresh local salmon, cooked up large pots of beans, and welcomed hundreds of people to dinner. We have eaten together at long tables in a meeting house across the road.

Some drumming and chanting opens the evening reading. People with asthma sit near the door so they won't inhale too much smoke. A Swinomish elder in her 80s, wearing a shawl, rises and tells a story to welcome us.

There is Pat Mora (Latina), Li-Young Lee (Chinese-American), Edward Hirsch (Jewish-American), Joy Harjo (Native American), Kurtis Lamkin (African-American, who plays native African instruments when he speaks his poems), Colleen McElroy (African-American), Madeline DeFrees (a nun for more than 30 years before leaving her order), and the witty Thomas Lux and David Lee, who writes in a colloquial small-town vernacular. This festival feels like a reunion, since we have all met before and read one another's work and value the power of communication above everything else.

I look around the giant smoky space at poets and listeners of all ages and think, *Incredible*. Every voice is welcomed. No one says, Use my style. I think, *This is my second family. The family that adopted me*. The world of words that helped me make a map of this mysterious living. How various we are in our eccentric, multi-colored land, our trails dotting so many landscapes, cultures and histories up till now.

If I had to choose one word to describe this world, it would be *acceptance*.

In a family of voices this wide, no one can be excluded. Do you hear me? The little boats are traveling out to you.

A Provincial Sense of Time

by **Robert Pinsky**

I grew up in a town where one of my grandfathers had a well-known bar -- across from City Hall, it was the place where the politicians and policemen drank. When I was ten years old the chief of the Long Branch police was a man who had been one of my grandfather's employees in the 1920s, when the liquor business was illegal. My other grandfather washed the windows for most of the stores in Long Branch, New Jersey. My father, an optician, was a noted local athlete, voted Best-Looking Boy in his class at Long Branch High School, where he and my mother met when they were students there, as were my aunts and uncles and cousins as well as my brother and sister and me.

In such a place, there are stories. The stories are as if in the air -- did it happen to your father or to someone he heard of, did it happen in his generation or another? It is as if the stories are alive, and the people temporary containers, which is to say it is like a form of possession by the dead. Pleasure Bay is a section of Long Branch, near the lower-middle-class street on which my father and I both lived as children (the houses are on the same block):

AT PLEASURE BAY

*In the willows along the river at Pleasure Bay
A catbird singing, never the same phrase twice.
Here under the pines a little off the road
In 1927 the Chief of Police
And Mrs. W. killed themselves together,
Sitting in a roadster. Ancient unshaken pilings
And underwater chunks of still-mortared brick
In shapes like bits of puzzle strew the bottom
Where the landing was for Price's Hotel and Theater.
And here's where boats blew two blasts for the keeper
To shunt the iron swing-bridge. He leaned on the gears
Like a skipper in the hut that housed the works
And the bridge moaned and turned on its middle pier
To let them through. In the middle of the summer*



Robert Pinsky teaches in the graduate creative writing program at Boston University. He is poetry editor for the online magazine *Slate*, and he reads poems as a contributor to public television's *The Newshour with Jim Lehrer*.

Jersey Rain, Pinsky's most recent book of poems, was published by Farrar, Straus & Giroux in 2000. Another volume of his poetry, *The Figured Wheel: New and Collected Poems 1966-1996* was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize and received both the Lenore Marshall Award and the Ambassador Book Award of the English Speaking Union. His other awards include the Shelley Memorial Award, the William Carlos Williams Prize and the Los Angeles Times Book Award as well as the Howard Morton Landon Translation Prize for his best-selling translation *The Inferno of Dante*. He is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

Pinsky is co-editor of *Americans' Favorite Poems* and the more recent *Poems to Read*, both anthologies that grew out of his Favorite Poem Project. Among his prose works are *The Sounds of Poetry: A Brief Guide*, and his recent *Democracy, Culture and the Voice of Poetry*.

During Pinsky's tenure as poet laureate of the United States, from 1997-2000, he created the Favorite Poem Project to document, promote, and celebrate poetry's place in American culture. In addition to the anthologies, the project has produced 50 video segments showcasing Americans reading and speaking about poems they love and a Web site, www.favoritepoem.org, featuring the videos and a forum for teachers and students.

He lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts, with his wife, Dr. Ellen Pinsky.

*Two or three cars might wait for the iron trusswork
Winching aside, with maybe a child to notice
A name on the stern in black-and-gold on white,
Sandpiper, Patsy Ann, Do Not Disturb,
The Idler. If a boat was running whiskey,
The bridge clanged shut behind it as it passed
And opened up again for the Coast Guard cutter
Slowly as a sundial, and always jammed halfway.
The roadbed whole, but opened like a switch,
The river pulling and coursing between the piers.
Never the same phrase twice, the catbird filling
The humid August evening near the inlet
With borrowed music that he melds and changes.
Dragonflies and sandflies, frogs in the rushes, two bodies
Not moving in the open car among the pines,
A sliver of story. The tenor at Price's Hotel,
In clown costume, unfurls the sorrow gathered
In ruffles at his throat and cuffs, high quavers
That hold like splashes of light on the dark water,
The aria's closing phrases, changed and fading.
And after a gap of quiet, cheers and applause
Audible in the houses across the river,
Some in the audience weeping as if they had melted
Inside the music. Never the same. In Berlin
The daughter of an English lord, in love
With Adolf Hitler, whom she has met. She is taking
Possession of the apartment of a couple,
Elderly well-off Jews. They survive the war
To settle here in the Bay, the old lady
Teaches piano, but the whole world swivels
And gapes at their feet as the girl and a high-up Nazi
Examine the furniture, the glass, the pictures,
The elegant story that was theirs and now
Is a part of hers. A few months later the English
Enter the war and she shoots herself in a park,
An addled, upper-class girl, her life that passes
Into the lives of others or into a place.
The taking of lives? -- the Chief and Mrs. W.
Took theirs to stay together, as local ghosts.
Last flurries of kisses, the revolver's barrel,
Shivers of a story that a child might hear
And half remember, voices in the rushes,*

*A singing in the willows. From across the river,
Faint quavers of music, the same phrase twice and again,
Ranging and building. Over the high new bridge
The flashing of traffic homeward from the racetrack,
With one boat chugging under the arches, outward
Unnoticed through Pleasure Bay to the open sea.
Here's where the people stood to watch the theater
Burn on the water. All that night the fireboats
Kept playing their spouts of water into the blaze.
In the morning, smoking pilasters and beams.
Black smell of char for weeks, the ruin already
Soaking back into the river. After you die
You hover near the ceiling above your body
And watch the mourners awhile. A few days more
You float above the heads of the ones you knew
And watch them through a twilight. As it grows darker
You wander off and find your way to the river
And wade across. On the other side, night air,
Willows, the smell of the river, and a mass
Of sleeping bodies all along the bank,
A kind of singing from among the rushes
Calling you further forward in the dark.
You lie down and embrace one body, the limbs
Heavy with sleep reach eagerly up around you
And you make love until your soul brims up
And burns free out of you and shifts and spills
Down over into that other body, and you
Forget the life you had and begin again
On the same crossing? -- maybe as a child who passes
Through the same place. But never the same way twice.
Here in the daylight, the catbird in the willows,
The new caf 齶 with a terrace and a landing,
Frogs in the cattails where the swing-bridge was? --
Here's where you might have slipped across the water
When you were only a presence, at Pleasure Bay.*

What do I make of the way the historical scale of Nazism drifts in and out of this poem? Can I disclaim the stereotype of Americans as living without the resonance of history, inhabiting the present with a childlike complacency, an unwitting, unreflecting arrogance? I have tended to dwell in and on the past, but that is not exactly a defense: What is more unhistorical than the sentiments of nostalgia?

I hope my poem is about loss, not nostalgia, that the tenor singing an Italian aria, like the ruined pilasters of the theater, suggests an historical dimension of loss. Small things can do that: In Czeslaw Milosz's great poem "Song on Porcelain," a poem of the immediate aftermath of World War II in Poland, millions murdered, every family in mourning and Warsaw in rubble, Milosz writes:

*Of all things broken and lost,
The porcelain troubles me most.*

I remember this poem being hissed once at Berkeley. I think the person who made that noise would have preferred Milosz to say that of all things broken and lost, the dead Jews troubled him most.

But that did not need saying, and that also would lack precisely the historical dimension of the broken porcelain, product of the old Europe that imagined itself civilized, that painted shepherdesses on teacups and that bit and slashed and tore itself apart.

I ask these questions of my own poem, and invoke such an exacting comparison for it, partly in light of a new national concern with a date. In the first weeks after September 11, 2001, a kindly reader of my work suggested to me that some American poet should devise a name for the suicidal attacks that turned 767's into populated weapons, hurtling into the World Trade Center Towers and the Pentagon. But even that early, it was clear that those events already had been given their name. The name is the date, established by an appalled consensus, beyond writerly volition, as it is beyond official decree.

This may be something new for us. European streets and plazas, and South American ones, are named for dates, as ours are not. There are countries where even a month, in phrases like "The October" or "The August," call up an entire manifold tale of public fate, a textured fistful of cataclysm and shame, heroism and grudge.

Aside from the Fourth of July, such naming by date has not provided an American civic shorthand. The bloodstained passages of our Civil War are called by place names: Antietam, Gettysburg, Shiloh, Andersonville. The struggles of our labor movement and civil rights are evoked by the names of protagonists: Sacco and Vanzetti, Rosa Parks, Cheney and Schwerner. November 22 has some force -- and the memorable numerical symmetry of 11/22 -- but that day's significance, which in 1963 seemed to be the loss of large political and cultural hopes, has become something more personal or familial, a crucial unfolding in our national iconography, a matter of symbols more than realities. Only the four digits of 1968, the year of assassinations, of disorders, and a Presidential contest that evoked both tragedy and

farce, may have the enduring emotional force that evokes epic memory from the mere laconic stuff of the calendar. Between 1776 and the present, 1968 comes closest to attaining the status of a word as 1789 and 1848 [a year of revolutions in Europe] and 1914 are words. Yeats's "Easter 1916" does not sound like an American title. Can it be that in the United States we shy away from the monumental shorthand of dates and years from an intuitive national preference for the vague, the untemporal paradise of the nostalgic?

I confront that possibility unhappily. I think of myself as having drunk a little history since childhood. One of my covert vanities has been that I have always had some sense of the past, was born with that sense -- though rudimentary and dreamlike in a way that places me as a child in a car watching the slow turning of the swing bridge, that functional interruption of the linear road as poetry perhaps functionally interrupts the linear conception of time.

My great-grandparents were Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe. Maybe that immigrant story includes an inherent desire to efface dates and specificities. Like Faulkner's savage would-be founders of dynasties, immigrants -- perhaps Jewish immigrants in particular -- sometimes turn their faces away from the past.

For many Americans, our most central moralized history, our most nearly epic story of what in the Renaissance was called "true history," meaning moralized or instructive history, is the story of how in a generation or less it is possible to become American. No small part of the racial divide in our country has to do with the contrast between that story and the story of the African slaves, denied that process for so long that only recently has the hyphenated "African-American" made its way tentatively into our language.

For me as a child, the history of Jewish immigrants, and of other groups as well, was merged with the remarkable history of my town. Let me become for a moment what the Italians call a *campanilista*, a pointer-out of local belltowers and such.

Abraham Lincoln visited the seashore resort of Long Branch, New Jersey. In Long Branch famous 19th-century gamblers endowed fire companies named after themselves, the way tamer eminences endowed colleges. In Long Branch, the sporting figure Diamond Jim Brady entertained Lillian Russell, gliding along the ocean at dusk in an early electric automobile, the crystal passenger compartment illuminated and the chauffeur in darkness, so that the large-bodied, extravagantly draped and tailored lovers could be seen as though in a moving department-store display window. Behind them, a noiseless parade of three spare vehicles in case the main one failed, each with its driver.

On the same promenade, President Grant drove his team of fast horses. To draw the fashionable crowds on the Long Branch boardwalk, Harper's magazine assigned Winslow Homer, whose great painting "Long Branch, New Jersey" hangs in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. When President Garfield was shot one June in a Washington train station by the politicized madman Guiteau, the President was on his way to Long Branch for vacation. Guiteau had stalked him in the Long Branch church now known as "The Church of Six Presidents." After the shooting, Garfield lingered for weeks in the Washington heat, tormented by doctors still ignorant of sepsis, eager for the honor of poking their fingers into Garfield's wounds in search of a missing bullet. The Potomac swamps grew malarial, and to avoid the merciless heat the President on his mattress was carried, past futile muslin sheets soaked in icewater and hung in the White House, to a special railroad car packed with ice and special springs. The car went up the coast to Long Branch, where men worked all night to build a railway spur from the Elberon station to a seaside cottage. People from the hotels brought the workers coffee and sandwiches, and the spur was finished in time for Garfield to be carried, still on the same mattress, from the car to the cottage, where he spent his final weeks comforted by Atlantic breezes.

I could go on. Such are the strands of provincial history for the inveterate *campanilista*. The town's second glorious period was in the first decades of the 20th century, when it was a prosperous getaway spot for middle class families from New York and Philadelphia. Boats from New York delivered passengers for a night of theater and a shore dinner at Price's Hotel. A good number of these visitors were Jewish or Italian, as were the local merchants. There was a raffish note to the place, thanks to the race track I mention in "At Pleasure Bay."

When I was a child, the town had fallen from both its 19th-century glory and the prosperity of the 1920s, in the '50s still clinging to a fading boardwalk of clam-bars, kiddy-rides, wheels of fortune, pinball parlors, and taffy stands. Summer resorts are elegiac most of the year, and a resort with its best days behind it is doubly elegiac. "The town is not what it used to be." I grew up hearing this resigned sentence, a choral sigh, and a sloppy but impressionable quality in my intelligence prevented me from efficiently distinguishing the decline of business from the deaths of presidents.

My grandfather Pinsky's bar, the Broadway Tavern, was on the same block as the Garfield-Grant hotel. The civic, historical stature of the dead presidents for whom the still-elegant hotel was named blended in my mind with the name "Broadway," which seemed to run from Manhattan to the door of the tavern, with its liquorous perfume. Before the bar, in the prosperous '20s, the family business had been the smuggling and distribution of illegal booze. The tales of gangster days interpenetrated with stories of when the Summer White House was in our town.

That vague, misty, and unquantified past seems the contrary of dates. But after all dates, too, are notoriously sentimentalized, politically exploited, distorted, spun out into fabrics like pink sugar or concentrated into murderous weapons. The tale of the lovers, the provincial Paolo and Francesca in their convertible, the tale of the couple who survive, the names of the boats, the aria, the theater on the water -- all are historical, all come down from dark or brilliant sources upriver from us, all are rooted in our desires and pleasures as well as in what William Shakespeare calls "death's dateless night."