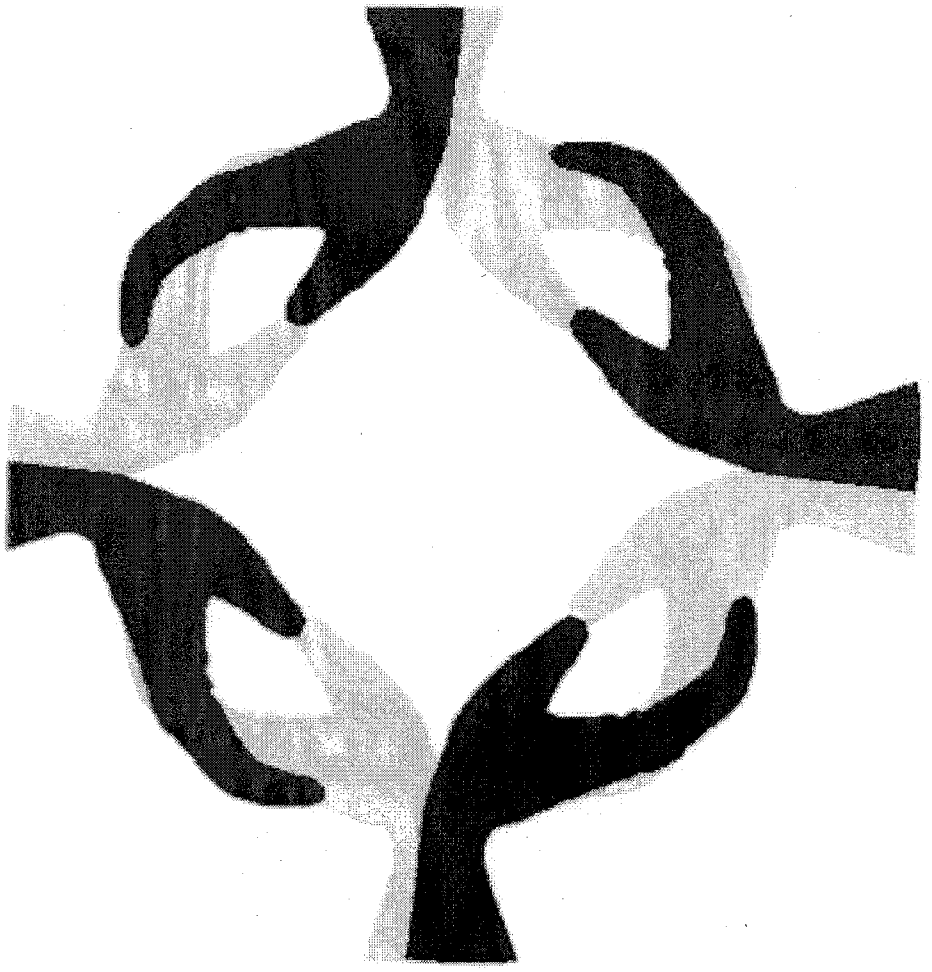
AMERICAN VOICES

Poetry and Nonfiction by Diverse Americans



Let America Be America Again

by Langston Hughes (1902-1967)

Let America be America again.
Let it be the dream it used to be.
Let it be the pioneer on the plain
Seeking a home where he himself is free.

(America never was America to me.)

Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed—
Let it be that great strong land of love
Where never kings connive nor tyrants scheme
That any man be crushed by one above.

(It never was America to me.)

O, let my land be a land where Liberty
Is crowned with no false patriotic wreath,
But opportunity is real, and life is free,
Equality is in the air we breathe.

(There's never been equality for me,
Nor freedom in this "homeland of the free.")

Say, who are you that mumbles in the dark?
And who are you that draws your veil across the stars?

I am the poor white, fooled and pushed apart,
I am the Negro bearing slavery's scars.
I am the red man driven from the land,
I am the immigrant clutching the hope I seek—
And finding only the same old stupid plan
Of dog eat dog, of mighty crush the weak.

I am the young man, full of strength and hope,
Tangled in that ancient endless chain
Of profit, power, gain, of grab the land!
Of grab the gold! Of grab the ways of satisfying need!
Of work the men! Of take the pay!
Of owning everything for one's own greed!

I am the farmer, bondsman to the soil.
I am the worker sold to the machine.
I am the Negro, servant to you all.
I am the people, humble, hungry, mean—
Hungry yet today despite the dream.
Beaten yet today—O, Pioneers!
I am the man who never got ahead,
The poorest worker bartered through the years.

Yet I'm the one who dreamt our basic dream
In that Old World while still a serf of kings,
Who dreamt a dream so strong, so brave, so true,
That even yet its mighty daring sings
In every brick and stone, in every furrow turned
That's made America the land it has become.
O, I'm the man who sailed those early seas
In search of what I meant to be my home—
For I'm the one who left dark Ireland's shore,
And Poland's plain, and England's grassy lea,
And torn from Black Africa's strand I came
To build a "homeland of the free."

The free?

Who said the free? Not me?
Surely not me? The millions on relief today?
The millions shot down when we strike?
The millions who have nothing for our pay?
For all the dreams we've dreamed
And all the songs we've sung
And all the hopes we've held
And all the flags we've hung,
The millions who have nothing for our pay—
Except the dream that's almost dead today.

O, let America be America again—
The land that never has been yet—
And yet must be—the land where *every* man is free.
The land that's mine—the poor man's, Indian's, Negro's, ME—
Who made America,
Whose sweat and blood, whose faith and pain,
Whose hand at the foundry, whose plow in the rain,
Must bring back our mighty dream again.

Sure, call me any ugly name you choose—
The steel of freedom does not stain.
From those who live like leeches on the people's lives,
We must take back our land again,
America!

O, yes,
I say it plain,
America never was America to me,
And yet I swear this oath—
America will be!

Out of the rack and ruin of our gangster death,
The rape and rot of graft, and stealth, and lies,
We, the people, must redeem
The land, the mines, the plants, the rivers.
The mountains and the endless plain—
All, all the stretch of these great green states—
And make America again!

1938

2

North American Friend

Pablo Neruda (1904-1973)

Man from the north, North American,
industrial harvester of apples,
simple as a pine in a pine grove,
geographic spruce of Alaska,
Yankee of the villages and factories
with wife, responsibility and children,
fertile engineers who work
in the immutable jungle of numbers
or in the time machine of factories,
workers broad, narrow and bent
over wheels and flames,
dissolute poets who have lost
Whitman's faith in the human race,
I want what I love and hate
to remain clear in my words:
my only rebuke against you
is for the silence that says nothing:
we do not know what North Americans
meditate in their homes,
we understand the sweetness of the family,
but we also love the sudden blaze,
so that when things happen in this world
we want to share your learning
but we find that two or three people
close the North American doors
and only the "Voice of America" is heard
which is like listening to a lean chicken.

But the rest I celebrate here,
your feats of today and tomorrow
and I think that the delayed satellite
that you orbited at dawn
is healthy for the pride of all:
Why always be in first place?
In this contest for life
boasting has forever fallen behind:
thus we can together go to the sun
and drink wine from the same jar.
We are Americans like you
we do not want to exclude you from anything.
but we want to conserve what is ours,
there is lots of space for our souls
we can live without trampling
and with underdeveloped sympathy
until with sincerity we speak
how far we have gone, face to face.
The world is changing and we don't believe
that there must be a victory of bombs and swords.
On this base we will understand each other
without your suffering at all.
We are not going to exploit your petroleum,
we will not intervene with customs,
we will not sell electrical energy
to North American villages:
we are peaceful people who can
be content with the little we earn,
we do not want to submit anyone
to coveting the circumstances of others.
We respect Lincoln's space
and Paul Robeson's clear conscience.
We learned to love with Charlie Chaplin
(although his power was evilly rewarded).
And so many things, the geography
that unites us in the desired land,
everything tells me to say once again
that we are sailing in the same boat:
it could sink with pride:
let us load it with bread and apples,
let us load it with Blacks and Whites,
with understanding and hopes.

ELIANA SUÁREZ RIVERO
(1942– present)

North from the River, South Inside

(Florida, 1961–Arizona, 1980)

I

the way it all began as they say
in old tales was surprising:
suddenly I had no clay under my feet
but sand was holding what I was

I clutched a few and carefully tended
myths and entered
into this territory of submersion:
north from my childhood
and from my early stories of each day
in the land where I grew (neon-lighted
showcase for underdevelopment) where we went
to church every Sunday and subtracted
smiles from the boys around the park
and the teacher told us that the Blessed
Virgin would cry if we so much as had
an impure thought (let alone play footsie)
and we merrily danced and forgot
that others were not invited to our clubs:
suddenly
that reality was no more
than a crushing distance the presence was
walls that shouted "you're in America now and have to
speak American" and how does one learn
to untalk all the past
another world would have to be forgotten
and the journey somehow erased
to be able to eat breakfast every morning and
go to school and
pay the bus fare and
read the messages of alienation:
seven or eight times January came around
before I could walk into a room and feel
I wasn't really from another planet
my hair was brown as it should be
instead of green
and the accents of the tongue were forgiven
by well-meaning hostesses who never
failed to ask "how do you like it here?" and then
the act of gratitude of intense
repetition of thanks (which were really sincere and
wagging-of-the-puppy-tail-like) and then the cute
and condescending references to talent
and land of opportunity for all
but I couldn't (I didn't know the words)
recite the pledge of allegiance and so
they made me cross the water
I spent a foreign day in a colorful sunny
marketplace and bought a big hat and straw purses
that had embroidery all over and said

NASSAU, BAHAMAS and the stewardess
insisted on my drinking Bloody Marys at
seven-thirty in the morning because
the Caribbean was so blue and
I was coming back forever to stripes
and amber waves of grain

II

south from the present: it remained
underground for so long deeply tucked away
in the recesses of the soul I never
thought it would begin to surface
nevertheless it slowly filtered through
recoiling at the mentioning of impositions
of phrases that made fun
of the other part of me the early errors
sunlight in the avenues a novel that
brings back the setting for a previous love
living on a strange (and worse than that, indifferent)
street full of faces that had never
existed in my dreams

smell of sea port and grease from shipyards
and twenty pounds of laundry taken to the corner
the old lady would say that tablecloths were badly
folded and fixed cabbages and onion rings
for supper while one could hear the clatter
of dusk and dishes above the din of rotting
apartment houses
María the neighbor refused to eat while her daughters
were still in jail and then would sit on the
front steps and listen to short-wave radio
for news in her own language and I would try
to do my homework (it was chemistry or math because
I never wrote a line that was unnecessary in those days)
and then the jars of peanut butter and the boxes
of rolled oats U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE—
SURPLUS COMMODITIES I learned to read them
carefully
every fifth of the month
and liked their cardboard flavor because
it came from the Midwest and heartland of the country
(it was free anyhow and it made for good cookies)
at the library I used to borrow Mozart records and
my old aunt's recordplayer almost got me in trouble
with scratches on *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* what the hell
was I doing listening to German music in the middle of
Florida? well I was an expert on the other kind of
música bailable and culture was the name of the game
"education for the future citizen" and lots
of peanut butter cookies for the swallowing

III

years make it seem so unreal but
it existed: Miss Miller who at fifty-five
swore never to rent her nice one-bedroom apartment
to another Cuban: the tenant had strange ways of
celebrating hurricanes with a party and
her strong coffee made stains in the sink
the upstairs neighbor (very proper high school
administrator) had a visitor
every Thursday evening and my living room rafters
would screech with the jolts of the bed
and middle-aged white Anglo-Saxon
passionate Protestants making love
over my head
another uncle of mine was married
to a Puerto Rican lady who shopped at Jordan Marsh
and scolded me for studying too much (most of all *Spanish*
of all idiotic things) and she recited
every time I was her captive audience "marry a doctor,
nice, Latino parents but American ways" and then
proceeded to engage in solid conversation for two years
reciting all the wonderful values she had learned
as a bicultural and I was still
chewing cookies made with oats from the USDA

IV

and all is oh so far beyond
my present north from the river
where I live and suddenly exist in memories
where sand made its castles one day for me
to come and play this is
another land of plenty where I reap and am reaped
where I deal in my words and forget
that I ever ate surplus commodities and I look at the
very
beginning of Latin America out of my kitchen window
(a little town with dirty streets called Naco, Sonora,
Mexico,
where we cross the border and get sad and feel angry and
buy
Bacardí Carta Oro but it doesn't taste the same) and still
the two circles surround me the dual love-and-
hate
relationship my languages the mother that I
recognize
as real legitimate and splendid and the surro-
gate
the tongue that lets me be two times the person
that I am
the presence of the territory that engulfs me
and all the memories of southern places
inside
hurting

FROM: Daughters of the fifth Sun: a collection of Latina fiction and poetry
Riverhead Books: New York
1995

Dear John Wayne

Louise Erdrich (1954-)

August and the drive-in picture is packed.
We lounge on the hood of the Pontiac
Surrounded by the slow-burning spirals they sell
At the window, to vanquish the hordes of mosquitoes.
Nothing works. They break through the smoke screen for blood.

Always the lookout spots the Indians first,
Spread north to south, barring progress.
The Sioux or some other Plains bunch
In spectacular columns, ICBM missiles,
Feathers bristling in the meaningful sunset.

The drum breaks. There will be no parlance,
Only the arrows whining, a death-cloud of nerves
Swarming down on the settlers
Who die beautifully, tumbling like dust weeds
Into the history that brought us all here
together: this wide screen beneath the sign of the bear.

The sky fills, acres of blue squint and eye
that the crowd cheers. His face moves over us,
a thick cloud of vengeance, pitted
like the land that was once flesh. Each rut,
each scar makes a promise: *It is*
not over, this fight, not as long as you resist.

Everything we see belongs to us.

A few laughing Indians fall over the hood
slipping in the hot spilled butter.
The eye sees a lot, John, but the heart is so blind.
Death makes us owners of nothing.
He smiles, a horizon of teeth
the credits reel over, and then the white fields
again blowing in the true-to -life dark.
The dark films over everything.
We get into the car
scratching our mosquito bites, speechless and small
as people are when the movie is done.
We are back in our skins.

How can we help but keep hearing his voice,
the flip side of the sound track, still playing:
Come on, boys, we got them
where we want them, drunk, running.
They'll give us what we want, what we need.
Even his disease was the idea of taking everything.
Those cells, burning, doubling, splitting out of their skins.

Nelson, Cary (ed.). Anthology of Modern American Poetry.
New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.

CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI (B. 1956)

Indian Movie, New Jersey (1990)

1990

Not like the white filmstars, all rib
and gaunt cheekbone, the Indian sex-goddess
smiles plumply from behind a flowery
branch. Below her brief red skirt, her thighs
are satisfying-solid, redeeming
as tree trunks. She swings her hips
and the men-viewers whistle. The lover-hero
dances in to a song, his lip-sync
a little off, but no matter, we
know the words already and sing along.
It is safe here, the day
golden and cool so no one sweats,
roses on every bush and the Dal Lake
clean again.

The sex-goddess switches
to thickened English to emphasize
a joke. We laugh and clap. Here
we need not be embarrassed by words
dropping like lead pellets into foreign ears.
The flickering movie-light
wipes from our faces years of America, sons
who want mohawks and refuse to run
the family store, daughters who date
on the sly.

When at the end the hero
dies for his friend who also
loves the sex-goddess and now can marry her,
we weep, understanding. Even the men
clear their throats to say, "What *qurbani*!° *sacrifice*
What *dosti!*"° After, we mill around *friendship*
unwilling to leave, exchange greetings
and good news: a new gold chain, a trip
to India. We do not speak
of motel raids, canceled permits, stones
thrown through glass windows, daughters and sons
raped by Dotbusters.°

In this dim foyer
we can pull around us the faint, comforting smell
of incense and *pakoras*,° can arrange *fried appetizers*
our children's marriages with hometown boys and girls,
open a franchise, win a million
in the mail. We can retire
in India, a yellow two-storied house
with wrought-iron gates, our own
Ambassador car. Or at least
move to a rich white suburb, Summerfield
or Fort Lee, with neighbors that will
talk to us. Here while the film-songs still echo
in the corridors and restrooms, we can trust
in movie truths: sacrifice, success, love and luck,
the America that was supposed to be.

36 *Dotbusters:* New Jersey gangs that attack Indians.

http://instructional1.calstatela.edu/mkarafi/Eng1250/divakarunialvarez.htm

"Queens, 1963" (1995) by Julia Alvarez (1950-)

Everyone seemed more American
than we, newly arrived,
foreign dirt still on our soles.
By year's end, a sprinkler waving
like a flag, on our mowed lawn,
we were melted into the block,
owned our own mock Tudor house.
Then the house across the street
sold to a black family.
Cop cars patrolled our block
from the Castellucci's at one end
to the Balakian's on the other.
We heard rumors of bomb threats,
a burning cross on their lawn.
(It turned out to be a sprinkler.)
Still the neighborhood buzzed.
The barber's family, Haralambides,
our left side neighbors, didn't want
trouble.
They'd come a long way to be free!
Mr. Scott, the retired plumber,
and his plump midwestern wife,
considered moving back home
where white and black got along
by staying where they belonged.
They had cultivated our street
like the garden she'd given up
on account of her ailing back,
bad knees, poor eyes, arthritic hands.
She went through her litany daily.
Politely, my mother listened—
Ay, Mrs. Scott, que pena!
--her Dominican good manners
still running on automatic.
The Jewish counselor next door,
had a practice in her house;
clients hurried up the walk
ashamed to be seen needing.
(I watched from my upstairs window,
gloomy with adolescence,
and guessed how they too must have
hypocritical old world parents.)
Mrs. Bernstein said it was time
the neighborhood opened up.
As the first Jew on the block,
she remembered the snubbing she got
a few years back from Mrs. Scott.
But real estate worried her,
our houses' plummeting value.
She shook her head as she might
at a client's grim disclosures.
Too bad the world works this way.
The German girl playing the piano
down the street abruptly stopped
in the middle of a note.
I completed the tune in my head
as I watched their front door open.
A dark man in a suit
with a girl about my age
walked quickly into a car.
My hand lifted but fell
before I made a welcoming gesture.
On her face I had seen a look
from the days before we had melted
into the United States of America.
It was hardness mixed with hurt.
It was knowing she never could be
the right kind of American.
A police car followed their car.
Down the street, curtains fell back.
Mrs. Scott swept her walk
as if it had just been dirtied.
Then the German piano commenced
downward scales as if tracking
the plummeting real estate.
One by one I imagined the houses
sinking into their lawns,
the grass grown wild and tall
in the past tense of this continent
before the first foreigners owned
any of this free country.

http://instructional1.calstatela.edu/mkarafi/Engl250/divakarunialvarez.htm

I Hear America Singing (1867)
by Walt Whitman (1819-1892)

I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear,
Those of mechanics, each one singing his as it should be blithe and strong,
The carpenter singing his as he measures his plank or beam,
The mason singing his as he makes ready for work, or leaves off work,
The boatman singing what belongs to him in his boat, the deckhand
singing on the steamboat deck,
The shoemaker singing as he sits on his bench, the hatter singing as he stands,
The wood-cutter's song, the ploughboy's on his way in the morning, or
at noon intermission or at sundown,
The delicious singing of the mother, or of the young wife at work, or of
the girl sewing or washing,
Each singing what belongs to him or her and to none else,
The day what belongs to the day—at night the party of young fellows,
robust, friendly,
Singing with open mouths their strong melodious songs.

http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/15752

For A New Citizen Of These United States
Li-Young Lee (1957-present)

Forgive me for thinking I saw
the irregular postage stamp of death;
a black moth the size of my left
thumbnail is all I've trapped in the damask.
There is no need for alarm. And

there is no need for sadness, if
the rain at the window now reminds you
of nothing; not even of that
parlor, long like a nave, where cloud-shadow,
wing-shadow, where father-shadow
continually confused the light. In flight,
leaf-throng and, later, soldiers and
flags deepened those windows to submarine.

But you don't remember, I know,
so I won't mention that house where Chung hid,
Lin wizened, you languished, and Ming-
Ming hush-hushed us with small song. And since you
don't recall the missionary
bells chiming the hour, or those words whose sounds
alone exhaust the heart--*garden,*
heaven, amen--I'll mention none of it.

After all, it was just our life,
merely years in a book of years. It was
1960, and we stood with
the other families on a crowded
railroad platform. The trains came, then
the rains, and then we got separated.

And in the interval between
familiar faces, events occurred, which
one of us faithfully pencilled
in a day-book bound by a rubber band.

But birds, as you say, fly forward.
So I won't show you letters and the shawl
I've so meaninglessly preserved.
And I won't hum along, if you don't, when
our mothers sing *Nights in Shanghai.*
I won't, each Spring, each time I smell lilac,
recall my mother, patiently
stitching money inside my coat lining,
if you don't remember your mother
preparing for your own escape.

After all, it was only our
life, our life and its forgetting. 1990

www.poemhunter.com/poem/for-a-new-citizen-of-these-united-states/

Prospective Immigrants Please Note
Adrienne Rich (1929-present)

Either you will
go through this door
or you will not go through.

If you go through
there is always the risk
of remembering your name.

Things look at you doubly
and you must look back
and let them happen.

If you do not go through
it is possible
to live worthily

to maintain your attitudes
to hold your position
to die bravely

but much will blind you,
much will evade you,
at what cost who knows?

The door itself
makes no promises.
It is only a door.

www.americanpoems.com/poets/adrienne_rich/11756

"next to of course god america i
love you land of the pilgrims' and so forth oh
say can you see by the dawn's early my
country tis of centuries come and go
and are no more what of it we should worry
in every language even deafanddumb
thy sons acclaim your glorious name by gorry
by jingo by gee by gosh by gum
why talk of beauty what could be more beaut-
iful than these heroic happy dead
who rushed like lions to the roaring slaughter
they did not stop to think they died instead
then shall the voice of liberty be mute?"

He spoke. And drank rapidly a glass of water

e.e. cummings
(1894-1962)

1926

http://homepages.wmich.edu/~cooneys/poems/cummings.nextto.html

I, Too
Langston Hughes
(1902-1967)

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.

1925

http://flightline.highline.edu/tkim/Files/Lit100_PP2.pdf

The New Colossus
Emma Lazarus

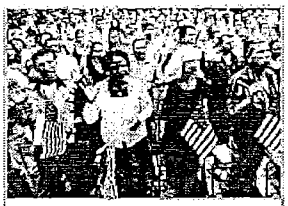
Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

1883

www.sonnets.org/lazarus.htm

13 February 2008

American Identity: Ideas, Not Ethnicity



Immigrants sworn in as citizens in Phoenix, Arizona, in 2007 (© AP Images)

By Michael Jay Friedman

Since the United States was founded in the 18th century, Americans have defined themselves not by their racial, religious, and ethnic identity but by their common values and belief in individual freedom.

Michael Jay Friedman is a historian and writer in the Bureau of International Information Programs of the U.S. Department of State.

"I'm in a New York state of mind."
—- *Billy Joel*

In 2000 28.2 percent of people living in the New York metropolitan area were foreign born.
-- *U.S. Census Bureau*

In 1782, barely six years after the United States of America declared its nationhood, Benjamin Franklin offered certain "Information to Those Who Would Remove to America." Among the constellation of outsized historical actors Americans came to know as their "founding fathers," Franklin was in many ways the most typically American: If George Washington was inapproachably august, Thomas Jefferson bookish, and John Adams dour, it was Franklin — that practical inventor, resourceful businessman, and ever-busy civic catalyst — who best understood that his countrymen were, as the historian Walter McDougall would later call them, a nation of hustlers. In such a land, Franklin instructed the would-be immigrant:

People do not inquire concerning a Stranger, What is he? but, What can he do? If he has any useful Art, he is welcome; and if he exercises it, and behaves well, he will be respected by all that know him.

Franklin's remark was grounded in first-hand observation: As early as 1750, German immigrants outnumbered English stock in his home colony of Pennsylvania. The newcomers were perceived as industrious and law-abiding. Skillful farmers, they improved the land and stimulated economic growth. In 1790, when Congress set the first national standard for naturalized citizenship, it required no ethnic or religious test, no literacy test, no property requirement — just two years residence, good character, and an oath to uphold the Constitution. Because American identity is, as Franklin understood, grounded in actions and attitudes rather than racial, religious, or ethnic identity, Americans differ from many other peoples both in how they define themselves and in the kinds of lives they choose to lead. Membership in the national community, as cultural scholar Marc Pachter has written, "demands only the decision to become American."

This communal American identity embraces a pluralism that spans racial, religious, and ethnic divides. It also encompasses a strong civic commitment to individual freedom and to a representative government of limited and clearly defined powers that respects that freedom.

Melting Pot or Salad Bowl?

The American self-image has always harnessed a creative tension between pluralism and assimilation. On the one hand, immigrants traditionally have been expected to immerse themselves in the American "melting pot," a metaphor popularized by the playwright Israel Zangwill's 1908 drama *The Melting Pot*, in which one character declares:

Understand that America is God's Crucible, the great Melting-Pot where all the races of Europe are melting and reforming! A fig for your feuds and vendettas! Germans and Frenchmen, Irishmen and Englishmen, Jews and Russians — into the Crucible with you all! God is making the American.

Traditionally dressed immigrants join together in 1959 in front of the Statue of Liberty. (© Bettmann/Corbis)

Nor were Zangwill's sentiments new ones. As far back as 1782, J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, a French immigrant and keen observer of American life, described his new compatriots as:

... a mixture of English, Scotch, Irish, French, Dutch, Germans, and Swedes ... . What, then, is the American, this new man? He is neither an European nor the descendant of an European; hence that strange mixture of blood, which you will find in no other country. I could point out to you a family whose grandfather was an Englishman, whose wife was Dutch, whose son married a French woman, and whose present four sons have now four wives of different nations. He is an American... leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners ... .

The melting pot, however, has always existed alongside a competing model, in which each successive immigrant group retains a measure of its distinctiveness and enriches the American whole. In 1918 the public intellectual Randolph Bourne called for a "trans-national America." The original English colonists, Bourne argued, "did not come to be assimilated in an American melting pot ... . They came to get freedom to live as they wanted to ... to make their fortune in a new land." Later immigrants, he continued, had not been melted down into some kind of "tasteless, colorless" homogeneous Americanism but rather added their distinct contributions to the greater whole.

The balance between the melting pot and transnational ideals varies with time and circumstance, with neither model achieving complete dominance. Unquestionably, though, Americans have internalized a self-portrait that spans a spectrum of races, creeds, and colors. Consider the popular motion pictures depicting American troops in action during the Second World War. It became a Hollywood cliché that every platoon included a farm boy from Iowa, a Brooklyn Jew, a Polish millworker from Chicago, an Appalachian woodsman, and other diverse examples of mid-20th century American manhood. They strain at first to overcome their differences, but by film's end all have bonded — as Americans. Real life could be more complicated, and not least because the African-American soldier would have served in a segregated unit. Regardless, these films depict an American identity that Americans believed in — or wanted to.

Individualism and Tolerance

If American identity embraces all kinds of people, it also affords them a vast menu of opportunities to make and remake themselves. Americans historically have scorned efforts to trade on "accidents of birth," such as great inherited wealth or social status. Article I of the U.S. Constitution bars the government from granting any title of nobility, and those who cultivate an air of superiority toward their fellow Americans are commonly disparaged for "putting on airs," or worse.

Americans instead respect the "self-made" man or woman, especially where he or she has overcome great obstacles to success. The late 19th-century American writer Horatio Alger, deemed by the *Encyclopedia Britannica* perhaps the most socially influential American writer of his generation, captured this ethos in his many rags-to-riches stories, in which poor shoeshine boys or other street urchins would rise, by dint of their ambition, talent, and fortitude, to wealth and fame.

In the United States, individuals craft their own definitions of success. It might be financial wealth — and many are the college dropouts working in their parents' garage in hopes of creating the next Google, Microsoft, or Apple Computer. Others might prize the joys of the sporting arena, of creating fine music or art, or of raising a loving family at home. Because Americans spurn limits, their national identity is not -- cannot be -- bounded by the color of one's skin, by one's parentage, by which house of worship one attends.

Americans hold differing political beliefs, embrace (often wildly) divergent lifestyles, and insist upon broad individual freedoms, but they do so with a remarkable degree of mutual tolerance. One key is their representative form of government: No citizen agrees with every U.S. government decision; all know they can reverse those policies by persuading their fellow citizens to vote for change at the next election.

Another key is the powerful guarantees that protect the rights of all Americans from government overreaching. No sooner was the U.S. Constitution ratified than Americans demanded and received the Bill of Rights: 10 constitutional amendments that safeguard basic rights.

There simply is no one picture of a "typical" American. From the powdered-wigged Founding Fathers to the multiracial golf champion Tiger Woods, Americans share a common identity grounded in the freedom — consistent always with respecting the freedom of others — to live as they choose. The results can bemuse, intrigue, and inspire. Cambodia's biggest hip-hop star, born on a Cambodian farm, lives in southern California. (He goes by the name "praCh.") Walt Whitman, the closest Americans have produced to a national poet, would not have been surprised. "I am large," Whitman wrote of his nation, "I contain multitudes."

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What's Happening to America?

JOHN STEINBECK

Reader's Digest Assn.
1966

It is customary (indeed, at graduations it is a requirement) for speakers to refer to America as a "precious inheritance"—our heritage, a gift proffered like a sandwich wrapped in plastic on a plastic tray. Our ancestors, so it is implied, gathered to the invitation of a golden land and accepted the sacrament of milk and honey.

This is not so. In the beginning we crept, scuttled, escaped, were driven out of the safe and settled corners of the earth to the fringes of a strange and hostile wilderness, a nameless and hostile continent. Far from welcoming us, it resisted us. This land was no gift. The firstlings worked for it, fought for it, died for it. They stole and cheated and double-crossed for it.

But we built America, and the process made us Americans—a new breed, rooted in all races, stained and tinted with all colors, a seeming ethnic anarchy. Then in a little, little time, we became more alike than we were different—a new society; not great, but fitted by our very faults for greatness: *E Pluribus Unum.*

The whole thing is crazy. Every single man in our emerging country was out for himself. When communities arose, each

one defended itself against other communities. All that was required to release the mechanism of oppression was that the newcomers be poor, weak in numbers and unprotected—although it helped if their skin, hair, eyes were different, and if they spoke some language other than English, or worshipped in some church other than Protestant. The Puritans took out after any other faith; the Germans clotted for self-defense until the Irish took the resented place; the Irish became "Americans" against the Poles, the Slavs against the Italians.

It occurs to me that this very cruelty toward newcomers might go far toward explaining the speed with which the ethnic and national strangers merged with the "Americans." In spite of all the pressure the old people could bring to bear, the children of each ethnic group denied their background and their ancestral language. Something was loose in this land, and the new generations wanted to be Americans more than they wanted to be Hungarians or Italians or British. And in one or two, certainly not more than three generations, each ethnic group has clicked into place in the union without losing the *pluribus.*

One of the generalities most often noted about Americans is that we are a restless, a dissatisfied, a searching people. We spend our time searching for security, and hate it when we get it. We are an intemperate people: we eat too much, drink too much, indulge our senses too much. We work too hard, and many die under the strain; and we play with a violence just as suicidal. The result is that we seem to be in a state of turmoil all the time, both physically and mentally. We are able to believe that our government is weak, stupid, overbearing, dishonest and inefficient, and at the same time we are deeply convinced that it is the best government in the world, and we would like to impose it upon everyone else.

Americans seem to live and breathe and function by paradox; but in nothing are we so paradoxical as in our passionate belief in our own myths. We shout that we are a nation of laws, not men—and then proceed to break every law we can if we can get away with it. Our most persistent folktales—constantly retold in books, movies and television shows—concern cowboys, gun-slinging sheriffs and Indian fighters. The brave and

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honest sheriff who with courage and a six-gun brings law and order to a Western community is perhaps our most familiar hero. And in these moral tales, so deep-set in us, virtue does not arise out of reason or orderly process of law—it is imposed by violence and maintained by the threat of violence.

I wonder whether this folk wisdom is the story of our capability. Are these stories permanent because we know within ourselves that only the threat of violence makes it possible for us to live together in peace?

No one can define the "American Way of Life" or point to any person or group who lives it, but it is real nevertheless.

Our means of governing ourselves, while it derives from European and Asian sources, is unique. That it works at all is astonishing; that it works well is a matter for amazement. In thinking about conferring the blessings of our system on other people, we forget that ours is the product of our own history, which has not been duplicated anywhere else. We have amassed a set of feelings which grew out of our background, but which are just as strongly held when we do not know that background.

For example, Americans almost without exception have a fear and a hatred of any perpetuation of power—political, religious or bureaucratic. Whether this anxiety stems from what amounts to a folk memory of our own revolution against the England of George III, or whether in the family background of all Americans from all parts of the world there is an alert memory of the foreign tyrannies which were the cause of their coming here in the first place, it is hard to say. Regardless, any official with a power potential causes in Americans first a restiveness, then suspicion and finally—if the official remains in office too long—a downright general animosity. Many a public servant has been voted out of office for no other reason than that he has been in too long.

In nothing are the Americans so strange as in their attitudes toward their children. I have studied children in many countries, and I find nothing to approximate the American child-sickness. Before it appeared, parents were delighted to have children at all and content that they might grow up to be exactly like themselves. Farm boys grew up farmers; housewives trained their daughters to be housewives. Population explosions were taken care of by wars, plagues and starvation.

Our child-sickness has developed very rapidly in the last 60 years, and it runs parallel, it would seem, with increasing material plenty and the medical conquest of child-killing diseases. Suddenly it was no longer acceptable that the child should be like his parents and live as they did; he must live better, know more, dress more richly and, if possible, change from his father's trade to a profession. Since it was demanded of the child that he be better than his parents, he must be guided, pushed, admired, disciplined, flattered and forced. But since the parents were and are no better than they are, the rules they propounded were not based on their experience but on their wishes and hopes.

If the hope was not fulfilled, the parents went into a tailspin of guilt, blaming themselves for having done something wrong or at least something not right. This feeling of the parents was happily seized upon by the children, for it allowed them to be failures through no fault of their own. Laziness, sloppiness, indiscipline, selfishness and general piggery, which are the natural talents of children and were once slapped out of them, now became either crimes of the parents or sickness in the children, who would far rather be sick than be disciplined.

Into this confusion the experts entered, and American parents put their troubles, and their children, in the hands of the professionals—doctors, educators, psychologists, neurologists, psychiatrists. The only trouble was and is that few of the professionals agreed with one another except in the belief that the child should always be the center of attention—an attitude which has the full support of the children.

I have been putting off writing about the most serious problem that Americans are faced with, both as a people and as individuals. We discuss it constantly, and yet there is not even a name for it. Immorality does not describe it, nor does lack of integrity, nor does dishonesty. Many people, not able to face the universal spread and danger of the cancerous growth, split off a fragment of the whole to worry about or to try to cure.

But I begin to think that the evil is one thing, not many; that

racial unrest, the emotional crazy quilt that drives our people to the psychiatrists, the fallout, dropout, copout insurgency of our children and young people, the rush to stimulant as well as hypnotic drugs, the rise of narrow, ugly and vengeful cults of all kinds, the distrust and revolt against all authority—this in a time of plenty such as has never been known—I think all of these are manifestations of one single cause.

I'm not going to preach about any good old days. By our standards of comfort they were pretty awful. What did they have then that we are losing or have lost? For one thing, they had rules—rules concerning life, limb and property; rules governing deportment and manners; and finally rules defining dishonesty, dishonor, misconduct and crime. The rules were not always obeyed, but they were believed in, and a breaking of them was savagely punished. The rule-breaker knew he was wrong and the others were right. The rules were understood and accepted by everyone.

Adlai Stevenson, speaking of a politician of particularly rancid practices, once said, "If he were a bad man, I wouldn't be so afraid of him. But this man has no principles. He doesn't know the difference." Could this be our difficulty—that gradually we are losing our ability to tell the difference? The rules fall away in chunks, and in the vacant place we have a generality: "It's all right because everybody does it."

We are also poisoned with *things*. Having many things seems to create a desire for more things. Think of the pure horror of Christmases when children tear open package after package and then, when the floor is heaped with wrappings and presents, say, "Is that all?" And two days later the smashed and abandoned "things" are added to our national trash pile, and perhaps the child, having got in trouble, explains, "I didn't have anything to do." And he means exactly that—nothing to do, nowhere to go, no direction, no purpose, and worst of all, no needs.

It is probable that the want of things and the need of things have been the two greatest stimulants toward the change and complication we call progress. And surely we Americans, most of us starting with nothing, have contributed our share of wanting. Wanting is probably a valuable human trait. It is the *means* of getting that can be dangerous.

The evil that threatens us came quickly and quietly, came from many directions and was the more dangerous because it wore the face of good. Almost unlimited new machine power took the place of straining muscles and bent backs. Medicine and hygiene cut down infant mortality almost to the vanishing point, and at the same time extended our life-span. Leisure came to us before we knew what to do with it, and all of these good things falling on us unprepared constitute calamity. We have the things, and we have not had time to develop a way of thinking about them.

I strongly suspect that our moral and spiritual disintegration grows out of our lack of experience with plenty. We had a million years to get used to the idea of fire and only 20 to prepare ourselves for the productive-destructive tidal wave of atomic fission. Our babies live, and we have no work for their hands. We retire men and women at the age of their best service for no other reason than that we need their jobs for younger people. To allow ourselves the illusion of usefulness, we have standby crews for functions which no longer exist.

Why do we act the way we do? I believe it is because we have reached the end of a road and have discovered no new path to take, no duty to carry out, no purpose to fulfill. I think we will find a path to the future, but its direction may be unthinkable to us now.

Something happened in America to create the Americans. Now we face the danger which in the past has been most destructive to the human: success, plenty, comfort and ever-increasing leisure. No dynamic people has ever survived these dangers. If the anesthetic of self-satisfaction were added to our hazards, we would not have a chance of survival—as Americans.

But I expect that we will survive as Americans. A dying people tolerates the present, rejects the future and finds its satisfactions in past greatness and half-remembered glory. It is in the American negation of these symptoms of extinction that my hope and confidence lie. We are not satisfied. Our restlessness is still with us. Young Americans are rebellious, angry, searching. The energy pours out in rumbles, in strikes and causes, even in crime—but it is energy. Wasted energy is only a little problem compared with the lack of it.

The world is open as it has never been before, and for the first time in human experience we have the tools to work with. Three fifths of the world and perhaps four fifths of the world's wealth lie under the sea, and we can get to it. The sky is open at last, and we have the means to rise into it.

We are in the perplexing period of change. We seem to be running in all directions at once—but we are running. And I believe that our history, our experience in America, has endowed us for the change that is coming. We have cut ourselves off from the self-abuse of war by raising it from a sin to an extinction. Far larger experiences are open to our restlessness—the fascinating unknown is everywhere.

How will we Americans act and react to a new set of circumstances for which new rules must be made? We will make mistakes; we always have. But from our beginning, in hindsight at least, our social direction is clear. We have moved to become one people out of many. We have failed sometimes, taken wrong paths, paused for renewal, filled our bellies and licked our wounds. But we have never slipped back—never.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. How does Steinbeck's description of America's early years differ from Crèvecoeur's? Do you think that Steinbeck is cynical, or that Crèvecoeur is unrealistic, or both, or neither? Does the time in which the writer lives affect his interpretation of facts? How do Crèvecoeur and Steinbeck illustrate your answer?
2. When Steinbeck compares the phrase "precious inheritance" to a sandwich wrapped in plastic and served on a plastic tray, what is he saying about the phrase?
3. What is the explanation for the "cruelty toward newcomers" which Steinbeck notices in the American past? Does such cruelty still occur? Explain.
4. Is it true that "Americans almost without exception have a fear and a hatred of any perpetuation of power"? What evidence do you have to support this statement? What evidence can you find which disproves it?

5. What method of child-rearing do you think Steinbeck would advocate? Do you agree with him?
6. Steinbeck suggests that leisure is a powerful calamity. Why? Do you agree that "our moral and spiritual disintegration grows out of our lack of experience with plenty"? What evidence is there of such disintegration?

FOR COMPOSITION

1. Write an essay either agreeing with or disagreeing with the generalization Steinbeck refers to: that "we are a restless, a dissatisfied, a searching people." Support your view of this generalization with proof and documentation. Simply repeating your opinion is not enough.
2. Carefully describe and discuss one paradox by which you feel "Americans live and breathe and function." Try not to repeat Steinbeck's examples.

Making Waves

An Anthology of Writings By and About Asian American Women

EDITED BY

Asian Women United of California

BEACON PRESS

Boston
1991

Growing Up Asian in America

KESAYA E. NODA

Sometimes when I was growing up, my identity seemed to hurtle toward me and paste itself right to my face. I felt that way, encountering the stereotypes of my race perpetuated by non-Japanese people (primarily white) who may or may not have had contact with other Japanese in America. "You don't like cheese, do you?" someone would ask. "I know your people don't like cheese." Sometimes questions came making allusions to history. That was another aspect of the identity. Events that had happened quite apart from the me who stood silent in that moment connected my face with an incomprehensible past. "Your parents were in California? Were they in those camps during the war?" And sometimes there were phrases or nicknames: "Lotus Blossom." I was sometimes addressed or referred to as racially Japanese, sometimes as Japanese American, and sometimes as an Asian woman. Confusions and distortions abounded.

How is one to know and define oneself? From the inside—within a context that is self defined, from a grounding in community and a connection with culture and history that are comfortably accepted? Or from the outside—in terms of messages received from the media and people who are often ignorant? Even as an adult I can still see two sides of my face and past. I can see from the inside out, in freedom. And I can see from the outside in, driven by the old voices of childhood and lost in anger and fear.

I am racially Japanese

A voice from my childhood says: "You are other. You are less than. You are unalterably alien." This voice has its own history. We have indeed been seen as other and alien since the early years of our arrival in the United States. The very first immigrants were welcomed and sought as laborers to replace the dwindling numbers of Chinese, whose influx had been cut off by the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. The Japanese fell natural heir to the same anti-Asian prejudice that had arisen against the Chinese. As soon as they began striking for better wages, they were no longer welcomed.

I can see myself today as a person historically defined by law and custom as being forever alien. Being neither "free white," nor "African," our people in California were deemed "aliens, ineligible for citizenship," no matter how long they intended to stay here. Aliens ineligible for citizenship were prohibited from owning, buying, or leasing land. They did not and could not belong here. The voice in me remembers that I am always a *Japanese* American in the eyes of many. A third-generation German American is an American. A third-generation Japanese American is a Japanese American. Being Japanese means being a danger to the country during the war and knowing how to use chopsticks. I wear this history on my face.

I move to the other side. I see a different light and claim a different context. My race is a line that stretches across ocean and time to link me to the shrine where my grandmother was raised. Two high, white banners lift in the wind at the top of the stone steps leading to the shrine. It is time for the summer festival. Black characters are written against the sky as boldly as the clouds, as lightly as kites, as sharply as the big black crows I used to see above the fields in New Hampshire. At festival time there is liquor and food, ritual, discipline, and abandonment. There is music and drunkenness and invocation. There is hope. Another season has come. Another season has gone.

I am racially Japanese. I have a certain claim to this crazy place where the prayers intoned by a neighboring Shinto priest (standing in for my grandmother's nephew who is sick) are drowned out by the rehearsals for the pop singing contest in which most of the villagers will compete later that night. The village elders, the priest, and I stand respectfully upon the immaculate, shining wooden floor of the outer shrine, bowing our heads before the hidden powers. During the patchy intervals when I can hear him, I notice the priest has a stutter. His voice flutters up to my ears only occasionally because two men and a woman are singing gustily into a microphone in the compound, testing the sound system. A prerecorded tape of guitars, samisens, and drums accompanies them. Rock music and Shinto prayers. That night, to loud applause and cheers, a young man is given the award for the most *netsuretsu*—passionate, burning—rendition of a song. We roar our approval of the reward. Never mind that his voice had wandered and slid, now slightly above, now slightly below the given line of the melody. Netsuretsu. Netsuretsu.

In the morning, my grandmother's sister kneels at the foot of the stone stairs to offer her morning prayers. She is too crippled to climb the stairs, so each morning she kneels here upon the path. She shuts her eyes for a few seconds, her motions as matter of fact as when she washes rice. I linger longer than she does, so reluctant to leave, savoring the connection I feel with my grandmother in America, the past, and the power that lives and shines in the morning sun.

Our family has served this shrine for generations. The family's need to protect this claim to identity and place outweighs any individual claim to any individual hope. I am Japanese.

I am a Japanese American

"Weak." I hear the voice from my childhood years. "Passive," I hear. Our parents and grandparents were the ones who were put into those

camps. They went without resistance; they offered cooperation as proof of loyalty to America. "Victim," I hear. And, "Silent."

Our parents are painted as hard workers who were socially uncomfortable and had difficulty expressing even the smallest opinion. Clean, quiet, motivated, and determined to match the American way; that is us, and that is the story of our time here.

"Why did you go into those camps," I raged at my parents, frightened by my own inner silence and timidity. "Why didn't you do anything to resist? Why didn't you name it the injustice it was?" Couldn't our parents even think? Couldn't they? Why were we so passive?

I shift my vision and my stance. I am in California. My uncle is in the midst of the sweet potato harvest. He is pressed, trying to get the harvesting crews onto the field as quickly as possible, worried about the flow of equipment and people. His big pickup is pulled off to the side, motor running, door ajar. I see two tractors in the yard in front of an old shed; the flat bed harvesting platform on which the workers will stand has already been brought over from the other field. It's early morning. The workers stand loosely grouped and at ease, but my uncle looks as harried and tense as a police officer trying to unsnarl a New York City traffic jam. Driving toward the shed, I pull my car off the road to make way for an approaching tractor. The front wheels of the car sink luxuriously into the soft, white sand by the roadside and the car slides to a dreamy halt, tail still on the road. I try to move forward. I try to move back. The front bites contentedly into the sand, the back lifts itself at a jaunty angle. My uncle sees me and storms down the road, running. He is shouting before he is even near me.

"What's the matter with you," he screams. "What the hell are you doing?" In his frenzy, he grabs his hat off his head and slashes it through the air across his knee. He is beside himself. "Don't you know how to drive in sand? What's the matter with you? You've blocked the whole roadway. How am I supposed to get my tractors out of here? Can't you use your head? You've cut off the whole roadway, and we've got to get out of here."

I stand on the road before him helplessly thinking, "No, I don't know how to drive in sand. I've never driven in sand."

"I'm sorry, uncle," I say, burying a smile beneath a look of sincere apology. I notice my deep amusement and my affection for him with great curiosity. I am usually devastated by anger. Not this time.

During the several years that follow I learn about the people and the place, and much more about what has happened in this California village where my parents grew up. The *issei*, our grandparents, made this settlement in the desert. Their first crops were eaten by rabbits and ravaged by insects. The land was so barren that men walking from house to house sometimes got lost. Women came here too. They bore children in 114 degree heat, then carried the babies with them into the fields to nurse when they reached the end of each row of grapes or other truck farm crops.

I had had no idea what it meant to buy this kind of land and make it grow green. Or how, when the war came, there was no space at all for the subtlety of being who we were—Japanese Americans. Either/or was the way. I hadn't understood that people were literally afraid for their lives then, that their money had been frozen in banks; that there was a five-mile travel limit; that when the early evening curfew came and they were inside their houses, some of them watched helplessly as people they knew went into their barns to steal their belongings. The police were patrolling the road, interested only in violators of curfew. There was no help for them in the face of thievery. I had not been able to imagine before what it must have felt like to be an American—to know absolutely that one is an American—and yet to have almost everyone else deny it. Not only deny it, but challenge that identity with machine guns and troops of white American soldiers. In those circumstances it was difficult to say, "I'm a Japanese American." "American" had to do.

But now I can say that I am a Japanese American. It means I have a place here in this country, too. I have a place here on the East Coast, where our neighbor is so much a part of our family that my mother never passes her house at night without glancing at the lights to see if she is home and safe; where my parents have hauled hundreds of pounds of rocks from fields and arduously planted Christmas trees and blueberries, lilacs, asparagus, and crab apples; where my father still dreams of angling a stream to a new bed so that he can dig a pond in the field and fill

it with water and fish. "The neighbors already came for their Christmas tree?" he asks in December. "Did they like it? Did they like it?"

I have a place on the West Coast where my relatives still farm, where I heard the stories of feuds and backbiting, and where I saw that people survived and flourished because fundamentally they trusted and relied upon one another. A death in the family is not just a death in a family; it is a death in the community. I saw people help each other with money, materials, labor, attention, and time. I saw men gather once a year, without fail, to clean the grounds of a ninety-year-old woman who had helped the community before, during, and after the war. I saw her remembering them with birthday cards sent to each of their children.

I come from a people with a long memory and a distinctive grace. We live our thanks. And we are Americans. Japanese Americans.

I am a Japanese American woman

Woman. The last piece of my identity. It has been easier by far for me to know myself in Japan and to see my place in America than it has been to accept my line of connection with my own mother. She was my dark self, a figure in whom I thought I saw all that I feared most in myself. Growing into womanhood and looking for some model of strength, I turned away from her. Of course, I could not find what I sought. I was looking for a black feminist or a white feminist. My mother is neither white nor black.

My mother is a woman who speaks with her life as much as with her tongue. I think of her with her own mother. Grandmother had Parkinson's disease and it had frozen her gait and set her fingers, tongue, and feet jerking and trembling in a terrible dance. My aunts and uncles wanted her to be able to live in her own home. They fed her, bathed her, dressed her, awoke at midnight to take her for one last trip to the bathroom. My aunts (her daughters-in-law) did most of the care, but my mother went from New Hampshire to California each summer to spend a month living with grandmother, because she wanted to and because she wanted to give my aunts at least a small rest. During those hot summer days, mother lay on the couch watching the television or reading, cooking foods that grandmother liked, and speaking little. Grandmother thrived under her care.

The time finally came when it was too dangerous for grandmother to live alone. My relatives kept finding her on the floor beside her bed when they went to wake her in the mornings. My mother flew to California to help clean the house and make arrangements for grandmother to enter a local nursing home. On her last day at home, while grandmother was sitting in her big, overstuffed armchair, hair combed and wearing a green summer dress, my mother went to her and knelt at her feet. "Here, Mamma," she said. "I've polished your shoes." She lifted grandmother's legs and helped her into the shiny black shoes. My grandmother looked down and smiled slightly. She left her house walking, supported by her children, carrying her pocket book, and wearing her polished black shoes. "Look, Mamma," my mom had said, kneeling. "I've polished your shoes."

Just the other day, my mother came to Boston to visit. She had recently lost a lot of weight and was pleased with her new shape and her feeling of good health. "Look at me, Kes," she exclaimed, turning toward me, front and back, as naked as the day she was born. I saw her small breasts and the wide, brown scar, belly button to pubic hair, that marked her because my brother and I were both born by Caesarean section. Her hips were small. I was not a large baby, but there was so little room for me in her that when she was carrying me she could not even begin to bend over toward the floor. She hated it, she said.

"Don't I look good? Don't you think I look good?"

I looked at my mother, smiling and as happy as she, thinking of all the times I have seen her naked. I have seen both my parents naked throughout my life, as they have seen me. From childhood through adulthood we've had our naked moments, sharing baths, idle conversations picked up as we moved between showers and closets, hurried moments at the beginning of days, quiet moments at the end of days.

I know this to be Japanese, this ease with the physical, and it makes me think of an old, Japanese folk song. A young nursemaid, a fifteen-year-old girl, is singing a lullaby to a baby who is strapped to her back. The nursemaid has been sent as a servant to a place far from her own

home. "We're the beggars," she says, "and they are the nice people. Nice people wear fine sashes. Nice clothes."

If I should drop dead,
bury me by the roadside!
I'll give a flower
to everyone who passes.

What kind of flower?
The cam-cam-camellia [tsun-tsun-tsubaki]
watered by Heaven:
alms water.[1]

The nursemaid is the intersection of heaven and earth, the intersection of the human, the natural world, the body, and the soul. In this song, with clear eyes, she looks steadily at life, which is sometimes so very terrible and sad. I think of her while looking at my mother, who is standing on the red and purple carpet before me, laughing, without any clothes.

I am my mother's daughter. And I am myself.

I am a Japanese American woman.

THE WOMAN WARRIOR

Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts

MAXINE HONG KINGSTON

Vintage Books
A Division of Random House
New York
1977

What my brother actually said was, "I drove Mom and Second Aunt to Los Angeles to see Aunt's husband who's got the other wife."

"Did she hit him? What did she say? What did he say?"

"Nothing much. Mom did all the talking."

"What did she say?"

"She said he'd better take them to lunch at least."

"Which wife did he sit next to? What did they eat?"

"I didn't go. The other wife didn't either. He motioned us not to tell."

"I would've told. If I was his wife, I would've told. I would've gone to lunch and kept my ears open."

"Ah, you know they don't talk when they eat."

"What else did Mom say?"

"I don't remember. I pretended a pedestrian broke her leg so he would come."

"There must've been more. Didn't Aunt get in one nasty word? She must've said something."

"No, I don't think she said anything. I don't remember her saying one thing."

In fact, it wasn't me my brother told about going to Los Angeles; one of my sisters told me what he'd told her. His version of the story may be better than mine because of its bareness, not twisted into designs. The

hearer can carry it tucked away without it taking up much room. Long ago in China, knot-makers tied string into buttons and frogs, and rope into bell pulls. There was one knot so complicated that it blinded the knot-maker. Finally an emperor outlawed this cruel knot, and the nobles could not order it anymore. If I had lived in China, I would have been an outlaw knot-maker.

Maybe that's why my mother cut my tongue. She pushed my tongue up and sliced the frenum. Or maybe she snipped it with a pair of nail scissors. I don't remember her doing it, only her telling me about it, but all during childhood I felt sorry for the baby whose mother waited with scissors or knife in hand for it to cry—and then, when its mouth was wide open like a baby bird's, cut. The Chinese say "a ready tongue is an evil."

I used to curl up my tongue in front of the mirror and tauten my frenum into a white line, itself as thin as a razor blade. I saw no scars in my mouth. I thought perhaps I had had two frena, and she had cut one. I made other children open their mouths so I could compare theirs to mine. I saw perfect pink membranes stretching into precise edges that looked easy enough to cut. Sometimes I felt very proud that my mother committed such a powerful act upon me. At other times I was terrified—the first thing my mother did when she saw me was to cut my tongue.

"Why did you do that to me, Mother?"

"I told you."

"Tell me again."

"I cut it so that you would not be tongue-tied. Your tongue would be able to move in any language. You'll be able to speak languages that are completely different from one another. You'll be able to pronounce

anything. Your frenum looked too tight to do those things, so I cut it."

"But isn't 'a ready tongue an evil'?"

"Things are different in this ghost country."

"Did it hurt me? Did I cry and bleed?"

"I don't remember. Probably."

She didn't cut the other children's. When I asked cousins and other Chinese children whether their mothers had cut their tongues loose, they said, "What?"

"Why didn't you cut my brothers' and sisters' tongues?"

"They didn't need it."

"Why not? Were theirs longer than mine?"

"Why don't you quit blabbering and get to work?"

If my mother was not lying she should have cut more, scraped away the rest of the frenum skin, because I have a terrible time talking. Or she should not have cut at all, tampering with my speech. When I went to kindergarten and had to speak English for the first time, I became silent. A dumbness—a shame—still cracks my voice in two, even when I want to say "hello" casually, or ask an easy question in front of the check-out counter, or ask directions of a bus driver. I stand frozen, or I hold up the line with the complete, grammatical sentence that comes squeaking out at impossible length. "What did you say?" says the cab driver, or "Speak up," so I have to perform again, only weaker the second time. A telephone call makes my throat bleed and takes up that day's courage. It spoils my day with self-disgust when I hear my broken voice come skittering out into the open. It makes people wince to hear it. I'm getting better, though. Recently I asked the postman for special-issue stamps; I've waited since childhood for postmen to give me

some of their own accord. I am making progress, a little every day.

My silence was thickest—total—during the three years that I covered my school paintings with black paint. I painted layers of black over houses and flowers and suns, and when I drew on the blackboard, I put a layer of chalk on top. I was making a stage curtain, and it was the moment before the curtain parted or rose. The teachers called my parents to school, and I saw they had been saving my pictures, curling and cracking, all alike and black. The teachers pointed to the pictures and looked serious, talked seriously too, but my parents did not understand English. ("The parents and teachers of criminals were executed," said my father.) My parents took the pictures home. I spread them out (so black and full of possibilities) and pretended the curtains were swinging open, flying up, one after another, sunlight underneath, mighty operas.

During the first silent year I spoke to no one at school, did not ask before going to the lavatory, and flunked kindergarten. My sister also said nothing for three years, silent in the playground and silent at lunch. There were other quiet Chinese girls not of our family, but most of them got over it sooner than we did. I enjoyed the silence. At first it did not occur to me I was supposed to talk or to pass kindergarten. I talked at home and to one or two of the Chinese kids in class. I made motions and even made some jokes. I drank out of a toy saucer when the water spilled out of the cup, and everybody laughed, pointing at me, so I did it some more. I didn't know that Americans don't drink out of saucers.

I liked the Negro students (Black Ghosts) best because they laughed the loudest and talked to me as

if I were a daring talker too. One of the Negro girls had her mother coil braids over her ears Shanghai-style like mine; we were Shanghai twins except that she was covered with black like my paintings. Two Negro kids enrolled in Chinese school, and the teachers gave them Chinese names. Some Negro kids walked me to school and home, protecting me from the Japanese kids, who hit me and chased me and stuck gum in my ears. The Japanese kids were noisy and tough. They appeared one day in kindergarten, released from concentration camp, which was a tic-tac-toe mark, like barbed wire, on the map.

It was when I found out I had to talk that school became a misery, that the silence became a misery. I did not speak and felt bad each time that I did not speak. I read aloud in first grade, though, and heard the barest whisper with little squeaks come out of my throat. "Louder," said the teacher, who scared the voice away again. The other Chinese girls did not talk either, so I knew the silence had to do with being a Chinese girl.

Reading out loud was easier than speaking because we did not have to make up what to say, but I stopped often, and the teacher would think I'd gone quiet again. I could not understand "I." The Chinese "I" has seven strokes, intricacies. How could the American "I," assuredly wearing a hat like the Chinese, have only three strokes, the middle so straight? Was it out of politeness that this writer left off strokes the way a Chinese has to write her own name small and crooked? No, it was not politeness; "I" is a capital and "you" is lower-case. I stared at that middle line and waited so long for its black center to resolve into tight strokes and dots that I forgot to pronounce it. The other troublesome word was "here," no strong

consonant to hang on to, and so flat, when "here" is two mountainous ideographs. The teacher, who had already told me every day how to read "I" and "here," put me in the low corner under the stairs again, where the noisy boys usually sat.

When my second grade class did a play, the whole class went to the auditorium except the Chinese girls. The teacher, lovely and Hawaiian, should have understood about us, but instead left us behind in the classroom. Our voices were too soft or nonexistent, and our parents never signed the permission slips anyway. They never signed anything unnecessary. We opened the door a crack and peeked out, but closed it again quickly. One of us (not me) won every spelling bee, though.

I remember telling the Hawaiian teacher, "We Chinese can't sing 'land where our fathers died.'" She argued with me about politics, while I meant because of curses. But how can I have that memory when I couldn't talk? My mother says that we, like the ghosts, have no memories.

After American school, we picked up our cigar boxes, in which we had arranged books, brushes, and an inkbox neatly, and went to Chinese school, from 5:00 to 7:30 P.M. There we chanted together, voices rising and falling, loud and soft, some boys shouting, everybody reading together, reciting together and not alone with one voice. When we had a memorization test, the teacher let each of us come to his desk and say the lesson to him privately, while the rest of the class practiced copying or tracing. Most of the teachers were men. The boys who were so well behaved in the American school played tricks on them and talked back to them. The girls were not mute. They screamed and yelled during recess, when there

were no rules; they had fistfights. Nobody was afraid of children hurting themselves or of children hurting school property. The glass doors to the red and green balconies with the gold joy symbols were left wide open so that we could run out and climb the fire escapes. We played capture-the-flag in the auditorium, where Sun Yat-sen and Chiang Kai-shek's pictures hung at the back of the stage, the Chinese flag on their left and the American flag on their right. We climbed the teak ceremonial chairs and made flying leaps off the stage. One flag headquarters was behind the glass door and the other on stage right. Our feet drummed on the hollow stage. During recess the teachers locked themselves up in their office with the shelves of books, copybooks, inks from China. They drank tea and warmed their hands at a stove. There was no play supervision. At recess we had the school to ourselves, and also we could roam as far as we could go—downtown, Chinatown stores, home—as long as we returned before the bell rang.

At exactly 7:30 the teacher again picked up the brass bell that sat on his desk and swung it over our heads, while we charged down the stairs, our cheering magnified in the stairwell. Nobody had to line up.

Not all of the children who were silent at American school found voice at Chinese school. One new teacher said each of us had to get up and recite in front of the class, who was to listen. My sister and I had memorized the lesson perfectly. We said it to each other at home, one chanting, one listening. The teacher called on my sister to recite first. It was the first time a teacher had called on the second-born to go first. My sister was scared. She glanced at me and looked away; I looked down at my desk. I hoped that she could do it because if she could, then I would

have to. She opened her mouth and a voice came out that wasn't a whisper, but it wasn't a proper voice either. I hoped that she would not cry, fear breaking up her voice like twigs underfoot. She sounded as if she were trying to sing though weeping and strangling. She did not pause or stop to end the embarrassment. She kept going until she said the last word, and then she sat down. When it was my turn, the same voice came out, a crippled animal running on broken legs. You could hear splinters in my voice, bones rubbing jagged against one another. I was loud, though. I was glad I didn't whisper. There was one little girl who whispered.

You can't entrust your voice to the Chinese, either; they want to capture your voice for their own use. They want to fix up your tongue to speak for them. "How much less can you sell it for?" we have to say. Talk the Sales Ghosts down. Make them take a loss.

We were working at the laundry when a delivery boy came from the Rexall drugstore around the corner. He had a pale blue box of pills, but nobody was sick. Reading the label we saw that it belonged to another Chinese family, Crazy Mary's family. "Not ours," said my father. He pointed out the name to the Delivery Ghost, who took the pills back. My mother muttered for an hour, and then her anger boiled over. "That ghost! That dead ghost! How dare he come to the wrong house?" She could not concentrate on her marking and pressing. "A mistake! Huh!" I was getting angry myself. She fumed. She made her press crash and hiss. "Revenge. We've got to avenge this wrong on our future, on our health, and on our lives. Nobody's going to sicken my children and get away with it." We brothers and sisters did not look at one another. She would do something awful, something

embarrassing. She'd already been hinting that during the next eclipse we slam pot lids together to scare the frog from swallowing the moon. (The word for "eclipse" is *frog-swallowing-the-moon.*) When we had not banged lids at the last eclipse and the shadow kept receding anyway, she'd said, "The villagers must be banging and clanging very loudly back home in China."

("On the other side of the world, they aren't having an eclipse, Mama. That's just a shadow the earth makes when it comes between the moon and the sun."

"You're always believing what those Ghost Teachers tell you. Look at the size of the jaws!")

"Aha!" she yelled. "You! The biggest." She was pointing at me. "You go to the drugstore."

"What do you want me to buy, Mother?" I said.

"But nothing. Don't bring one cent. Go and make them stop the curse."

"I don't want to go. I don't know how to do that. There are no such things as curses. They'll think I'm crazy."

"If you don't go, I'm holding you responsible for bringing a plague on this family."

"What am I supposed to do when I get there?" I said, sullen, trapped. "Do I say, 'Your delivery boy made a wrong delivery'?"

"They know he made a wrong delivery. I want you to make them rectify their crime."

I felt sick already. She'd make me swing stinky censers around the counter, at the druggist, at the customers. Throw dog blood on the druggist. I couldn't stand her plans.

"You get reparation candy," she said. "You say, 'You have tainted my house with sick medicine and

must remove the curse with sweetness.' He'll understand."

"He didn't do it on purpose. And no, he won't, Mother. They don't understand stuff like that. I won't be able to say it right. He'll call us beggars."

"You just translate." She searched me to make sure I wasn't hiding any money. I was sneaky and bad enough to buy the candy and come back pretending it was a free gift.

"Mymotherseztagimmesomecandy," I said to the druggist. Be cute and small. No one hurts the cute and small.

"What? Speak up. Speak English," he said, big in his white druggist coat.

"Tatatagimme somecandy."

The druggist leaned way over the counter and frowned. "Some free candy," I said. "Sample candy."

"We don't give sample candy, young lady," he said.

"My mother said you have to give us candy. She said that is the way the Chinese do it."

"What?"

"That is the way the Chinese do it."

"Do what?"

"Do things." I felt the weight and immensity of things impossible to explain to the druggist.

"Can I give you some money?" he asked.

"No, we want candy."

He reached into a jar and gave me a handful of lollipops. He gave us candy all year round, year after year, every time we went into the drugstore. When different druggists or clerks waited on us, they also gave us candy. They had talked us over. They gave us Halloween candy in December, Christmas candy around Valentine's day, candy hearts at Easter, and

Easter eggs at Halloween. "See?" said our mother. "They understand. You kids just aren't very brave." But I knew they did not understand. They thought we were beggars without a home who lived in back of the laundry. They felt sorry for us. I did not eat their candy. I did not go inside the drugstore or walk past it unless my parents forced me to. Whenever we had a prescription filled, the druggist put candy in the medicine bag. This is what Chinese druggists normally do, except they give raisins. My mother thought she taught the Druggist Ghosts a lesson in good manners (which is the same word as "traditions").

My mouth went permanently crooked with effort, turned down on the left side and straight on the right. How strange that the emigrant villagers are shouters, hollering face to face. My father asks, "Why is it I can hear Chinese from blocks away? Is it that I understand the language? Or is it they talk loud?" They turn the radio up full blast to hear the operas, which do not seem to hurt their ears. And they yell over the singers that wail over the drums, everybody talking at once, big arm gestures, spit flying. You can see the disgust on American faces looking at women like that. It isn't just the loudness. It is the way Chinese sounds, chingchong ugly, to American ears, not beautiful like Japanese sayonara words with the consonants and vowels as regular as Italian. We make guttural peasant noise and have Ton Duc Thang names you can't remember. And the Chinese can't hear Americans at all; the language is too soft and western music unhearable. I've watched a Chinese audience laugh, visit, talk-story, and holler during a piano recital, as if the musician could not hear them. A Chinese-American, somebody's son, was playing Chopin, which has no punctuation, no cymbals, no gongs.

Chinese piano music is five black keys. Normal Chinese women's voices are strong and bossy. We American-Chinese girls had to whisper to make ourselves American-feminine. Apparently we whispered even more softly than the Americans. Once a year the teachers referred my sister and me to speech therapy, but our voices would straighten out, unpredictably normal, for the therapists. Some of us gave up, shook our heads, and said nothing, not one word. Some of us could not even shake our heads. At times shaking my head no is more self-assertion than I can manage. Most of us eventually found some voice, however faltering. We invented an American-feminine speaking personality, except for that one girl who could not speak up even in Chinese school.

She was a year older than I and was in my class for twelve years. During all those years she read aloud but would not talk. Her older sister was usually beside her; their parents kept the older daughter back to protect the younger one. They were six and seven years old when they began school. Although I had flunked kindergarten, I was the same age as most other students in our class; my parents had probably lied about my age, so I had had a head start and came out even. My younger sister was in the class below me; we were normal ages and normally separated. The parents of the quiet girl, on the other hand, protected both daughters. When it sprinkled, they kept them home from school. The girls did not work for a living the way we did. But in other ways we were the same.

We were similar in sports. We held the bat on our shoulders until we walked to first base. (You got a strike only when you actually struck at the ball.) Sometimes the pitcher wouldn't bother to throw to us.

"Automatic walk," the other children would call, sending us on our way. By fourth or fifth grade, though, some of us would try to hit the ball. "Easy out," the other kids would say. I hit the ball a couple of times. Baseball was nice in that there was a definite spot to run to after hitting the ball. Basketball confused me because when I caught the ball I didn't know whom to throw it to. "Me. Me," the kids would be yelling. "Over here." Suddenly it would occur to me I hadn't memorized which ghosts were on my team and which were on the other. When the kids said, "Automatic walk," the girl who was quieter than I kneeled with one end of the bat in each hand and placed it carefully on the plate. Then she dusted her hands as she walked to first base, where she rubbed her hands softly, fingers spread. She always got tagged out before second base. She would whisper-read but not talk. Her whisper was as soft as if she had no muscles. She seemed to be breathing from a distance. I heard no anger or tension.

I joined in at lunchtime when the other students, the Chinese too, talked about whether or not she was mute, although obviously she was not if she could read aloud. People told how *they* had tried *their* best to be friendly. *They* said hello, but if she refused to answer, well, they didn't see why they had to say hello anymore. She had no friends of her own but followed her sister everywhere, although people and she herself probably thought I was her friend. I also followed her sister about, who was fairly normal. She was almost two years older and read more than anyone else.

I hated the younger sister, the quiet one. I hated her when she was the last chosen for her team and I, the last chosen for my team. I hated her for her China

doll hair cut. I hated her at music time for the wheezes that came out of her plastic flute.

One afternoon in the sixth grade (that year I was arrogant with talk, not knowing there were going to be high school dances and college seminars to set me back), I and my little sister and the quiet girl and her big sister stayed late after school for some reason. The cement was cooling, and the tetherball poles made shadows across the gravel. The hooks at the rope ends were clinking against the poles. We shouldn't have been so late; there was laundry work to do and Chinese school to get to by 5:00. The last time we had stayed late, my mother had phoned the police and told them we had been kidnapped by bandits. The radio stations broadcast our descriptions. I had to get home before she did that again. But sometimes if you loitered long enough in the schoolyard, the other children would have gone home and you could play with the equipment before the office took it away. We were chasing one another through the playground and in and out of the basement, where the playroom and lavatory were. During air raid drills (it was during the Korean War, which you knew about because every day the front page of the newspaper printed a map of Korea with the top part red and going up and down like a window shade), we curled up in this basement. Now everyone was gone. The playroom was army green and had nothing in it but a long trough with drinking spigots in rows. Pipes across the ceiling led to the drinking fountains and to the toilets in the next room. When someone flushed you could hear the water and other matter, which the children named, running inside the big pipe above the drinking spigots. There was one playroom for girls next to the girls' lavatory and one playroom for boys next to

the boys' lavatory. The stalls were open and the toilets had no lids, by which we knew that ghosts have no sense of shame or privacy.

Inside the playroom the lightbulbs in cages had already been turned off. Daylight came in x-patterns through the caging at the windows. I looked out and, seeing no one in the schoolyard, ran outside to climb the fire escape upside down, hanging on to the metal stairs with fingers and toes.

I did a flip off the fire escape and ran across the schoolyard. The day was a great eye, and it was not paying much attention to me now. I could disappear with the sun; I could turn quickly sideways and slip into a different world. It seemed I could run faster at this time, and by evening I would be able to fly. As the afternoon wore on we could run into the forbidden places—the boys' big yard, the boys' playroom. We could go into the boys' lavatory and look at the urinals. The only time during school hours I had crossed the boys' yard was when a flatbed truck with a giant thing covered with canvas and tied down with ropes had parked across the street. The children had told one another that it was a gorilla in captivity; we couldn't decide whether the sign said "Trail of the Gorilla" or "Trial of the Gorilla." The thing was as big as a house. The teachers couldn't stop us from hysterically rushing to the fence and clinging to the wire mesh. Now I ran across the boys' yard clear to the Cyclone fence and thought about the hair that I had seen sticking out of the canvas. It was going to be summer soon, so you could feel that freedom coming on too.

I ran back into the girls' yard, and there was the quiet sister all by herself. I ran past her, and she followed me into the girls' lavatory. My footsteps rang

hard against cement and tile because of the taps I had nailed into my shoes. Her footsteps were soft, padding after me. There was no one in the lavatory but the two of us. I ran all around the rows of twenty-five open stalls to make sure of that. No sisters. I think we must have been playing hide-and-go-seek. She was not good at hiding by herself and usually followed her sister; they'd hide in the same place. They must have gotten spearated. In this growing twilight, a child could hide and never be found.

I stopped abruptly in front of the sinks, and she came running toward me before she could stop herself, so that she almost collided with me. I walked closer. She backed away, puzzlement, then alarm in her eyes.

"You're going to talk," I said, my voice steady and normal, as it is when talking to the familiar, the weak, and the small. "I am going to make you talk, you sissy-girl." She stopped backing away and stood fixed.

I looked into her face so I could hate it close up. She wore black bangs, and her cheeks were pink and white. She was baby-soft. I thought that I could put my thumb on her nose and push it bonelessly in, indent her face. I could poke dimples into her cheeks. I could work her face around like dough. She stood still, and I did not want to look at her face anymore; I hated fragility. I walked around her, looked her up and down the way the Mexican and Negro girls did when they fought, so tough. I hated her weak neck, the way it did not support her head but let it droop; her head would fall backward. I stared at the curve of her nape. I wished I was able to see what my own neck looked like from the back and sides. I hoped it did not look like hers; I wanted a stout neck. I grew my hair long to hide it in case it was a flower-

stem neck. I walked around to the front of her to hate her face some more.

I reached up and took the fatty part of her cheek, not dough, but meat, between my thumb and finger. This close, and I saw no pores. "Talk," I said. "Are you going to talk?" Her skin was fleshy, like squid out of which the glassy blades of bones had been pulled. I wanted tough skin, hard brown skin. I had callused my hands; I had scratched dirt to blacken the nails, which I cut straight across to make stubby fingers. I gave her face a squeeze. "Talk." When I let go, the pink rushed back into my white thumbprint on her skin. I walked around to her side. "Talk!" I shouted into the side of her head. Her straight hair hung, the same all these years, no ringlets or braids or permanents. I squeezed her other cheek. "Are you? Huh? Are you going to talk?" She tried to shake her head, but I had hold of her face. She had no muscles to jerk away. Her skin seemed to stretch. I let go in horror. What if it came away in my hand? "No, huh?" I said, rubbing the touch of her off my fingers. "Say 'No,' then," I said. I gave her another pinch and a twist. "Say 'No.'" She shook her head, her straight hair turning with her head, not swinging side to side like the pretty girls'. She was so neat. Her neatness bothered me. I hated the way she folded the wax paper from her lunch; she did not wad her brown paper bag and her school papers. I hated her clothes —the blue pastel cardigan, the white blouse with the collar that lay flat over the cardigan, the homemade flat, cotton skirt she wore when everybody else was wearing flared skirts. I hated pastels; I would wear black always. I squeezed again, harder, even though her cheek had a weak rubbery feeling I did not like. I squeezed one cheek, then the other, back and forth

until the tears ran out of her eyes as if I had pulled them out. "Stop crying," I said, but although she habitually followed me around, she did not obey. Her eyes dripped; her nose dripped. She wiped her eyes with her papery fingers. The skin on her hands and arms seemed powdery-dry, like tracing paper, onion paper. I hated her fingers. I could snap them like breadsticks. I pushed her hands down. "Say 'Hi,' " I said. " 'Hi'. Like that. Say your name. Go ahead. Say it. Or are you stupid? You're so stupid, you don't know you own name, is that it? When I say, 'What's your name?' you just blurt it out, O.K.? What's your name?" Last year the whole class had laughed at a boy who couldn't fill out a form because he didn't know his father's name. The teacher sighed, exasperated and was very sarcastic, "Don't you notice things? What does your mother call him?" she said. The class laughed at how dumb he was not to notice things. "She calls him father of me," he said. Even we laughed although we knew that his mother did not call his father by name, and a son does not know his father's name. We laughed and were relieved that our parents had had the foresight to tell us some names we could give the teachers. "If you're not stupid," I said to the quiet girl, "what's you name?" She shook her head, and some hair caught in the tears; wet black hair stuck to the side of the pink and white face. I reached up (she was taller than I) and took a strand of hair. I pulled it. "Well, then, let's honk your hair," I said. "Honk. Honk." Then I pulled the other side—"ho-o-n-nk"—a long pull; "ho-o-n-n-nk"—a longer pull. I could see her little white ears, like white cutworms curled underneath the hair. "Talk!" I yelled into each cutworm.

I looked right at her. "I know you talk," I said.

"I've heard you." Her eyebrows flew up. Something in those black eyes was startled, and I pursued it. "I was walking past your house when you didn't know I was there. I heard you yell in English and in Chinese. You weren't just talking. You were shouting. I heard you shout. You were saying, 'Where are you?' Say that again. Go ahead, just the way you did at home." I yanked harder on the hair, but steadily, not jerking. I did not want to pull it out. "Go ahead. Say, 'Where are you?" Say it loud enough for your sister to come. Call her. Make her come help you. Call her name. I'll stop if she comes. So call. Go ahead."

She shook her head, her mouth curved down, crying. I could see her tiny white teeth, baby teeth. I wanted to grow big strong yellow teeth. "You do have a tongue," I said. "So use it." I pulled the hair at her temples, pulled the tears out of her eyes. "Say, 'Ow' " I said. "Just 'Ow.' Say, 'Let go.' Go ahead. Say it. I'll honk you again if you don't say, 'Let me alone.' Say, 'Leave me alone,' and I'll let you go. I will. I'll let go if you say it. You can stop this anytime you want to, you know. All you have to do is tell me to stop. Just say, 'Stop.' You're just asking for it, aren't you? You're just asking for another honk. Well then, I'll have to give you another honk. Say, 'Stop.' " But she didn't. I had to pull again and again.

Sounds did come out of her mouth, sobs, chokes, noises that were almost words. Snot ran out of her nose. She tried to wipe it on her hands, but there was too much of it. She used her sleeve. "You're disgusting," I told her. "Look at you, snot streaming down your nose, and you won't say a word to stop it. You're such a nothing." I moved behind her and pulled the hair growing out of her weak neck. I let go. I stood silent for a long time. Then I screamed, "Talk!" I would

scare the words out of her. If she had had little bound feet, the toes twisted under the balls, I would have jumped up and landed on them—crunch!—stomped on them with my iron shoes. She cried hard, sobbing aloud. "Cry, 'Mama,' " I said. "Come on. Cry, 'Mama.' Say, 'Stop it.' "

I put my finger on her pointed chin. "I don't like you. I don't like the weak little toots you make on your flute. Wheeze. Wheeze. I don't like the way you don't swing at the ball. I don't like the way you're the last one chosen. I don't like the way you can't make a fist for tetherball. Why don't you make a fist? Come on. Get tough. Come on. Throw fists." I pushed at her long hands; they swung limply at her sides. Her fingers were so long, I thought maybe they had an extra joint. They couldn't possibly make fists like other people's. "Make a fist," I said. "Come on. Just fold those fingers up; fingers on the inside, thumbs on the outside. Say something. Honk me back. You're so tall, and you let me pick on you.

"Would you like a hanky? I can't get you one with embroidery on it or crocheting along the edges, but I'll get you some toilet paper if you tell me to. Go ahead. Ask me. I'll get it for you if you ask." She did not stop crying. "Why don't you scream, 'Help'?" I suggested. "Say, 'Help.' Go ahead." She cried on. "O.K. O.K. Don't talk. Just scream, and I'll let you go. Won't that feel good? Go ahead. Like this." I screamed not too loudly. My voice hit the tile and rang it as if I had thrown a rock at it. The stalls opened wider and the toilets wider and darker. Shadows leaned at angles I had not seen before. I was very late. Maybe a janitor had locked me in with this girl for the night. Her black eyes blinked and stared, blinked and stared. I felt dizzy from hunger. We had been in this lavatory

together forever. My mother would call the police again if I didn't bring my sister home soon. "I'll let you go if you say just one word," I said. "You can even say 'a' or 'the,' and I'll let you go. Come on. Please." She didn't shake her head anymore, only cried steadily, so much water coming out of her. I could see the two duct holes where the tears welled out. Quarts of tears but no words. I grabbed her by the shoulder. I could feel bones. The light was coming in queerly through the frosted glass with the chicken wire embedded in it. Her crying was like an animal's —a seal's—and it echoed around the basement. "Do you want to stay here all night?" I asked. "Your mother is wondering what happened to her baby. You wouldn't want to have her mad at you. You'd better say something." I shook her shoulder. I pulled her hair again. I squeezed her face. "Come on! Talk! Talk! Talk!" She didn't seem to feel it anymore when I pulled her hair. "There's nobody here but you and me. This isn't a classroom or a playground or a crowd. I'm just one person. You can talk in front of one person. Don't make me pull harder and harder until you talk." But her hair seemed to stretch; she did not say a word. "I'm going to pull harder. Don't made me pull anymore, or your hair will come out and you're going to be bald. Do you want to be bald? You don't want to be bald, do you?"

Far away, coming from the edge of town, I heard whistles blow. The cannery was changing shifts, letting out the afternoon people, and still we were here at school. It was a sad sound—work done. The air was lonelier after the sound died.

"Why won't you talk?" I started to cry. What if I couldn't stop, and everyone would want to know what happened? "Now look what you've done," I

scolded. "You're going to pay for this. I want to know why. And you're going to tell me why. You don't see I'm trying to help you out, do you? Do you want to be like this, dumb (do you know what dumb means?), your whole life? Don't you ever want to be a cheerleader? Or a pompon girl? What are you going to do for a living? Yeah, you're going to have to work because you can't be a housewife. Somebody has to marry you before you can be a housewife. And you, you are a plant. Do you know that? That's all you are if you don't talk. If you don't talk, you can't have a personality. You'll have no personality and no hair. You've got to let people know you have a personality and a brain. You think somebody is going to take care of you all your stupid life? You think you'll always have your big sister? You think somebody's going to marry you, is that it? Well, you're not the type that gets dates, let alone gets married. Nobody's going to notice you. And you have to talk for interviews, speak right up in front of the boss. Don't you know that? You're so dumb. Why do I waste my time on you?" Sniffling and snorting, I couldn't stop crying and talking at the same time. I kept wiping my nose on my arm, my sweater lost somewhere (probably not worn because my mother said to wear a sweater). It seemed as if I had spent my life in that basement, doing the worst thing I had yet done to another person. "I'm doing this for your own good," I said. "Don't you dare tell anyone I've been bad to you. Talk. Please talk."

I was getting dizzy from the air I was gulping. Her sobs and my sobs were bouncing wildly off the tile, sometimes together, sometimes alternating. "I don't understand why you won't say just one word," I cried, clenching my teeth. My knees were shaking, and I

hung on to her hair to stand up. Another time I'd stayed too late, I had had to walk around two Negro kids who were bonking each other's head on the concrete. I went back later to see if the concrete had cracks in it. "Look. I'll give you something if you talk. I'll give you my pencil box. I'll buy you some candy. O.K.? What do you want? Tell me. Just say it, and I'll give it to you. Just say, 'yes,' or, 'O.K.,' or, 'Baby Ruth.' " But she didn't want anything.

I had stopped pinching her cheek because I did not like the feel of her skin. I would go crazy if it came away in my hands. "I skinned her," I would have to confess.

Suddenly I heard footsteps hurrying through the basement, and her sister ran into the lavatory calling her name. "Oh, there you are," I said. "We've been waiting for you. I was only trying to teach her to talk. She wouldn't cooperate, though." Her sister went into one of the stalls and got handfuls of toilet paper and wiped her off. Then we found my sister, and we walked home together. "Your family really ought to force her to speak," I advised all the way home. "You mustn't pamper her."

The world is sometimes just, and I spent the next eighteen months sick in bed with a mysterious illness. There was no pain and no symptoms, though the middle line in my left palm broke in two. Instead of starting junior high school, I lived like the Victorian recluses I read about. I had a rented hospital bed in the living room, where I watched soap operas on TV, and my family cranked me up and down. I saw no one but my family, who took good care of me. I could have no visitors, no other relatives, no villagers. My bed was against the west window, and I watched the seasons change the peach tree. I had a bell to ring for

help. I used a bedpan. It was the best year and a half of my life. Nothing happened.

But one day my mother, the doctor, said, "You're ready to get up today. It's time to get up and go to school." I walked about outside to get my legs working, leaning on a staff I cut from the peach tree. The sky and trees, the sun were immense—no longer framed by a window, no longer grayed with a fly screen. I sat down on the sidewalk in amazement—the night, the stars. But at school I had to figure out again how to talk. I met again the poor girl I had tormented. She had not changed. She wore the same clothes, hair cut, and manner as when we were in elementary school, no make-up on the pink and white face, while the other Asian girls were starting to tape their eyelids. She continued to be able to read aloud. But there was hardly any reading aloud anymore, less and less as we got into high school.

I was wrong about nobody taking care of her. Her sister became a clerk-typist and stayed unmarried. They lived with their mother and father. She did not have to leave the house except to go to the movies. She was supported. She was protected by her family, as they would normally have done in China if they could have afforded it, not sent off to school with strangers, ghosts, boys.

We have so many secrets to hold in. Our sixth-grade teacher, who liked to explain things to children, let us read our files. My record shows that I flunked kindergarten and in first grade had no IQ—a zero IQ. I did remember the first grade teacher calling out during a test, while students marked X's on a girl or a boy or a dog, which I covered with black. First grade was when I discovered eye control; with my seeing I could shrink the teacher down to a height

of one inch, gesticulating and mouthing on the horizon. I lost this power in sixth grade for lack of practice, the teacher a generous man. "Look at your family's old addresses and think about how you've moved," he said. I looked at my parents' aliases and their birthdays, which variants I knew. But when I saw Father's occupations I exclaimed, "Hey, he wasn't a farmer, he was a . . ." He had been a gambler. My throat cut off the word—silence in front of the most understanding teacher. There were secrets never to be said in front of the ghosts, immigration secrets whose telling could get us sent back to China.

Sometimes I hated the ghosts for not letting us talk; sometimes I hated the secrecy of the Chinese. "Don't tell," said my parents, though we couldn't tell if we wanted to because we didn't know. Are there really secret trials with our own judges and penalties? Are there really flags in Chinatown signaling what stowaways have arrived in San Francisco Bay, their names, and which ships they came on? "Mother, I heard some kids say there are flags like that. Are there? What colors are they? Which buildings do they fly from?"

"No. No, there aren't any flags like that. They're just talking-story. You're always believing talk-story."

"I won't tell anybody, Mother. I promise. Which building are the flags on? Who flies them? The benevolent associations?"

"I don't know. Maybe the San Francisco villagers do that; our villagers don't do that."

"What do our villagers do?"

They would not tell us children because we had been born among ghosts, were taught by ghosts, and were ourselves ghostlike. They called us a kind of

ghost. Ghosts are noisy and full of air; they talk during meals. They talk about anything.

"Do we send up signal kites? That would be a good idea, huh? We could fly them from the school balcony." Instead of cheaply stringing dragonflies by the tail, we could fly expensive kites, the sky splendid in Chinese colors, distracting ghost eyes while the new people sneak in. Don't tell. "Never tell."

Occasionally the rumor went about that the United States immigration authorities had set up headquarters in the San Francisco or Sacramento Chinatown to urge wetbacks and stowaways, anybody here on fake papers, to come to the city and get their files straightened out. The immigrants discussed whether or not to turn themselves in. "We might as well," somebody would say. "Then we'd have our citizenship for real."

"Don't be a fool," somebody else would say. "It's a trap. You go in there saying you want to straighten out your papers, they'll deport you."

"No, they won't. They're promising that nobody is going to go to jail or get deported. They'll give you citizenship as a reward for turning yourself in, for your honesty."

"Don't you believe it. So-and-so trusted them, and he was deported. They deported his children too."

"Where can they send us now? Hong Kong? Taiwan? I've never been to Hong Kong or Taiwan. The Big Six? Where?" We don't belong anywhere since the Revolution. The old China has disappeared while we've been away.

"Don't tell," advised my parents. "Don't go to San Francisco until they leave."

Lie to Americans. Tell them you were born during the San Francisco earthquake. Tell them your birth

certificate and your parents were burned up in the fire. Don't report crimes; tell them we have no crimes and no poverty. Give a new name every time you get arrested; the ghosts won't recognize you. Pay the new immigrants twenty-five cents an hour and say we have no unemployment. And, of course, tell them we're against Communism. Ghosts have no memory anyway and poor eyesight. And the Han people won't be pinned down.

Even the good things are unspeakable, so how could I ask about deformities? From the configurations of food my mother set out, we kids had to infer the holidays. She did not whip us up with holiday anticipation or explain. You only remembered that perhaps a year ago you had eaten monk's food, or that there was meat, and it was a meat holiday; or you had eaten moon cakes or long noodles for long life (which is a pun). In front of the whole chicken with its slit throat toward the ceiling, she'd lay out just so many pairs of chopsticks alternating with wine cups, which were not for us because they were a different number from the number in our family, and they were set too close together for us to sit at. To sit at one of those place settings a being would have to be about two inches wide, a tall wisp of an invisibility. Mother would pour Seagram's 7 into the cups and after a while, pour it back into the bottle. Never explaining. How can Chinese keep any traditions at all? They don't even make you pay attention, slipping in a ceremony and clearing the table before the children notice specialness. The adults get mad, evasive, and shut you up if you ask. You get no warning that you shouldn't wear a white ribbon in your hair until they hit you and give you the sideways glare for the rest of the day. They hit you if you wave brooms around or

drop chopsticks or drum them. They hit you if you wash your hair on certain days, or tap somebody with a ruler, or step over a brother whether it's during your menses or not. You figure out what you got hit for and don't do it again if you figured correctly. But I think that if you don't figure it out, it's all right. Then you can grow up bothered by "neither ghosts nor deities." "Gods you avoid won't hurt you." I don't see how they kept up a continuous culture for five thousand years. Maybe they didn't; maybe everyone makes it up as they go along. If we had to depend on being told, we'd have no religion, no babies, no menstruation (sex, of course, unspeakable), no death.

I thought talking and not talking made the difference between sanity and insanity. Insane people were the ones who couldn't explain themselves. There were many crazy girls and women. Perhaps the sane people stayed in China to build the new, sane society. Or perhaps our little village had become odd in its isolation. No other Chinese, neither the ones in Sacramento, nor the ones in San Francisco, not Hawaii speak like us. Within a few blocks of our house were half a dozen crazy women and girls, all belonging to village families.

There was the woman next door who was chatty one moment—inviting us children to our first "sky movie"—and shut up the next. Then we would see silver heat rise from her body; it solidified before our eyes. She made us afraid, though she said nothing, did nothing. Her husband threw the loudspeaker out the window and drove home fast in the middle of the show. She sat like stone in the front seat; he had to open the door for her and help her out. Whe slammed the door. After they went inside, we could hear doors slamming throughout their house. They

did not have children, so it was not children slamming doors. The next day, she disappeared, and people would say she had been taken to Napa or Agnew. When a woman disappeared or reappeared after an absence, people whispered, "Napa." "Agnew." She had been locked up before. Her husband rented out the house and also went away. The last time he had left town, he had been single. He had gone back to China, where he had bought her and married her. Now while she was locked up in the asylum, he went, people said, to the Midwest. A year or two passed. He returned to Napa to drive her home. As a present, he had brought with him from the Midwest a child, half Chinese and half white. People said it was his illegitimate son. She was very happy to have a son to raise in her old age, although I saw that the boy hit her to get candy and toys. She was the one who died happy, sitting on the steps after cooking dinner.

There was Crazy Mary, whose family were Christian converts. Her mother and father had come to the Gold Mountain leaving Mary, a toddler, in China. By the time they made enough money to send for her, having replaced the horse and vegetable wagon with a truck, she was almost twenty and crazy. Her parents often said, "We thought she'd be grown but young enough to learn English and translate for us." Their other children, who were born in the U.S., were normal and could translate. I was glad that I was born nine months after my mother emigrated. Crazy Mary was a large girl and had a big black mole on her face, which is a sign of fortune. The black mole pulls you forward with its power; a mole at the back of the head pulls you back. She seemed cheerful, but pointed at things that were not there. I disliked looking at her; you never knew what you were going to

Penguin Books 1993

Days of Obligation

An Argument with My Mexican Father

Richard Rodriguez

CHAPTER THREE

Mexico's Children

When I was a boy it was still possible for Mexican farmworkers in California to commute between the past and the future.

The past returned every October. The white sky clarified to blue and fog opened white fissures in the landscape.

After the tomatoes and the melons and the grapes had been picked, it was time for Mexicans to load up their cars and head back into Mexico for the winter.

The schoolteacher said aloud to my mother what a shame it was the Mexicans did that—took their children out of school.

Like wandering Jews, Mexicans had no true home but the tabernacle of memory.

The schoolteacher was scandalized by what she took as the Mexicans' disregard of their children's future. The children failed their tests. They made no friends. What did it matter? Come November, they would be gone to some bright world that smelled like the cafeteria on Thursdays—Bean Days. Next spring they would be enrolled in some other school, in some other Valley town.

The schoolroom myth of America described an ocean—immigrants leaving behind several time zones and all the names for things.

Mexican-American memory described proximity. There are large Mexican-American populations in Seattle and Chicago and Kansas City, but the majority of Mexican Americans live, where most have always lived, in the Southwestern United States, one or two hours from Mexico, which is within the possibility of recourse to Mexico or within the sound of her voice.

My father knew men in Sacramento who had walked up from Mexico.

There is confluence of earth. The cut of the land or its fold, the bleaching sky, the swath of the wind, the length of shadows—all these suggested Mexico. Mitigated was the sense of dislocation otherwise familiar to immigrant experience.

By November the fog would thicken, the roads would be dangerous. Better to be off by late October. Families in old trucks and cars headed south down two-lane highways, past browning fields. Rolls of toilet paper streaming from rolled-down windows. After submitting themselves to the vegetable cycle of California for a season, these Mexicans were free. They were Mexicans! And what better thing to be?

HAIIII-EEE. HAI. HAI. HAI.

There is confluence of history.

Cities, rivers, mountains retain Spanish names. California was once Mexico.

The fog closes in, condenses, and drips day and night from the bare limbs of trees. And my mother looks out the kitchen window and cannot see the neighbor's house.

Amnesia fixes the American regard of the past. I remember a graduate student at Columbia University during the Vietnam years; she might have been an ingenue out of Henry James. "After

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Vietnam, I'll never again believe that America is the good and pure country I once thought it to be," the young woman said.

Whereas Mexican Americans have paid a price for the clarity of their past.

Consider my father: when he decided to apply for American citizenship, my father told no one, none of his friends, those men with whom he had come to this country looking for work. American citizenship would have seemed a betrayal of Mexico, a sin against memory. One afternoon, like a man with something to hide, my father slipped away. He went downtown to the Federal Building in Sacramento and disappeared into America.

Now memory takes her revenge on the son.

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VETE PERO NO ME OLVIDES.

Go, but do not forget me, someone has written on the side of a building near the border in Tijuana.

Mexicans may know their souls are imperiled in America but they do not recognize the risk by its proper name.

Two Mexican teenagers say they are going to *los Estados Unidos* for a job. Nothing more.

For three or four generations now, Mexican villages have lived under the rumor of America, a rumor vaguer than paradise. America exists in thousands of maternal prayers and in thousands of pubescent dreams. Everyone knows someone who has been. Everyone knows someone who never came back.

What do you expect to find?

The answer is always an explanation for the journey: "I want money enough to be able to return to live with my family in Mexico."

Proofs of America's existence abound in Mexican villages—stereo equipment, for example, or broken-down cars—but these are things Americans picked up or put down, not America.

Mexicans know very little of the United States, though they have seen America, the TV show, and America, the movie. Mexico's pre-eminent poet, Octavio Paz, writes of the United States as an idea of no characteristic mansion or spice. Paz has traveled and taught in America, but his writings relegate America to ineluctability—a jut of optimism, an aerodynamic law.

To enter America, which is invisible, Mexicans must become invisible. Tonight, a summer night, five hundred Mexicans will become invisible at 8:34 P.M. While they wait, they do not discuss Tom Paine or Thomas Jefferson or the Bill of Rights. Someone has an uncle in Los Angeles who knows a peach farmer near Tracy who always hires this time of year.

Compared with pulpy Mexico, grave Mexico, sandstone Mexico, which takes the impression of time, the United States and its promise of the future must seem always hypothetical—occasion more than place.

I once had occasion to ask a middle-class Mexican what he admires about the United States (a provocative question because, according to Mexican history and proverb, there is nothing about the United States to admire). He found only one disembodied word: "organization." When I pressed the man to anthropomorphize further he said, "Deliveries get made, phones are answered, brakes are repaired" (indirect constructions all, as if by the consent of unseen hands).

Coming from Mexico, a country that is so thoroughly *there*, where things are not necessarily different from when your father was your age, Mexicans are unable to puncture the abstraction. For Mexicans, even death is less abstract than America.

Mexican teenagers waiting along the levee in Tijuana are bound to be fooled by the United States because they do not yet realize the future will be as binding as the past. The American job will

introduce the Mexican to an industry, an optimism, a solitude nowhere described in Mexico's theology.

How can two Mexican teenagers know this, clutching the paper bags their mamas packed for them this morning? The past is already the future, for the bags contain only a change of underwear. These two may have seen *Dallas* on TV and they may think they are privy to the logic and locution of America. But that is not the same thing as having twenty American dollars in their own pockets.

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Mexico, mad mother. She still does not know what to make of our leaving. For most of this century Mexico has seen her children flee the house of memory. During the Revolution 10 percent of the population picked up and moved to the United States; in the decades following the Revolution, Mexico has watched many more of her children cast their lots with the future; head north for work, for wages; north for life. Bad enough that so many left, worse that so many left her for the gringo.

America wanted cheap labor. American contractors reached down into Mexico for men to build America. Sons followed fathers north. It became a rite of passage for the poor Mexican male.

I will send for you or I will come home rich.

I would see them downtown on Sundays—men my age drunk in Plaza Park. I was still a boy at sixteen, but I was an American. At sixteen, I wrote a gossip column, "The Watchful Eye," for my school paper.

Or they would come into town on Monday nights for the wrestling matches or on Tuesday nights for boxing. They worked on ranches over in Yolo County. They were men with time on their hands. They were men without women. They were Mexicans without Mexico.

On Saturdays, Mexican men flooded the Western Union office, where they sent money—money turned into humming wire and then turned back into money—all the way down into Mexico. America was a monastery. America was a vow of poverty. They kept themselves poor for Mexico.

Fidel, the janitor at church, lived over the garage at the rectory. Fidel spoke Spanish and was Mexican. He had a wife down there, people said; some said he had grown children. But too many years had passed and he didn't go back. Fidel had to do for himself. Fidel had a clean piece of linoleum on the floor; he had an iron bed; he had a table and a chair; he had a frying pan and a knife and a fork and a spoon. Everything else Fidel sent back to Mexico. Sometimes, on summer nights, I would see his head through the bars of the little window over the garage of the rectory.

My parents left Mexico in the twenties: she as a girl with her family; he as a young man, alone. To tell different stories. Two Mexicos. At some celebration—we went to so many when I was a boy—a man in the crowd filled his lungs with American air to crow over all, ¡VIVA MEXICO! Everyone cheered. My parents cheered. The band played louder. Why VIVA MEXICO? The country that had betrayed them? The country that had forced them to live elsewhere?

I remember standing in the doorway of my parents' empty bedroom.

Mexico was memory—not mine. Mexico was mysteriously both he and she, like this, like my parents' bed. And over my parents' bed floated the Virgin of Guadalupe in a dimestore frame. In its most potent guise, Mexico was a mother like this queen. Her lips curved like a little boat. *Tú*. *Tú*. The suspirate vowel. *Tú*. The ruby pendant. The lemon tree. The song of the dove. Breathed through the nose, perched on the lips.

Two voices, two pronouns were given me as a child, like good and bad angels, like sweet and sour milks, like rank and clement weathers; one yielding, one austere.

In the sixteenth century, Spain bequeathed to Mexico two forms of address, two versions of "you": In Mexico there is *tú* and there is *usted*.

In Sacramento, California, everything outside our house was English, was "you"—hey you. My dog was you. My parents were you. The nuns were you. My best friend, my worst enemy was you. God was You.

Whereas the architecture of Mexico is the hardened shell of a Spanish distinction.

Treeless, open plazas abate at walls; walls yield to refreshment, to interior courtyards, to shuttered afternoons.

At the heart there is *tú*—the intimate voice—the familiar room in a world full of rooms. *Tú* is the condition, not so much of knowing, as of being known; of being recognized. *Tú* belongs within the family. *Tú* is spoken to children and dogs, to priests; among lovers and drunken friends; to servants; to statues; to the high court of heaven; to God Himself.

The shaded arcade yields once more to the plaza, to traffic and the light of day. *Usted*, the formal, the bloodless, the ornamental you, is spoken to the eyes of strangers. By servants to masters. *Usted* shows deference to propriety, to authority, to history. *Usted* is open to interpretation; therefore it is subject to corruption, a province of politicians. *Usted* is the language outside Eden.

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In Mexico, one is most oneself in private. The very existence of *tú* must undermine the realm of *usted*. In America, one is most oneself in public.

In order to show you America I would have to take you out. I would take you to the restaurant—OPEN 24 HOURS—alongside

a freeway, any freeway in the U.S.A. The waitress is a blond or a redhead—not the same color as at her last job. She is divorced. Her eyebrows are jet-black migraines painted on, or relaxed, clownish domes of cinnamon brown. Morning and the bloom of youth are painted on her cheeks. She is at once antimaternal—the kind of woman you're not supposed to know—and supramaternal, the nurturer of lost boys.

She is the priestess of the short order, curator of the apple pie. She administers all the consolation of America. She has no illusions. She knows the score; she hands you the Bill of Rights printed on plastic, decorated with an heraldic tumble of French fries and drumsticks and steam.

Your table may yet be littered with bitten toast and spilled coffee and a dollar tip. Now you will see the greatness of America. As one complete gesture, the waitress pockets the tip, stacks dishes along one strong forearm, produces a damp rag soaked in lethe water, which she then passes over the Formica.

There! With that one swipe of the rag, the past has been obliterated. The Formica gleams like new. You can order anything you want.

If I were to show you Mexico, I would take you home; with the greatest reluctance I would take you home, where family snapshots crowd upon the mantel. For the Mexican, the past is firmly held from within. While outside, a few miles away in the American city, there is only loosening, unraveling; generations living apart. Old ladies living out their lives in fiercely flowered housedresses. Their sons are divorced; wear shorts, ride bikes; are not men, really; not really. Their granddaughters are not fresh, are not lovely or keen, are not even nice.

Seek the Mexican in the embrace of the family, where there is much noise. The family stands as a consolation, because in the certainty of generation there is protection against an uncertain

future. At the center of this gravity the child is enshrined. He is not rock-a-bye baby at the very top of the family tree, as it is with American families. The child does not represent distance from the past, but reflux. She is not expected to fly away, to find herself. He is not expected to live his own life.

I will send for you or I will come home rich.

The culture of *tú* is guarded by the son, desired by the son, enforced by the son. Femininity is defined by the son as motherhood. Only a culture so cruel to the wife could sustain such a sentimental regard for *mamacita*. By contrast, much license is appropriated by the Mexican male. If the brother is taught to hover—he is guarding his sister's virginity—the adolescent male is otherwise, elsewhere, schooled in seduction. For the male as for the female, sexuality is expressed as parenthood. The male, by definition, is father. The husband is always a son.

It is not coincidental that American feminists have borrowed the Spanish word *macho* to name their American antithesis. But in English, the macho is publicly playful, boorish, counter-domestic. American macho is drag—the false type for the male —as Mae West is the false type for the female.

Machismo in Mexican Spanish is more akin to the Latin *gravitas*. The male is serious. The male provides. The Mexican male never abandons those who depend upon him. The male remembers.

Mexican *machismo*, like Mexican politics, needs its mise-en-scène. In fair Verona, in doublet and hose, it might yet play. The male code derives less from efficacy than from valor. *Machismo* is less an assertion of power or potency than it is a rite of chivalry.

The *macho* is not urbane Gilbert Roland or the good guy Lee Trevino; he is more like Bobby Chacon, the slight, leathery,

middle-aged boxer, going twelve rounds the night after his wife commits suicide. The *macho* holds his own ground. There is sobriety in the male, and silence, too—a severe limit on emotional range. The male isn't weak. The male wins a Purple Heart or he turns wife beater. The male doesn't cry.

Men sing in Mexico. In song, the male can admit longing, pain, desire, weakness.

HAIII-EEEE.

A cry like a comet rises over the song. A cry like mock-weeping tickles the refrain of Mexican love songs. The cry is meant to encourage the balladeer—it is the raw edge of his sentiment. HAI-II-EEE. It is the man's sound. A ticklish arching of semen, a node wrung up a guitar string, until it bursts in a descending cascade of mockery. HAI. HAI. HAI. The cry of the jackal under the moon, the whistle of the phallus, the maniacal song of the skull.

So it may well be Mama who first realizes the liberation of the American "you," the American pan-*usted*, the excalibur "I" which will deliver her from the Islamic cloister of Mexico. (*Tú.*)

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A true mother, Mexico would not distinguish among her children. Her protective arm extended not only to the Mexican nationals working in the United States, but to the larger number of Mexican Americans as well. Mexico was not interested in passports; Mexico was interested in blood. No matter how far away you moved, you were still related to her.

In 1943, American sailors in Los Angeles ventured into an evil vein of boredom. They crashed the east side of town, where they beat up barrio teenagers dressed in the punk costume of their day. "The Zoot Suit Riots" lasted several nights. City officials went to bed early, and the Los Angeles press encouraged what

it termed high-spirited sailors. It required the diplomatic protest of the Mexican ambassador and the consequent intervention of the U.S. secretary of state to end the disturbances.

Mexico sent cables of protest to Washington whenever she heard of the mistreatment of Mexican nationals. In a city as small as Sacramento in the 1950s, there was a Mexican consulate—a small white building downtown, in all ways like an insurance office, except for the seal of Mexico over the door. For decades, at offices like this one, Mexicans would find a place of defense in the U.S.A.

In 1959, Octavio Paz, Mexico's sultan son, her clever one—philosopher, poet, statesman—published *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, his reflections on Mexico. Within his labyrinth, Paz places as well the Mexican American. He writes of the *pachuco*, the teenage gang member, and, by implication, of the Mexican American: "The *pachuco* does not want to become a Mexican again; at the same time he does not want to blend into the life of North America. His whole being is sheer negative impulse, a tangle of contradictions, an enigma."

This was Mother Mexico talking, her good son; this was Mexico's metropolitan version of Mexican Americans. Mexico had lost language, lost gods, lost ground. Mexico recognized historical confusion in us. We were Mexico's Mexicans.

When we return to Mexico as *turistas*, with our little wads of greenbacks, our credit cards, our Japanese cameras, our Bermuda shorts, our pauses for directions and our pointing fingers, Mexico condescends to take our order (our order in halting Spanish), *claro señor*. But the table is not cleared; the table will never be cleared. Mexico prefers to reply in English, as a way of saying:

¡Pocho!

The Mexican American who forgets his true mother is a *pocho*, a person of no address, a child of no proper idiom.

But blood is blood, or perhaps, in this case, language is blood. Mexico worried. Mexico had seen her children lured by the gringo's offer of work. During the Great Depression, as the gringo's eyes slowly drained of sugar, thousands of Mexicans in the United States were rounded up and deported.

In 1938, my mother's brother returned to Mexico with only a curse for the United States of America. He had worked at construction sites throughout California and he was paid less than he had contracted for. At his stupefaction—the money in his hand—the contractor laughed.

What's the matter, babe, can't you Mesicans count?

And who took him back, shrieks Mexico, thumping her breast. Who?

No wonder that Mexico would not entertain the idea of a "Mexican American" except as a fiction, a bad joke of history. And most Mexican Americans lived in barrios, apart from gringos; many retained Spanish, as if in homage to her. We were still her children.

As long as we didn't marry.

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pond alone for his first swim: this when the wood frogs and song sparrows had just started to sing. I was lolling in a patch of sunny grass, watching a pair of robins, listening to a kinglet and a phoebe, but, lest my delight seem unadulterated, also picking off my first tick of the season. Instead of forest lore, Wally has become adept at reading human beings (hunters are the only predators he flees), such as the precise moment every morning when he can jump on my bed without waking and angering me — or the extraordinary value I place on the welfare of the goofy parrot in the kitchen, versus the crows in the garden that he is encouraged to chase. They fly up into the basswood tree and razz him, then look for a hawk they can mob and mistreat.

from The Best American Essays 1998
Ed Cynthia Ozick

JAMAICA KINCAID

In History

FROM CALLALOO

WHAT TO CALL the thing that happened to me and all who look like me?

Should I call it history?

If so, what should history mean to someone like me?

Should it be an idea, should it be an open wound and each breath I take in and expel healing and opening the wound again and again, over and over, or is it a moment that began in 1492 and has come to no end yet? Is it a collection of facts, all true and precise details, and, if so, when I come across these true and precise details, what should I do, how should I feel, where should I place myself?

Why should I be obsessed with all these questions?

My history began like this: in 1492, Christopher Columbus discovered the New World. Since this is only a beginning and I am not yet in the picture, I have not yet made an appearance, the word "discover" does not set off an alarm, and I am not yet confused by this interpretation. I accept it. I am only taken by the personality of this quarrelsome, restless man. His origins are sometimes obscure; sometimes no one knows just where he really comes from, who he really was. His origins are sometimes quite vivid: his father was a tailor, he came from Genoa, he as a boy wandered up and down the Genoese wharf, fascinated by sailors and their tales of lands far away; these lands would be filled with treasures, as all things far away are treasures. I am far away, but I am not yet a treasure: I am not a part of this man's consciousness, he does not know of me, I do not yet have a name. And so the word

"discover," as it is applied to this New World, remains uninteresting to me.

He, Christopher Columbus, discovers this New World. That it is new only to him, that it had a substantial existence, physical and spiritual, before he became aware of it, does not occur to him. To cast blame on him now for this childlike immaturity has all the moral substance of a certificate given to a schoolgirl for good behavior. To be a well-behaved schoolgirl is not hard. When he sees this New World, it is really new to him: he has never seen anything like it before, it was not what he had expected, he had images of China and Japan, and, though he thought he was in China and Japan, it was not the China or Japan that he had fixed in his mind. He couldn't find enough words to describe what he saw before him: the people were new, the flora and fauna were new, the way the water met the sky was new, this world itself was new, it was the New World.

"If one does not know the names, one's knowledge of things is useless." This is attributed to Isidorus, and I do not know if this is the Greek Isidorus or the other Isidorus, the bishop of Seville; but now put it another way: to have knowledge of things, one must first give them a name. This, in any case, seems me to have been Christopher Columbus's principle, for he named and he named: he named places, he named people, he named things. This world he saw before him had a blankness to it, the blankness of the newly made, the newly born. It had no before — I could say that it had no history, but I would have to begin again, I would have to ask those questions again: What is history? This blankness, the one Columbus met, was more like the blankness of paradise; paradise emerges from chaos, and this chaos is not history; it is not a legitimate order of things. Paradise, then, is the arrangement of the ordinary and the extraordinary. But in such a way as to make it, paradise, seem as if it had fallen out of the clear air. Nothing about it suggests the messy life of the builder, the carpenter, the quarrels with the contractor, the people who are late with the delivery of materials, their defense which, when it is not accepted, is met with their back chat. This is an unpleasant arrangement; this is not paradise. Paradise is the thing just met when all the troublesome details have been vanquished, overcome.

Christopher Columbus met paradise. It would not have been

paradise for the people living there; they would have had the ordinary dreariness of living anywhere day after day, the ordinary dreariness of just being alive. But someone else's ordinary dreariness is another person's epiphany.

The way in which he wanted to know these things was not in the way of satisfying curiosity, or in the way of correcting an ignorance; he wanted to know them, to possess them, and he wanted to possess them in a way that must have been a surprise to him. His ideas kept not so much changing as evolving: he wanted to prove the world was round, and even that, to know with certainty that the world was round, that it did not come to an abrupt end at a sharp cliff from which one could fall into nothing; to know that is to establish a claim also. And then after the world was round, this round world should belong to his patrons, the king and queen of Spain; and then finding himself at the other side of the circumference and far away from his patrons, human and other kind, he loses himself, for it becomes clear: the person who really can name the thing gives it a life, a reality, that it did not have before. His patrons are in Spain, looking at the balance sheet: if they invest so much, will his journey yield a return to make the investment worthwhile? But he — I am still speaking of Columbus — is in the presence of something else.

His task is easier than he thought it would be; his task is harder than he could have imagined. If he had only really reached Japan or China, places like that already had an established narrative. It was not a narrative that these places had established themselves; it was a narrative that someone like him had invented, Marco Polo, for instance; but this world, China or Japan, in the same area of the world to him (even as this familiarity with each other — between China and Japan — would surprise and even offend the inhabitants of these places), had an order, and the order offered a comfort (the recognizable is always so comforting). But this new place, what was it? Sometimes it was just like Seville; sometimes it was like Seville but only more so; sometimes it was more beautiful than Seville. Mostly it was "marvelous," and this word "marvelous" is the word he uses again and again, and when he uses it, what the reader (and this is what I have been, a reader of this account of the journey, and the account is by Columbus himself) can feel, can hear, can see, is a great person whose small soul has been sundered

by something unexpected. And yet the unexpected turned out to be the most ordinary things: people, the sky, the sun, the land, the water surrounding the land, the things growing on the land.

What were the things growing on the land? I pause for this. What were the things growing on that land, and why do I pause for this?

I come from a place called Antigua. I shall speak of it as if no one has ever heard of it before; I shall speak of it as if it is just new. In the writings, in anything representing a record of the imagination of Christopher Columbus, I cannot find any expectation for a place like this. It is a small lump of insignificance, green, green, green, and green again. Let me describe this landscape again: it is green, and unmistakably so; another person, who would have a more specific interest, a painter, might say it is a green that often verges on blue, a green that often is modified by reds and yellows and even other more intense or other shades of green. To me, it is green and green and green again. I have no interest other than this immediate and urgent one: the landscape is green. For it is on this green landscape that, suddenly, I and the people who look like me made an appearance.

I, me. The person standing in front of you started to think of all this while really focused on something and someone else altogether. I was standing in my garden; my garden is in a place called Vermont; it is in a village situated in a place called Vermont. From the point of view of growing things, that is the gardener's, Vermont is not in the same atmosphere as that other place I am from, Antigua. But while standing in that place, Vermont, I think about the place I am from, Antigua. Christopher Columbus never saw Vermont at all; it never entered his imagination. He saw Antigua, I believe on a weekday, but if not, then it would have been a Sunday, for in this life there would have been only weekdays or Sundays, but he never set foot on it, he only came across it while passing by. My world then — the only world I might have known if circumstances had not changed, intervened, would have entered the human imagination, the human imagination that I am familiar with, the only one that dominates the world in which I live — came into being as a footnote to someone just passing by. By the time Christopher Columbus got to the place where I am from, the place that forms the foundation of the person you see before you, he was exhausted, he was sick of the whole thing, he longed for his

old home, or he longed just to sit still and enjoy the first few things that he had come upon. The first few things that he came on were named after things that were prominent in his thinking, his sponsors especially; when he came to the place I am from, he (it) had been reduced to a place of worship; the place I am from is named after a church. This church might have been an important church to Christopher Columbus, but churches are not important, originally, to people who look like me. And if people who look like me have an inheritance, among this inheritance will be this confusion of intent; nowhere in his intent when he set out from his point of embarkation (for him, too, there is not origin: he originates from Italy, he sails from Spain, and this is the beginning of another new traditional American narrative, point of origin and point of embarkation): "here is something I have never seen before, I especially like it because it has no precedent, but it is frightening because it has no precedent, and so to make it less frightening I will frame it in the thing I know; I know a church, I know the name of the church, even if I do not like or know the people connected to this church, it is more familiar to me, this church, than the very ground I am standing on; the ground has changed, the church, which is in my mind, remains the same."

I, the person standing before you, close the quotation marks. Up to this point, I and they that look like me am not yet a part of this narrative. I can look at all these events: a man setting sail with three ships, and after many, many days on the ocean, finding new lands whose existence he had never even heard of before, and then finding in these new lands people and their things and these people and their things, he had never heard of them before, and he empties the land of these people, and then he empties the people, he just empties the people. It is when this land is completely empty that I and the people who look like me begin to make an appearance, the food I eat begins to make an appearance, the trees I will see each day come from far away and begin to make an appearance, the sky is as it always was, the sun is as it always was, the water surrounding the land on which I am just making an appearance is as it always was; but these are the only things left from before that man, sailing with his three ships, reached the land on which I eventually make an appearance.

When did I begin to ask all this? When did I begin to think of

all this and in just this way? What is history? Is it a theory? I no longer live in the place where I and those who look like me first made an appearance. I live in another place. It has another narrative. Its narrative, too, can start with that man sailing on his ships for days and days, for that man sailing on his ships for days and days is the source of many narratives, for he was like a deity in the simplicity of his beliefs, in the simplicity of his actions; just listen to the straightforward way many volumes featuring this man sailing on his ships begin: "In fourteen hundred and ninety-two . . ." But it was while standing in this other place, which has a narrative mostly different from the place in which I make an appearance, that I began to think of this.

One day, while looking at the things that lay before me at my feet, I was having an argument with myself over the names I should use when referring to the things that lay before me at my feet. These things were plants. The plants, all of them and they were hundreds, had two names: they had a common name — that is, the name assigned to them by people for whom these plants have value — and then they have a proper name, or a Latin name, and that is a name assigned to them by an agreed-on group of botanists. For a long time I resisted using the proper names of the things that lay before me. I believed that it was an affectation to say "eupatorium" when you could say "joe-pye weed." I then would only say "joe-pye weed." The botanists are from the same part of the world as the man who sailed on the three ships, that same man who started the narrative from which I trace my beginning. And in a way, too, the botanists are like that man who sailed on the ships: they emptied the worlds of things animal, mineral, and vegetable of their names, and replaced these names with names pleasing to them; the recognized names are now reasonable, as reason is a pleasure to them.

Carl Linnaeus was born on May 23, 1707, somewhere in Sweden. (I know where, but I like the highhandedness of not saying so.) His father's name was Nils Ingemarsson; the Ingemarssons were farmers. Apparently, in Sweden then, surnames were uncommon among ordinary people, and so the farmer would add "son" to his name or he was called after the farm on which he lived. Nils Ingemarsson became a Lutheran minister, and on doing so he wanted to have a proper surname, not just a name with "son"

attached to it. On his family's farm grew a linden tree. It had grown there for generations and had come to be regarded with reverence among neighboring farmers; people believed that misfortune would fall on you if you harmed this tree in any way. This linden tree was so well regarded that people passing by used to pick up twigs that had dropped from it and carefully place them at the base of the tree. Nils Ingemarsson took his surname from this tree: Linnaeus is the Latinized form of the Swedish word *lind*, which means linden. Other branches of this family who also needed a surname drew inspiration from this tree; some took the name Tiliander — the Latin word for linden is *tilia* — and some others who also needed a surname took the name Lindelius, from the same Swedish word *lind*.

Carl Linnaeus's father had a garden. I do not know what his mother had. His father loved growing things in this garden and would point them out to the young Carl, but when the young Carl could not remember the names of the plants, his father gave him a scolding and told him he would not tell him the names of any more plants. (Is this story true? But how could it not be?) He grew up not far from a forest filled with beech, a forest with pine, a grove filled with oaks, meadows. His father had a collection of rare plants in his garden (but what would be rare to him and in that place, I do not know). At the time Linnaeus was born, Sweden — this small country that I now think of as filled with well-meaning and benign people interested mainly in the well-being of children, the well-being of the unfortunate no matter their age — was the ruler of an empire, but the remains of it are visible only in the architecture of the main square of the capital of places like Estonia. And so what to make of all this, this small detail that is the linden tree, this large volume of the Swedish empire, and a small boy whose father was a Lutheran pastor? At the beginning of this narrative, the narrative that is Linnaeus, I have not made an appearance yet; the Swedes are not overly implicated in the Atlantic slave trade, not because they did not want to have a part in it, only because they weren't allowed to do so; other people were better at it than they.

He was called "the little botanist" because he would neglect his studies and go out looking for flowers; if even then he had already showed an interest in or the ability to name and classify plants, this

fact is not in any account of his life that I have come across. He went to university at Uppsala; he studied there with Olof Rudbeck. I can pause at this name, Rudbeck, and say rudbeckia, and say, I do not like rudbeckia. I never have it in my garden, but then I remember a particularly stately, beautiful yellow flower in a corner of my field garden, *Rudbeckia nitida,* growing there. He met Anders Celsius (the Celsius scale of temperature measurement), who was so taken with Linnaeus's familiarity and knowledge of botany that he gave Linnaeus free lodging in his house. Linnaeus became one of the youngest lecturers at the university. He went to Lapland and collected plants and insects native to that region of the world; he wrote and published an account of it called *Flora Lapponica.* In Lapland, he acquired a set of clothing that people native to that region of the world wore on festive occasions; I have seen a picture of him dressed in these clothes, and the caption under the picture says that he is wearing his Lapland costume. Suddenly I am made a little uneasy, for just when is it that other people's clothes become your costume? But I am not too uneasy, I haven't really entered this narrative yet, I shall soon. In any case, I do not know the Laplanders, they live far away, I don't believe they look like me.

I enter the picture only when Linnaeus takes a boat to Holland. He becomes a doctor to an obviously neurotic man (obvious only to me, I arbitrarily deem him so; no account of him I have ever come across has described him so) named George Clifford. George Clifford is often described as a rich merchant banker; just like that, a rich merchant banker, and this description often seems to say that to be a rich merchant banker is just a type of person one could be, an ordinary type of person, anyone could be that. And now how to go on, for on hearing that George Clifford was a rich merchant in the eighteenth century, I now am sure I have become a part of the binomial-system-of-plant-nomenclature narrative.

George Clifford had glass houses full of vegetable material from all over the world. This is what Linnaeus writes of it:

> I was greatly amazed when I entered the greenhouses, full as they were of so many plants that a son of the North must feel bewitched, and wonder to what strange quarter of the globe he had been transported. In the first house were cultivated an abundance of flowers from southern Europe, plants from Spain, the South of France, Italy, Sicily and the isles of Greece. In the second were treasures from Asia, such as Poincianas, coconut and other palms, etc.; in the third, Africa's strangely shaped, not to say misshapen plants, such as the numerous forms of Aloe and Mesembryanthemum families, carnivorous flowers, Euphorbias, Crassula and Proteas species, and so on. And finally in the fourth greenhouse were grown the charming inhabitants of America and the rest of the New World; large masses of Cactus varieties, orchids, cruciferea, yams, magnolias, tulip-trees, calabash trees, arrow, cassias, acacias, tamarinds, pepper-plants, Anona, manicinilla, cucurbitaceous trees and many others, and surrounded by these, plantains, the most stately of all the world's plants, the most beauteous Hernandia, silver-gleaming species of Protea and camphor trees. When I then entered the positively royal residence and the extremely instructive museum, whose collections no less spoke in their owner's praise, I, a stranger, felt completely enraptured, as I had never before seen its like. My heartfelt wish was that I might lend a helping hand with its management.

In almost every account of an event that has taken place sometime in the last five hundred years, there is always a moment when I feel like placing an asterisk somewhere in its text, and at the end of this official story place my own addition. This chapter in the history of botany is such a moment. But where shall I begin? George Clifford is interesting — shall I look at him? He has long ago entered my narrative; I now feel I must enter his. What could it possibly mean to be a merchant banker in the eighteenth century? He is sometimes described as making his fortune in spices. Only once have I come across an account of him that says he was a director of the Dutch East India Company. The Dutch East India Company would not have been involved in the Atlantic trade in human cargo from Africa, but human cargo from Africa was a part of world trade. To read a brief account of the Dutch East India trading company in my very old encyclopedia is not unlike reading the label on an old can of paint. The entry mentions dates, the names of Dutch governors or people acting in Dutch interest; it mentions trade routes, places, commodities, incidents of war between the Dutch and other European people; it never mentions the people who lived in the area of the Dutch trading factories. Places like Ceylon, Java, the Cape of Good Hope, are emptied of

their people as the landscape itself was emptied of the things they were familiar with, the things that Linnaeus found in George Clifford's greenhouse.

"If one does not know the names, one's knowledge of things is useless." It was in George Clifford's greenhouse that Linnaeus gave some things names. The Adam-like quality of this effort was lost on him. "We revere the Creator's omnipotence," he says, meaning, I think, that he understood he had not made the things he was describing, he was only going to give them names. And even as a relationship exists between George Clifford's activity in the world, the world as it starts out on ships leaving the seaports of the Netherlands, traversing the earth's seas, touching on the world's peoples and the places they are in, the things that have meant something to them being renamed and a whole new set of narratives imposed on them, narratives that place them at a disadvantage in relationship to George Clifford and his fellow Dutch, even as I can say all this in one breath or in one large volume, so too then does an invisible thread, a thread that no deep breath or large volume can contain, hang between Carolus Linnaeus, his father's desire to give himself a distinguished name, the name then coming from a tree, the linden tree, a tree whose existence was regarded as not ordinary, and his invention of a system of naming that even I am forced to use?

The invention of this system has been a good thing. Its narrative would begin this way: in the beginning, the vegetable kingdom was chaos; people everywhere called the same things by a name that made sense to them, not by a name that they arrived at by an objective standard. But who has an interest in an objective standard? Who would need one? It makes me ask again what to call the thing that happened to me and all who look like me? Should I call it history? And if so, what should history mean to someone who looks like me? Should it be an idea, should it be an open wound and each breath I take in and expel healing and opening the wound again and again, over and over, or is it a long moment that begins anew each day since 1492?

WILLIAM MAXWELL

Nearing Ninety

FROM THE NEW YORK TIMES MAGAZINE

OUT OF THE corner of my eye I see my ninetieth birthday approaching. It is one year and six months away. How long after that will I be the person I am now?

I don't yet need a cane, but I have a feeling that my table manners have deteriorated. My posture is what you would expect of someone addicted to sitting in front of a typewriter, but it was always that way. "Stand up straight," my father would say to me. "You're all bent over like an old man." It didn't bother me then and it doesn't now, though I agree that an erect carriage is a pleasure to see, in someone of any age.

I have regrets but there are not very many of them and, fortunately, I forget what they are. I forget names, too, but it is not yet serious. What I am trying to remember and can't, quite often my wife will remember. And vice versa. She is in and out during the day, but I know she will be home when evening comes, and so I am never lonely. Long ago, a neighbor in the country, looking at our flower garden, said, "Children and roses reflect their care." This is true of the very old as well.

Though there have been a great many changes in the world since I came into it on August 16, 1908, I try not to deplore. It is not constructive and there is no point in discouraging the young by invidious comparisons with the way things used to be.

I am not — I think I am not — afraid of dying. When I was seventeen I worked on a farm in southern Wisconsin, near Portage. It was no ordinary farm and not much serious farming was done there, but it had the look of a place that has been lived in,

Women Writing Resistance
ed. Jennifer Browdy de Hernandez
South End Press
2003

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We Are Ugly, But We Are Here

Edwidge Danticat

One of the first people murdered on our land was a queen. Her name was Anacaona and she was an Arawak Indian. She was a poet, dancer, and even a painter. She ruled over the western part of an island so lush and green that the Arawaks called it Ayiti, land of high. When the Spaniards came from across the sea to look for gold, Anacaona was one of their first victims. She was raped and killed and her village pillaged. Anacaona's land is now often called the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, a place of continuous political unrest. Thus, for some, it is easy to forget that this land was the first black republic, home to the first people of African descent to uproot slavery and create an independent nation in 1804.

I was born under Haiti's dictatorial Duvalier regime. When I was four, my parents left Haiti to seek a better life in the United States. I must admit that their motives were more economic than political, but as anyone who knows Haiti will tell you, economics and politics are intrinsically related; who is in power determines to a great extent whether or not people will eat.

I am thirty-four years old now and have spent more than two-thirds of my life in the United States. My most vivid childhood memories of Haiti involve sudden power failures, "blakawouts," we called them. During blackouts, I couldn't read, study, or watch

television, so I'd sit around a candle or a kerosene lamp and listen to stories from the elders in the house.

My grandmother was an old country woman who always felt displaced in the capital where we lived. She had nothing but her patched-up quilts and her stories to console her. She was the one who told me about Anacaona. I used to share a room with her, and I was in the room with her when she died. She was over a hundred years old. She died with her eyes wide open; I was the one who closed them. I still miss the countless stories she told us. However, I accepted her death very easily because death was always around.

As a little girl, I attended more than my share of funerals. My uncle and legal guardian was a Baptist minister and his family was expected to attend every funeral he presided over. I went to all the funerals in the same white lace dress. Perhaps it was because I attended so many funerals that I have such a strong feeling that death is not the end, that the people we put in the ground are going off to live somewhere else. But at the same time I believe they will always hover around to watch over us and guide us through our journeys.

When I was eight, my uncle's brother-in-law went on a long journey to cut cane in the Dominican Republic. He came back deathly ill. I remember his wife twirling feathers inside his nostrils and rubbing black pepper on his upper lip to make him sneeze. She strongly believed that if he sneezed, he would live. At night, it was my job to watch the sky above the house for signs of falling stars. In rural Haitian lore, when a star falls out of the sky, it means someone will die. A star did fall out of the sky and he did die.

I have childhood memories of Jean-Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier and his wife, Michèle, racing by in their Mercedes-Benz and throwing money out the window to the very poor children in our neighborhood. The children would nearly kill each other trying to catch a coin or a glimpse of Baby Doc and Michèle. One Christmas, it was announced on the radio that the First Lady would be giving away free toys at the palace. My cousins and I went to the palace and were nearly crushed in the mob of children who flooded the palace lawns.

These stories and memories bring the questions always buzzing to my head. What is my place now in all of this? What was my grandmother's place? What is the legacy of the daughters of Anacaona, the daughters of Haiti?

Watching the news reports, it is often hard to tell whether there are real living and breathing women in conflict-stricken places like Haiti. The evening news broadcasts only allow us brief glimpses of presidential coups, rejected boat people, and sabotaged elections. The women's stories never manage to make the front page. But they do exist.

Over the years, I have known women who, when the soldiers came to their homes in Haiti, would tell their children to lie still and play dead. I once met a woman whose sister was shot in her pregnant stomach because she was wearing a T-shirt with an "antimilitary image." I know a mother who was arrested and beaten for working with a pro-democracy group. Her body remains laced with scars where the soldiers put out their cigarettes on her flesh. At night, this woman still smells the ashes of cigarette butts that were stuffed, lit, inside her nostrils. In the same jail cell, this woman watched as paramilitary attachés raped her fourteen-year-old daughter at gunpoint. When mother and daughter took a tiny boat to the United States, the mother had no idea that her daughter was pregnant. Nor did she know that her child had gotten the HIV virus from one of the paramilitary men who had raped her. The offspring of the rape, her grandchild, was named Anacaona after the Arawak queen, because that family of women is from Léogane, the same region where Anacaona was murdered, the same region where my grandmother was born.

The infant Anacaona has a face which no longer shows any trace of indigenous blood, but her story echoes some of the first incidents of bloodshed in a land that has seen so much more than its share.

There is a Haitian saying that might upset the aesthetic sensibilities of some women. *"Nou lèd, nou la,"* it says. "We are ugly, but we are here." Like the modesty that is common in rural Haitian culture, this saying makes a deeper claim for poor Haitian women

than maintaining beauty, be it skin-deep or otherwise. For women like my grandmother, what is worth celebrating is the fact that we are here, that against all the odds, we exist. To women like my grandmother, who greeted each other with this saying when they met along a trail in the countryside, the very essence of life lies in survival. It is always worth reminding our sisters that we have lived yet another day to answer the roll call of an often painful and very difficult life. It is in this spirit that to this day a woman remembers to name her child Anacaona, a name which resonates both the splendor and agony of a past that haunts so many women, and men, today.

When they were enslaved, our foremothers believed that when they died their spirits would return to Africa, most specifically to a peaceful land we call Ginen, where gods and goddesses live. The women who came before me were women who spoke half of one language and half another. They spoke the French and Spanish of their colonizers mixed in with their own African language. These women seemed to be speaking in tongues when they prayed to their old gods, the ancient African spirits. Even though they were afraid that their old deities would no longer understand them, they invented a new language with which to describe their new surroundings, a language from which colorful phrases blossomed to fit the desperate circumstances. When these women greeted each other, they found themselves speaking in codes.

—How are we today, sister?

—I am ugly, but I am here.

These days, many of my sisters are greeting each other far away from the lands where they first learned to speak in tongues. Many have made it to other shores, after traveling endless miles on the high seas, on rickety boats that almost took their lives. On October 29, 2002, a woman, weakened by a long ocean journey, spotted land and leapt into the shallow tide. Others followed, including little girls and boys who risked breaking an arm or a leg rather than separate from their parents. These are only some of the thousands who reach American shores each year, only to be rounded up, shackled, and taken away, often sent back where they came from.

Eleven years ago, a mother jumped into the sea when she discovered that her baby daughter had died in her arms on a journey that she had hoped would take them to a brighter future. Mother and child, they sank to the bottom of an ocean which already holds millions of souls from the middle passage, the holocaust of the slave trade. That woman's sacrifice moved many of us to tears, even while it reminded us of a slew of past sacrifices made previously for all of us, so that we could be here.

The past is full of examples of our foremothers showing such deep trust in the sea that they would jump off slave ships and let the waves embrace them. They believed that the sea was the beginning and the end of all things, the road to freedom and their entrance to Ginen. These women, women like my grandmother who had taught me the story of Anacaona, the queen, have been part of the very construction of my being ever since I was a little girl.

My grandmother believed that if a life is lost, then another one springs up replanted somewhere else, the next life even stronger than the last. She believed that no one really dies as long as someone remembers, someone who will acknowledge that this person had, in spite of everything, been here. We are part of an endless circle, the daughters of Anacaona. We have stumbled, but have not fallen. We are ill-favored, but still we endure. Every once in a while, we must scream this as far as the wind can carry our voices. "Nou lèd, nou la!" We are ugly, but we are here!

And here to stay.

CHOICE: A TRIBUTE TO DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

[This address was made in 1972 at a Jackson, Mississippi restaurant that refused to serve people of color until forced to do so by the Civil Rights Movement a few years before.]

My great-great-great-grandmother walked as a slave from Virginia to Eatonton, Georgia—which passes for the Walker ancestral home—with two babies on her hips. She lived to be a hundred and twenty-five years old and my own father knew her as a boy. (It is in memory of this walk that I choose to keep and to embrace my "maiden" name, Walker.)

There is a cemetery near our family church where she is buried; but because her marker was made of wood and rotted years ago, it is impossible to tell exactly where her body lies. In the same cemetery are most of my mother's people, who have lived in Georgia for so long nobody even remembers when they

came. And all of my great-aunts and -uncles are there, and my grandfather and grandmother, and, very recently, my own father.

If it is true that land does not belong to anyone until they have buried a body in it, then the land of my birthplace belongs to me, dozens of times over. Yet the history of my family, like that of all black Southerners, is a history of dispossession. We loved the land and worked the land, but we never owned it; and even if we bought land, as my great-grandfather did after the Civil War, it was always in danger of being taken away, as his was, during the period following Reconstruction.

My father inherited nothing of material value from his father, and when I came of age in the early sixties I awoke to the bitter knowledge that in order just to continue to love the land of my birth, I was expected to leave it. For black people —including my parents—had learned a long time ago that to stay willingly in a beloved but brutal place is to risk losing the love and being forced to acknowledge only the brutality.

It is a part of the black Southern sensibility that we treasure memories; for such a long time, that is all of our homeland those of us who at one time or another were forced away from it have been allowed to have.

I watched my brothers, one by one, leave our home and leave the South. I watched my sisters do the same. This was not unusual; abandonment, except for memories, was the common thing, except for those who "could not do any better," or those whose strength or stubbornness was so colossal they took the risk that others could not bear.

In 1960, my mother bought a television set, and each day after school I watched Hamilton Holmes and Charlayne Hunter as they struggled to integrate—fair-skinned as they were—the University of Georgia. And then, one day, there appeared the face of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. What a funny name, I

thought. At the moment I first saw him, he was being handcuffed and shoved into a police truck. He had dared to claim his rights as a native son, and had been arrested. He displayed no fear, but seemed calm and serene, unaware of his own extraordinary courage. His whole body, like his conscience, was at peace.

At the moment I saw his resistance I knew I would never be able to live in this country without resisting everything that sought to disinherit me, and I would never be forced away from the land of my birth without a fight.

He was The One, The Hero, The One Fearless Person for whom we had waited. I hadn't even realized before that we *had* been waiting for Martin Luther King, Jr., but we had. And I knew it for sure when my mother added his name to the list of people she prayed for every night.

I sometimes think that it was literally the prayers of people like my mother and father, who had bowed down in the struggle for such a long time, that kept Dr. King alive until five years ago. For years we went to bed praying for his life, and awoke with the question "Is the 'Lord' still here?"

The public acts of Dr. King you know. They are visible all around you. His voice you would recognize sooner than any other voice you have heard in this century—this in spite of the fact that certain municipal libraries, like the one in downtown Jackson, do not carry recordings of his speeches, and the librarians chuckle cruelly when asked why they do not.

You know, if you have read his books, that his is a complex and revolutionary philosophy that few people are capable of understanding fully or have the patience to embody in themselves. Which is our weakness, which is our loss.

And if you know anything about good Baptist preaching, you can imagine what you missed if you never had a chance to hear Martin Luther King, Jr., preach at Ebeneezer Baptist Church.

You know of the prizes and awards that he tended to think very little of. And you know of his concern for the disinherited: the American Indian, the Mexican-American, and the poor American white—for whom he cared much.

You know that this very room, in this very restaurant, was closed to people of color not more than five years ago. And that we eat here together tonight largely through his efforts and his blood. We accept the common pleasures of life, assuredly, in his name.

But add to all of these things the one thing that seems to me second to none in importance: He gave us back our heritage. He gave us back our homeland; the bones and dust of our ancestors, who may now sleep within our caring *and* our hearing. He gave us the blueness of the Georgia sky in autumn as in summer; the colors of the Southern winter as well as glimpses of the green of vacation-time spring. Those of our relatives we used to invite for a visit we now can ask to stay. . . . He gave us full-time use of our own woods, and restored our memories to those of us who were forced to run away, as realities we might each day enjoy and leave for our children.

He gave us continuity of place, without which community is ephemeral. He gave us home.

1973

In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose
Alice Walker
Harcourt Brace Jovanovich - pub.
San Diego, New York, London
1983

Reimaging America: the arts of social change
New Society Publishers
1990

Bernice Johnson Reagon

Nurturing Resistance

There is money going overseas
To buy changes that will never come
Dollar-backed contras spill the blood of the people
In small nations we won't leave alone
There are contras in Nicaragua
U.S. trained death squads in El Salvador
I hear Jonas Savimbe holding hands with apartheid
Is being led to drink at the trough
U.S.A. sponsored violence
Creates refugees all over the world
They pour into LA, DC, and Arizona
Seeking Sanctuary from our guns
Meanwhile in the corporate board rooms
They talk about the debt as if it could be paid
But money borrowed and loaned for:
Guns you can't eat
And buildings you can't live
And trinkets you can't wear
It is a debt not owed by the people
There is money going overseas. . . .
To buy changes that will never come
Dollar-backed contras spill the blood of the people
In small nations we won't leave alone
—"Ode to the International Debt"

"Ode to the International Debt" is one of a group of songs I wrote when I spent a year at the Institute for Policy Studies. When I was asked to present something for their annual winter festival, I asked several of the research fellows to give me some of their latest papers on the state of the world from their particular area of research and analysis. I wanted to see if I could sing progressive contemporary analysis. I did a suite of six pieces; Sweet Honey in the Rock (the vocal group I work with), moved two of those works to performance level one year later. We continue to work on several others.

CULTURE OF STRUGGLE

I grew up in a culture of struggle where, without any specific spoken warning, I received clear messages of boundaries in all aspects of my life that were not to be crossed, rules that were not to be broken. I internalized these messages, thus setting up a control mechanism to protect myself against acting freely. I went around in life with this inner warning light or buzzer that would be triggered if I considered any action that was considered inappropriate behavior. There was a tape in my head that chanted, "If you do that you are going to be killed." This warning system worked to control my actions at home, in school, in church, and in the larger society. I am not here talking about a physical murder. I am talking about a fear of being shut out, cut off if you behaved in unacceptable ways. Within the home, the school, and the church, you had a sense that this structure of boundaries was set up by people who cared about you and wanted you to do well. They organized community structures so that all pressures would be applied to make you make the right choices. In the larger society, with its blatant racism, there were clearly marked places for you to live and function. When one considered challenging those narrow, twisted spaces, the inner buzzer 'em went crazy. You felt inside that you would be inviting total ruction if you considered behavior that was outside the parameters drawn by whites who controlled your community.

There was a life inside the boundaries. There were ways of being fed and centered on a worldview that made us know somewhere deep inside that life based on racism was wrong. That white people were not superior. We knew this best because we cleaned their homes, we took care of their children, we knew how they treated each other, we knew how they treated us. We knew they were not superior. Everywhere—in church, in school—we were drawn into powerful creative experiences that said that we were worthwhile, that there was a reason for us being alive, and it was not to serve white men and women. I had teachers who talked to us between the prescribed lessons to tell us in a hundred ways that things could change. I heard old men and women sing in church, "I'm so glad trouble don't last always." I thus also internalized the perspective that we as a people were living through a time that had to change, and we had to be prepared for functioning and living productive, respectable lives.

It was the Civil Rights Movement that taught me that one did not always get killed for going up against the powers that controlled your life. The movement taught me that if you went across the line, you were offering your life, but it was not always taken. The space between being alive and becoming conscious of my own beliefs and being killed belonged to me. I could, once I put my life where my beliefs were, really stand for what I felt deeply about. It was the first time my life really made sense as an empowered person. It was the first time I felt what I said and did made a difference. I could affect the space I operated in if I offered my life to back up my actions.

The relationship between singing and that struggle was crucial for me. The training for being a singing fighter had begun with learning about the role of music in African-American culture and the role of the artist in the leadership of the community.

Growing up in a traditionally based home and community, I had seen that it was important for leaders to also be cultural artists of great power. Content went beyond text; the virtuosity of delivery of a talk, sermon, or speech included both what was said and whether the speaker could tune her or his words with feelings. Information passed within the traditional forms of the African-American culture is concrete reality. It helps if one lives "the life one sings about," but the singing itself is a concrete offering that can be and is used by those gathered within the sound of the expression. Our people respond when information is heard and felt. We are culturally socialized to test experiences by how we feel when we sit under the power of someone's voice. This is talk that goes far beyond an aural experience. Exchanges between leaders and their constituents had to be transforming experiences where a bonding was created by all gathered, a community was formed in the process of giving and receiving through talk and song.

My central training was as a singer. I learned very early that I had to affect the space I sang in. The air that people breathed carried the sound of my voice as songleader joined by their own. I am now describing a feast of song, where that which is consumed is also created by the consumers, and what you take in is more than you give out because when you put it out, it is enlarged by the sounds of others who commit themselves to participate in the creation. Creating a congregational song means creating sound images that so affect the environment that people walk into you several blocks before they get to you as a source of the sound. Black people singing together is a pulling sound; when you hear it you want to go to it and to get in it. You want to belong to that group that is being born in that singing.

Having been trained in African-American southern communities to sing, I then was charged to go to schools to learn the way of the larger society. I trained in Western-structured institutions run by my people to be a scholar and scientist in the history of this nation. It was my

xperience in the Civil Rights Movement coming in the middle of these wo learning systems that made me reshape how I would try to operate n the world.

As a scholar at the Smithsonian Institution, I have made every ffort to do work that validates the presence of my people in this world s a vital and central part of who this country is. I have produced rograms that through research, analysis, and public presentations nake clear that African Americans belong to a world family of culture ased in Africa and that the most prolific sacred music form created in he twentieth century in the United States of America is the gospel nusic of the urban Black church.

"AMERICA"

I operate out of the assumption that I am the United States of America and that I am central to anything that is really happening in his country that is worthwhile. I recognize that I am a secret. I also ecognize that among the people who do pay attention to the fact of my existence and the existence of my people—our history, our contribu-ions, and our culture—we are presented as being subcultural, as if we are outside, the other—a tangent, a limb or something that if lost by the nain body, life would not be threatened. The inference is that if you, the Jnited States of America, lose us, you would still be. This is a lie, I know hat without me, there would not be a United States of America to talk about. My people are central to what is the main cultural power and fabric of this society. The distortion and outright denial of that fact are central to the lie perpetuated as myth that the culture of this country is not African-American at her core.

It is the same kind of mythology that is wrapped up in the owner-ship of terms like "America." Most of us say the word and we only see the United States of America. We do not see the Americas and all of its peoples and their cultures and their histories. The collective pysche of this society is based on denying the existence of a society that is multi-cultural and composed of many peoples and classes, existing in a world that is very small and dominated by women, children, and peoples of color. We steal the identity of being American from millions of others throughout the hemisphere who should share that identity equally in our minds and thus in our daily practice. When we use the term America as a synonym for the United States of America, we are denying other peoples their space, reality, hope, and territory.

Re-imagining America for me is smashing the mythology, and end-ing the robbery that is so basic to the general collective consciousness. Re-imaging America is to embrace the reality of the human community and life on the planet and to try to understand partnering with respon-sibility and love for all that makes up our universe as we understand it, as well as that which is still beyond our knowing.

CULTURALLY GROUNDED INTERNATIONALISM

All of my work has to do with my sense of being very central and being part of a larger constituency that is the heart of what this society can be. When I think of the future, I think of myself as being a part of laying the foundation for the evolution of a society where many peoples can live and share the same world without killing, exploiting, and ruling each other. Whenever I offer an image as a singer, as a scholar, it is that vision that drives my efforts. I also make clear that in this living and sharing the world with many peoples and cultures, I will always be an African American woman, and all my offerings will come from that base. That being in the world as a daughter of daughters of daughters of African parents is not a contradiction to being able to live in a multi-cultural society.

In the context of the African American community exp e, there are all of these songs that are about church or praying—information that says that black people are very conscious of what is going on in the larger world we live in and how it impacts on us. We are not a cocoon people. Our culture is constructed with internal bound-aries; there are always ways to enter and leave. In doing my work, I have continued to operate from that perspective. You don't have to move from your base in order to participate in the larger world; you don't have to obscure or go beyond your cultural soundings in order for peoples of other soundings to make use of your offerings.

The community I celebrate is that universe of progressive peoples who share with others a loose collection of values and ideals about human and environmental society. In my mind most of these people are culturally united. They do not in local communities always work to-gether. They may not really like each other. However, they do share a vision of a less oppressive society. They dream of a less violent world; they care intensively about whether there will be a tomorrow. When I speak through my singing and my research, it is that constituency I try to nurture and validate.

We come to you
You in every color of the rainbow
With your freedom and struggle stances
In every position of the moon and sun

We come to you
Offering our songs and the sounds of our mothers' mothers
In libation
To everyone of us
There really is a community
We have seen and felt and been held by you these ten years

There is a community we belong to without geographical boundaries
D.C., Atlanta, Berea, Chicago, East St. Louis, L.A., Toronto, Chiba, the Bay area, Newark, Seattle, Chapel Hill, Boston, Frankfurt, London, Richmond, Li. Rock, NYC, Denver, Albuquerque, Nashville, Brixton, New Orleans, Vancouver, Portland, Berlin, Albany, Durham, Tokyo, St. Louis, Detroit, St. Paul, Dallas, Peoria, Jamaica . . .

There really is a community
Lovers
Searchers
Movers into life
Fighters and builders
Of a place where military machines, hatred of women, abuse of children, homophobia, societal male suicide, racial bigotry, starvation, work that kills and cripples, social orders driven by greed, the U.S.A. invading whoever . . . this week.
Where this dying and acting out of fear, anger, and terror
will find no feeding ground
I wanna be there.

(written July 1983 for the tenth anniversary album release of Sweet Honey in the Rock, "We All . . . Everyone of Us.")

This community is everywhere . . . in order to do the nurturing, others like me must share in the ownership of the airwaves so that the ood we offer can be received from those who would eat from our palettes. Our visions of the world, the universe, and the future have very right to ride the waves and be accessible to all who would choose.

COMMUNITY OF ORGANIZERS

I sing to those who will listen. It is important to talk to the con-vinced. I am often asked if when Sweet Honey sings, "Aren't you singing o yourself?" The progressive community of this country is one of the most fragile in the world. We suffer from illusions of being in better shape than we are because we think it follows that if we are Ameri-ns, ve must be great! We are in great need of understanding ou nerability, our need for validation, maintenance, nurturing, and cele-oration. We need to learn how to be longtimers and not be forever imited by operating ahistorically and responding to crisis after crisis.

4 / In the Kitchen

by Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

We always had a gas stove in the kitchen, though electric cooking became fashionable in Piedmont, like using Crest toothpaste rather than Colgate, or watching Huntley and Brinkley rather than Walter Cronkite. But for us it was gas, Colgate, and good ole Walter Cronkite, come what may. We used gas partly out of loyalty to Big Mom, Mama's mama, because she was mostly blind and still loved to cook, and she could feel her way better with gas than with electric.

But the most important thing about our gas-equipped kitchen was that Mama used to do hair there. She had a "hot comb"—a fine-toothed iron instrument with a long wooden handle—and a pair of iron curlers that opened and closed like scissors: Mama would put them into the gas fire until they glowed. You could smell those prongs heating up.

I liked what that smell meant for the shape of my day. There was an intimate warmth in the women's tones as they talked with my mama while she did their hair. I knew what the women had been through to get their hair ready to be "done," because I would watch Mama do it to herself. How that

scorched kink could be transformed through grease and fire into a magnificent head of wavy hair was a miracle to me. Still is.

Mama would wash her hair over the sink, a towel wrapped round her shoulders, wearing just her half-slip and her white bra. (We had no shower until we moved down Rat Tail Road into Doc Wolverton's house, in 1954.) After she had dried it, she would grease her scalp thoroughly with blue Bergamot hair grease, which came in a short, fat jar with a picture of a beautiful colored lady on it. It's important to grease your scalp real good, my mama would explain, to keep from burning yourself.

Of course, her hair would return to its natural kink almost as soon as the hot water and shampoo hit it. To me, it was another miracle how hair so "straight" would so quickly become kinky again once it even approached some water.

My mama had only a few "clients" whose heads she "did"—and did, I think, because she enjoyed it, rather than for the few dollars it brought in. They would sit on one of our red plastic kitchen chairs, the kind with the shiny metal legs, and brace themselves for the process. Mama would stroke that red-hot iron, which by this time had been in the gas fire for half an hour or more, slowly but firmly through their hair, from scalp to strand's end. It made a scorching, crinkly sound, the hot iron did, as it burned its way through damp kink, leaving in its wake the straightest of hair strands, each of them standing up long and tall but drooping at the end, like the top of a heavy willow tree. Slowly, steadily, with deftness and grace, Mama's hands would transform a round mound of Odetta kink into a darkened swamp of everglades. The Bergamot made the hair shiny; the heat of the hot iron gave it a brownish-red cast. Once all the hair was as straight as God allows kink to get, Mama would take the well-heated curling iron and twirl the straightened strands into more or less

loosely wrapped curls. She claimed that she owed her strength and skill as a hairdresser to her wrists, and her little finger would poke out the way it did when she sipped tea. Mama was a southpaw, who wrote upside down and backwards to produce the cleanest, roundest letters you've ever seen.

The "kitchen" she would all but remove from sight with a pair of shears bought for this purpose. Now, the *kitchen* was the room in which we were sitting, the room where Mama did hair and washed clothes, and where each of us bathed in a galvanized tub. But the word has another meaning, and the "kitchen" I'm speaking of now is the very kinky bit of hair at the back of the head, where the neck meets the shirt collar. If there ever was one part of our African past that resisted assimilation, it was the kitchen. No matter how hot the iron, no matter how powerful the chemical, no matter how stringent the mashed-potatoes-and-lye formula of a man's "process," neither God nor woman nor Sammy Davis, Jr., could straighten the kitchen. The kitchen was permanent, irredeemable, invincible kink. Unassimilably African. No matter what you did, no matter how hard you tried, nothing could dekink a person's kitchen. So you trimmed it off as best you could.

When hair had begun to "turn," as they'd say, or return to its natural kinky glory, it was the kitchen that turned first. When the kitchen started creeping up the back of the neck, it was time to get your hair done again. The kitchen around the back, and nappy edges at the temples.

Sometimes, after dark, Mr. Charlie Carroll would come to have his hair done. Mr. Charlie Carroll was very light-complected and had a ruddy nose, the kind of nose that made me think of Edmund Gwenn playing Kris Kringle in *Miracle on 34th Street*. At the beginning, they did it after Rocky and I had gone to sleep. It was only later that we found out he had come to our house so Mama could iron his hair—not with

a hot comb and curling iron but with our very own Proctor-Silex steam iron. For some reason, Mr. Charlie would conceal his Frederick Douglass mane under a big white Stetson hat, which I never saw him take off. Except when he came to our house, late at night, to have his hair pressed.

(Later, Daddy would tell us about Mr. Charlie's most prized piece of knowledge, which the man would confide only after his hair had been pressed, as a token of intimacy. "Not many people know this," he'd say in a tone of circumspection, "but George Washington was Abraham Lincoln's daddy." Nodding solemnly, he'd add the clincher: "A white man told me." Though he was in dead earnest, this became a humorous refrain around the house—"a white man told me"—used to punctuate especially preposterous assertions.)

My mother furtively examined my daughters' kitchens whenever we went home for a visit in the early eighties. It became a game between us. I had told her not to do it, because I didn't like the politics it suggested of "good" and "bad" hair. "Good" hair was straight. "Bad" hair was kinky. Even in the late sixties, at the height of Black Power, most people could not bring themselves to say "bad" for "good" and "good" for "bad." They still said that hair like white hair was "good," even if they encapsulated it in a disclaimer like "what we used to call 'good.' "

Maggie would be seated in her high chair, throwing food this way and that, and Mama would be cooing about how cute it all was, remembering how I used to do the same thing, and wondering whether Maggie's flinging her food with her left hand meant that she was going to be a southpaw too. When my daughter was just about covered with Franco-American SpaghettiOs, Mama would seize the opportunity and wipe her clean, dipping her head, tilted to one side, down under the back of Maggie's neck. Sometimes, if she could get away with it, she'd even rub a curl between her fingers, just to make

sure that her bifocals had not deceived her. Then she'd sigh with satisfaction and relief, thankful that her prayers had been answered. No kink . . . yet. "Mama!" I'd shout, pretending to be angry. (Every once in a while, if no one was looking, I'd peek too.)

I say "yet" because most black babies are born with soft, silken hair. Then, sooner or later, it begins to "turn," as inevitably as do the seasons or the leaves on a tree. And if it's meant to turn, it *turns*, no matter how hard you try to stop it. People once thought baby oil would stop it. They were wrong.

Everybody I knew as a child wanted to have good hair. You could be as ugly as homemade sin dipped in misery and still be thought attractive if you had good hair. Jesus Moss was what the girls at Camp Lee, Virginia, had called Daddy's hair during World War II. I know he played that thick head of hair for all it was worth, too. Still would, if he could.

My own hair was "not a bad grade," as barbers would tell me when they cut my head for the first time. It's like a doctor reporting the overall results of the first full physical that he has given you. "You're in good shape" or "Blood pressure's kind of high; better cut down on salt."

I spent much of my childhood and adolescence messing with my hair. I definitely wanted straight hair. Like Pop's.

When I was about three, I tried to stick a wad of Bazooka bubble gum to that straight hair of his. I suppose what fixed that memory for me is the spanking I got for doing so: he turned me upside down, holding me by my feet, the better to paddle my behind. Little *nigger*, he shouted, walloping away. I started to laugh about it two days later, when my behind stopped hurting.

When black people say "straight," of course, they don't usually mean "straight" literally, like, say, the hair of Peggy Lipton (the white girl on *The Mod Squad*) or Mary of Peter,

Paul and Mary fame; black people call that "stringy" hair. No, "straight" just means not kinky, no matter what contours the curl might take. Because Daddy had straight hair, I would have done *anything* to have straight hair—and I used to try everything to make it straight, short of getting a process, which only riffraff were dumb enough to do.

Of the wide variety of techniques and methods I came to master in the great and challenging follicle prestidigitation, almost all had two things in common: a heavy, oil-based grease and evenly applied pressure. It's no accident that many of the biggest black companies in the fifties and sixties made hair products. Indeed, we do have a vast array of hair grease. And I have tried it all, in search of that certain silky touch, one that leaves neither the hand nor the pillow sullied by grease.

I always wondered what Frederick Douglass put on *his* hair, or Phillis Wheatley. Or why Wheatley has that rag on her head in the little engraving in the frontispiece of her book. One thing is for sure: you can bet that when Wheatley went to England to see the Countess of Huntington, she did not stop by the Queen's Coiffeur on the way. So many black people still get their hair straightened that it's a wonder we don't have a national holiday for Madame C. J. Walker, who invented the process for straightening kinky hair, rather than for Dr. King. Jheri-curled or "relaxed"—it's still fried hair.

I used all the greases, from sea-blue Bergamot, to creamy vanilla Duke (in its orange-and-white jar), to the godfather of grease, the formidable Murray's. Now, Murray's was some *serious* grease. Whereas Bergamot was like oily Jell-O and Duke was viscous and sickly sweet, Murray's was light brown and *hard*. Hard as lard and twice as greasy, Daddy used to say whenever the subject of Murray's came up. Murray's came in an orange can with a screw-on top. It was so hard that some people would put a match to the can, just to soften it and make it more manageable. In the late sixties, when Afros came

into style, I'd use Afro-Sheen. From Murray's to Duke to Afro-Sheen: that was my progression in black consciousness.

We started putting hot towels or washrags over our greased-down Murray's-coated heads, in order to melt the wax into the scalp and follicles. Unfortunately, the wax had a curious habit of running down your neck, ears, and forehead. Not to mention your pillowcase.

Another problem was that if you put two palmfuls of Murray's on your head, your hair turned white. Duke did the same thing. It was a challenge: if you got rid of the white stuff, you had a magnificent head of wavy hair. Murray's turned kink into waves. Lots of waves. Frozen waves. A hurricane couldn't have blown those waves around.

That was the beauty of it. Murray's was so hard that it froze your hair into the wavy style you brushed it into. It looked really good if you wore a part. A lot of guys had parts *cut* into their hair by a barber, with clippers or a straight-edge razor. Especially if you had kinky hair—in which case you'd generally wear a short razor cut, or what we called a Quo Vadis.

Being obsessed with our hair, we tried to be as innovative as possible. Everyone knew about using a stocking cap, because your father or your uncle or the older guys wore them whenever something really big was about to happen, secular or sacred, a funeral or a dance, a wedding or a trip in which you confronted official white people, or when you were trying to look really sharp. When it was time to be clean, you wore a stocking cap. If the event was really a big one, you made a new cap for the occasion.

A stocking cap was made by asking your mother for one of her hose, and cutting it with a pair of scissors about six inches or so from the open end, where the elastic goes up to the top of the thigh. Then you'd knot the cut end, and behold—a conical-shaped hat or cap, with an elastic band that you pulled down low on your forehead and down around your neck in

the back. A good stocking cap, to work well, had to fit tight and snug, like a press. And it had to fit that tightly because it *was* a press: it pressed your hair with the force of the hose's elastic. If you greased your hair down real good and left the stocking cap on long enough—*voilà*: you got a head of pressed-against-the-scalp waves. If you used Murray's, and if you wore a stocking cap to sleep, you got a *whole lot* of waves. (You also got a ring around your forehead when you woke up, but eventually that disappeared.)

And then you could enjoy your concrete 'do. Swore we were bad, too, with all that grease and those flat heads. My brother and I would brush it out a bit in the morning, so it would look—ahem—"natural."

Grown men still wear stocking caps, especially older men, who generally keep their caps in their top drawer, along with their cuff links and their see-through silk socks, their Maverick tie, their silk handkerchief, and whatever else they prize most.

A Murrayed-down stocking cap was the respectable version of the process, which, by contrast, was most definitely not a cool thing to have, at least if you weren't an entertainer by trade.

Zeke and Keith and Poochie and a few other stars of the basketball team all used to get a process once or twice a year. It was expensive, and to get one you had to go to Pittsburgh or D.C. or Uniontown, someplace where there were enough colored people to support a business. They'd disappear, then reappear a day or two later, strutting like peacocks, their hair burned slightly red from the chemical lye base. They'd also wear "rags" or cloths or handkerchiefs around it when they slept or played basketball. Do-rags, they were called. But the result was *straight* hair, with a hint of wave. No curl. Do-it-yourselfers took their chances at home with a concoction of mashed potatoes and lye.

The most famous process, outside of what Malcolm X describes in his *Autobiography* and maybe that of Sammy Davis, Jr., was Nat King Cole's. Nat King Cole had patent-leather hair.

"That man's got the finest process money can buy." That's what Daddy said the night Cole's TV show aired on NBC, November 5, 1956. I remember the date because everyone came to our house to watch it and to celebrate one of Daddy's buddies' birthdays. Yeah, Uncle Joe chimed in, they can do shit to his hair that the average Negro can't even *think* about—secret shit.

Nat King Cole was *clean*. I've had an ongoing argument with a Nigerian friend about Nat King Cole for twenty years now. Not whether or not he could sing; any fool knows that he could sing. But whether or not he was a handkerchief-head for wearing that patent-leather process.

Sammy Davis's process I detested. It didn't look good on him. Worse still, he liked to have a fried strand dangling down the middle of his forehead, shaking it out from the crown when he sang. But Nat King Cole's hair was a thing unto itself, a beautifully sculpted work of art that he and he alone should have had the right to wear.

The only difference between a process and a stocking cap, really, was taste; yet Nat King Cole—unlike, say, Michael Jackson—looked *good* in his process. His head looked like Rudolph Valentino's in the twenties, and some say it was Valentino that the process imitated. But Nat King Cole wore a process because it suited his face, his demeanor, his name, his style. He was as clean as he wanted to be.

I had forgotten all about Nat King Cole and that patent-leather look until the day in 1971 when I was sitting in an Arab restaurant on the island of Zanzibar, surrounded by men in fezzes and white caftans, trying to learn how to eat curried goat and rice with the fingers of my right hand, feeling two

million miles from home, when all of a sudden the old transistor radio sitting on top of a china cupboard stopped blaring out its Swahili music to play "Fly Me to the Moon" by Nat King Cole. The restaurant's din was not affected at all, not even by half a decibel. But in my mind's eye, I saw it: the King's sleek black magnificent tiara. I managed, barely, to blink back the tears.

Colored People: A Memoir
Henry Louis Gates, Jr.
Alfred A. Knopf - pub.
New York
1994

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Wendy Rose was born in 1948. Her father is full-blood Hopi, her mother Anglo-Miwok. She has published ten books of poetry, from *Hopi Roadrunner Dancing* (Greenfield Review Press, 1973), to *The Halfbreed Chronicles* (West End Press, 1985). Her work has appeared in over forty anthologies, including Duane Niatum's *Carriers of the Dream Wheel* (Harper & Row, 1975), Joseph Bruchac's *The Next World* (Crossing Press, 1978), and Jamake Highwater's *Words in the Blood* (New American Library, 1984). She has also published an anthropological study, *Aboriginal Tattooing in California* (Archeological Research Facility, University of California, Berkeley, 1979), and edited the *American Indian Quarterly* for a year. Rose teaches full time in the American Indian studies program at Fresno City College, and is program coordinator there.

I Tell You Now: Autobiographical Essays by Native American Writers

University of Nebraska Press: Lincoln & London

1987

I hate it when other people write about my alienation and anger. Even if it's true, I'm not proud of it. It has crippled me, made me sick, made me out of balance. It has also been the source of my poetry.

Writing this autobiographical essay has been the most difficult, most elusive task I have faced as a writer. I work hard to be less self-involved, less self-centered, less self-pitying. As readers and listeners have noted the angry or somber tone of my poems, I have struggled to lessen these things or, at least, keep them in proportion. I work toward balance and attempt to celebrate at least as often as I moan and rage. Everything I have ever written is fundamentally autobiographical, no matter what the topic or style; to state my life now in an orderly way with clear language is actually to restate, simplified, what has already been said. If I could just come right out and state it like that, as a matter of fact, I would not have needed the poetry. If I could look my childhood in the eye and describe it, I would not have needed to veil those memories in metaphor. If I had grown up with a comfortable identity, I would not need to explain myself from one or another persona. Poetry is both ultimate fact and ultimate fiction; nothing is more brutally honest and, at the same time, more thickly coded.

When I speak of bruises that rise on my flesh like blue marbles, do you understand that these are real bruises that have appeared on my flesh? Or has the metaphor succeeded in hiding the pain while producing the fact, putting it in a private place just for those readers and listeners who know me well enough to have seen the bruises? I live with ghosts and like anyone who lives with ghosts, I am trapped inside their circle. I long for someone to siphon off the pain, someone to tell it all to, someone to be amazed at how well I have survived. There is both a need for and a revulsion from pity. More than pity, I have needed respect. More than respect, I have needed to be claimed by someone as their own,

someone who is wanted. I have survived—and there is pride in that fact—but is my survival of any value? Is my survival different from the millions of survivals in the world? Or is its kinship with them the truth of the matter—that we are growing, reproducing, living together as relations? Is my survival the final proof I have needed that I belong here after all? Will I be missed someday?

When I was first approached for this essay, my response (which lasted for several months) was simply to insist that the editor take some body of my poetic work and let it speak for me. I must have decided that there is some reason to make my pain public, although I am enough of a coward to keep the greatest pain (and the greatest pleasure) to myself. Would releasing the secrets let loose a passion so great and so uncontrolled that it would destroy the poetry? I am told that I take risks. When I am told that, the tellers mean that I take risks artistically, in style or technique, in placing the words on the page just so in a way that other poets would have the sense or the training not to do. It is usually meant as a compliment.

Do you know what is the greatest risk of all? Someday I may be forced to see myself as in a sweat vision, wide open to the world. I may find that I am only that one I saw in the vision, no more, no less. I am only what you see. The vision is naked and cannot be tampered with. Is it enough? Will the voices that have always said I am not good enough be quiet? Is this worth the pain and the poetry? Will you be satisfied?

Facts: May 7, 1948. Oakland. Catholic hospital. Midwife nun, no doctor. Citation won the Kentucky Derby. Israel was born. The United Nations met for the first time. It was Saturday, the end of the baby boom or the beginning. Boom. Stephen's little sister. Daughter of Betty. Almost named Bodega, named Bronwen instead. Little brown baby with a tuft of black hair. Baptized in the arms of Mary and Joe. Nearly blind for ten years. Glasses. Catholic school. Nuns with black habits to their ankles. Heads encased in white granite. Rosary beads like hard apricots—measuring prayers, whipping wrists. Paced before the blackboard. Swore in Gaelic. Alone. Alone at home. Alone in the play yard. Alone at Mass. Alone on the street. Fed, clothed in World War II dresses, little more. Mom too sick to care; brother raised by grandparents. Alone. Unwatched. Something wrong with me; everyone knows but me. They all leave me alone. No friends. Confirmation. Patron Francis of Assisi. He understands. Public high school. Drugs, dropping out. Finally friends. Getting high, staying high. Very sick, hospital. No more drugs, no more

friends. Alone again. Married at eighteen. Tried to shoot me. Lasted three months. Again at nineteen. Lived in basement, then in trailer. Worked in Yosemite. Sold Indian crafts. Went on display. Drinking, fighting, he tried to burn down the house; he gave me the name Rose. Starved in Nevada; nearly died. Home. Eating again; got fat. College. Graduated in ten years. Went to grad school. Alone again. Met Arthur. Fell in love, still happy. Another ten years. Live in a nice house. Fresno. Have a swimming pool. Air conditioning. Have an old cat. Rent a typewriter. Teach. Work on doctorate. Two of us now. Moved to another planet, home.

Healing.

I am probably my mother. She bears my face but is lighter in complexion, taller, long-legged. She was thin enough as a girl to have been teased for it. Her eyebrows each come to a point in the center, little tepees at the top of her face. My brother inherited these, while I got her upward-turned nose and hair that thins at the temple. From my father I have coarse dark hair, a flatness of face and mouth, no waist, a body made of bricks. At different times, I have resembled each of them. I see myself in old photographs of my mother as a short, stocky, dark version of her, and others have seen my father in me, thinner, younger, lighter, female.

As much as I have come from them, the two of them threw me away. I am the part of them that they worked long and hard to cut off. I have never depended on them. I have floated into the distance, alone.

I have heard Indians joke about those who act as if they had no relatives. I wince, because I have no relatives. They live, but they threw me away—so, I do not have them. I am without relations. I have always swung back and forth between alienation and relatedness. As a child, I would run away from the beatings, from the obscene words, and always knew that if I could run far enough, then any leaf, any insect, any bird, any breeze could bring me to my true home. I knew I did not belong among people. Whatever they hated about me was a human thing; the nonhuman world has always loved me. I can't remember when it was otherwise. But I have been emotionally crippled by this. There is nothing romantic about being young and angry, or even about turning that anger into art. I go through the motions of living in society, but never feel a part of it. When my family threw me away, every human on earth did likewise.

I have been alone too much. I have been bitter too long. This part of me is not in balance. It has made me alien. This is something to pray about.

There is only one recent immigrant in my family. Sidney, my mother's father, came from England around the turn of the century. I don't know his father's name, but his mother was Christine. Early pictures of Sidney show a serious English schoolboy intent on his economic future. What he did in America was learn photography and operate a small studio in Berkeley for the rest of his life. He took misty portraits of young girls and babies, Victorian still-lifes, and sweeping panoramas of San Francisco Bay.

I don't remember being touched by Sidney at all, but he was my brother's greatest influence. Even today there is a British clip to my brother's speech. When I was in his house, Sidney was always on the other side of some door. I have wondered, too, why his middle name was "Valdez." And how he came to be so dark and brooding as a young man, so gray when old. Why did he leave England? Where did he meet Clare, the mountain girl from Mariposa, who would give birth to my mother?

Clare was born thirty years after the Gold Rush, in Bear Valley. Bear Creek branches from the Merced River near there, just down the mountain from Yosemite, rippling through oak-wooded grassy hills and bull-pines. Her mother and father were born there also; he was raised in a house that had belonged to John C. Fremont. Their people had ridden wagons west across the plains or had sailed around the Horn to find prosperity in a land newly claimed from Mexico. Clare's father, Maurice, was the son of German immigrants who had traveled from Missouri in a wagon train; there is a story told by his mother, Margaret, of how one night Indians came to steal the babies. Clare's mother, Elizabeth, had a noble and well-documented lineage. Her people were known by name all the way back to the eighth century on the Scottish side and to the Crusades on the Irish. The dominant thread in her ancestry crossed into Britain with William the Conqueror, part of the family rumored to have been related to him through one of his brothers. The Normans of my mother's background are very well documented and include the modern Lord Dunboyne, although our branch of the Dunboynes split from his during the seventeenth century. This Norman part of the family included Butlers and Massys, Barretts and Percys, Le Petits and de Berminghams—names that fiercely colonized Ireland and settled on stolen land. Among

the parts of Ireland that they stole were certain women: O'Brien of Thomond, McCarthy Reagh, Carthach of Muskerry, all representing royal native Irish families. Another thread can be followed to the Scottish Highlands and to royal Celtic and Pictish families via the Clans MacInnes and Drummond.

By the time Clare was born in the 1880s, the family had included an Indian man, most probably Miwok. Clare's blond hair and transparently blue eyes belied that less well-known (and possibly involuntary) heritage, but the native blood reappeared in my mother. How many almost-comic photographs do I have of the sharp-faced blond and delicate lady who sits before the long-faced mustached Englishman and, between them, holds the chubby little girl with the dark round face, that little Indian baby?

Late in the summer of 1984, I received a package from my mother's cousin Joe, who is also my godfather, although I had not seen him for more than thirty years. He was both black sheep and bachelor in the family, a mystery man of whom I have no clear memories. Now I am laughing at myself. I have always searched for my place and my people, focusing that search on my father. His Hopi people have been sympathetic but silent; they trace their lineage through the mother and I could never be more than the daughter of a Hopi man. How ironic and unexpected Joe's package was! It contained diary excerpts, lists of names and dates, and newspaper clippings about my mother's family. She had always refused to answer my questions about ancestry, citing the melting pot as her excuse. My interest in our heritage was, in her eyes, just an aberration which—like slipping away from the Church—would someday be fixed. Yet the package with its precious communication came to me.

Now why didn't Joe send it to my brother? My brother is what they wanted. He is white-looking, with brown hair and green eyes; he has maintained his ties to home and hearth, even while in the Army. He has expressed great interest in his European blood, has dabbled in Druidic and neo-pagan rites, and looks like them. His hair and beard are long, his clothing covered with mystic symbols. The package did not go to him. I gave him and my mother copies of everything; they were as surprised as I that Joe chose me.

I learned that the Normans who stole Irish land went bankrupt, lost their land, and booked passage in 1830 for Quebec. The MacInnes clan,

near that time, was forbidden to wear the tartan and fled Scotland to preserve their heritage. The weekend after Joe's package arrived, Highland Games were held in Fresno. In no other year would it have occurred to me to attend, but Arthur and I walked onto the grounds to search for my roots, he Japanese and I wearing all my turquoise for courage. It may have looked funny to all those Scots to see an Indian looking for a booth with her clan's name on it. The first booth was Irish; I showed my list of ancestral names to the man there, and he pointed to certain ones and said they had stolen his castle. I apologized to all of Ireland on behalf of John Bull and returned his castle to him; I suspect it would not hold up in Parliament and, anyway, they were the ancestors who had gone bankrupt. This is not the heritage I would have picked—to be the daughter of the invaders. It is not where my sympathies lie. Searching the grounds, I found my clan.

Great-great-grandmother, Henrietta MacInnes, who came to California for gold from Quebec, you have given me what my own father could not. I learned that I am entitled to wear your tartan, your symbol of a strong arm pointing to the sky with a bow in its hand. I also learned that you were the natives of Scotland, descended from the Pictish king, Onnus, and lent strength to my apology for Ireland. The colonizer and the colonized meet in my blood. It is so much more complex than just white and just Indian. I will pray about this, too.

This year Sidney and Clare, Grandad and Nana, are turning real for me. They have been dead twenty-five years, but my thoughts go to them as I continue to listen to my mother's jokes about their embarrassment. Clare got so angry sometimes! like when people would ask what racial mixture her little girl, my mother, was. Or when that little girl shared a room with a Jew in college. Or when that little girl, who had bobbed her hair and hung out with flappers, married a man with Indian blood and rural background. Clare knew who to blame. My mother told me of her mother's peculiar habit of taking my brother into her home when he was sick to nurse him back to health and, when I was sick, of taking my brother into her home so he wouldn't catch what I had. She was amused by this.

Nana! I'm afraid you'll see me cry! I have never been able to cry in front of you, of anyone. Any strong emotion is dangerous, as people are dangerous. Poetry has been the safest way to cry in public. I bristle when people say I'm cold and unfriendly, but they're right. I can't tell you straight out how I feel without

putting it into a poem. And I have written some for you, safely cloaked in metaphor or masked by a persona. I hope you understand that the poetry is the only way I can love you. I *do* love. But you are dangerous. Does mom know how much it hurts when she tells me about the way you turned from me? Does she know how much it hurts for me to know that it could have gone unsaid?

I am turning numb. I have been educated to put a name to the things that my parents did, but the child within has no such knowledge. I recall that every dirty word I ever knew was first heard from my father's lips, from the man who raised me as he struck over and over. As an adult, I take this apart and study it. I suppose it was a kind of rape for him to talk like that in the middle of his violence, to name the parts of my body he intended to mutilate or cut away. I recall lying in my bed, hearing him scream at my mother that he wanted to kill me; and I recall that he tried, more than once. Symbolic of what he wanted to do to me, he smashed my toys. My mother's memories float in and out of those scenes; at times she denies everything, but I remember it was she who pulled him away as he tried to choke me on my bed. There was no media hype about abuse in those days, no public awareness; I begged the police to put me in a foster home, but I was always sent back. Eventually I learned that I was to blame for all of this, just as I was to blame for my parents' unhappiness.

I embarrassed them. They tell me their marriage began to go bad when I was born, although they never divorced. He lives in one room, she in another. How much it must embarrass them now for me to say these things to strangers! I would say something else, be someone else, act some other way—but there is no way I can twist my genes around. There is no sugar sweet enough to smear on the story of our household. These are ghosts that will never leave, the ghosts of knowing how I destroyed their lives. They sent me to social workers and psychiatrists, to priests, to people whose roles or professions I never knew. They told me I was sick and must try to get better so that my family could mend. Everything, they said, depended on me. I just wanted to get out so that the beatings, the obscene language about my body, and the constant knowledge of his hatred would be far away. Didn't they believe what I told them? Couldn't they see the scars? I didn't know that such scars never heal up. It's probably lucky that my nature is a fighting one; otherwise I would have died.

I will just talk about being different, as if I were talking about someone else. My mother said I was born different.

Her mother said she was born different. No one ever said what that difference was all about, but everyone knew it when they saw it. They avoided it as if it burned them. And so she was always alone and not just alone, but thrown away. They made sure she knew she was being thrown away. They told her so, over and over, through action and word, until she could see it in no other way. And so she knew she was rejected and she knew she was rejectable. She learned to worship her difference, whatever it was, and this empowered her. She rejected them.

Or, I could try this. I'll make up a story about my childhood and see if anyone believes it. I will tell about happy summer days with all my friends. Us girls are trying on makeup, combing each other's hair, comparing lies about boyfriends. The boys all want to date me, but I can only choose one at a time. I hate to hurt the others. I have been riding my beautiful stallion on the mountain; alongside is my healthy young collie. I know that when I go home, my parents will be glad to see me; they'll hug me and kiss me and hold me. Uncles and aunts and cousins will be there, too, and they will hug me. They know all about me, what my interests are, what I did that day. I have been placed in the gifted program at school and will be high school valedictorian. I have been skipping grades because everyone thinks I'm so smart. I'm pretty, too. I will enter college at seventeen with an enormous scholarship. I will receive gold jewelry or a diamond for my graduation. My father will kiss me on the cheek and take my picture.

I don't want to lie to you, but I don't want to tell the truth. The dirty laundry flaps in the wind, yet the alternative is to go on wearing it. How do you admit in public that you were abused, that the only time your parents ever touched you—that you can remember—was in anger, that your cousins probably don't know you exist, that your own grandparents had no use for you? How do you acknowledge that you were left so alone you never learned to brush your teeth or fix your food? How do you reveal that you were a bag lady at fourteen, having been turned out of the house, or that when you ran away no one looked for you? How do you expect anyone to believe how hungry you were at times, how you nearly died from starvation twice—when they can plainly see how fat you are now? How do you explain that you dropped out of high school, were classified as retarded but educable, and were not allowed to take college-prep classes? How do you reconcile being an "Indian writer" with such a non-Indian upbringing? It is not the Indian way to be left so alone, to be alienated, to be friendless, to be forced to live on the street like a rat, to be unacquainted with your cousins.

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It would certainly be better for my image as an Indian poet to manufacture something and let you believe in my traditional, loving, spiritual childhood where every winter evening was spent immersed in storytelling and ceremony, where the actions of every day continually told me I was valued.

Today I live about fifty miles from Bear Valley. As I write, it is early August and the days are valley-hot, the nights thickly warm and filled with crickets. Although last winter was dry, this summer has found an explosion of toads in my yard. To uncover the memories, I have peeled back layers of scar tissue. I have invoked the ghosts and made them work for me. Is that the answer? To keep them busy? There is nothing authentic or nice about my past; I am sure that I would be a great disappointment to anthropologists. But then, you know—now—why I write poetry; being Indian was never the reason. I have agonized for months about writing this essay, and now that it is finished I am afraid of it. I am mortified and embarrassed. I am certain I said too much, whined perhaps, made someone squirm. But there is no way I can change the past and the literal fact is that I have tried to forget what is unforgettable; there are few happy moments that I recall—or perhaps, as I have succeeded in forgetting the bad, the good has also been forgotten. Perhaps the editor and the readers will forgive me for using them in an exorcism.

My father told me, when I took Arthur down to Hopi to meet him, that Hopi earth does contain my roots and I am, indeed, from that land. Because the roots are there, I will find them. But when I find them, he said, I must rebuild myself as a Hopi. I am not merely a conduit, but a participant. I am not a victim, but a woman.

I am building myself.
There are many roots.
I plant, I pick, I prune.
I consume.

i hated tonto (still do)

by Sherman Alexie
Los Angeles Times, June 28 1998

Commentary: Sherman Alexie recalls growing up with stereotype movie Indians — and loving them, wanting to be them. (Well, most of them.)

I was a little Spokane Indian boy who read every book and saw every movie about Indians, no matter how terrible. I'd read those historical romance novels about the stereotypical Indian warrior ravaging the virginal white schoolteacher.

I can still see the cover art.

The handsome, blue-eyed warrior (the Indians in romance novels are always blue-eyed because half-breeds are somehow sexier than full-blooded Indians) would be nuzzling (the Indians in romance novels are always performing acts that are described in animalistic terms) the impossibly pale neck of a white woman as she reared her head back in primitive ecstasy (the Indians in romance novels always inspire white women to commit acts of primitive ecstasy).

Of course, after reading such novels, I imagined myself to be a blue-eyed warrior nuzzling the necks of various random, primitive and ecstatic white women.

And I just as often imagined myself to be a cinematic Indian, splattered with Day-Glo Hollywood war paint as I rode off into yet another battle against the latest actor to portray Gen. George Armstrong Custer.

But I never, not once, imagined myself to be Tonto.

I hated Tonto then and I hate him now.

However, despite my hatred of Tonto, I loved movies about Indians, loved them beyond all reasoning and saw no fault with any of them.

I loved John Ford's "The Searchers."

I rooted for John Wayne as he searched for his niece for years and years. I rooted for John Wayne even though I knew he was going to kill his niece because she had been "soiled" by the Indians. Hell, I rooted for John Wayne because I understood why he wanted to kill his niece.

I hated those savage Indians just as much as John Wayne did.

I mean, jeez, they had kidnapped Natalie Wood, transcendent white beauty who certainly didn't deserve to be nuzzled, nibbled, or nipped by some Indian warrior, especially an Indian warrior who only spoke in monosyllables and whose every movement was accompanied by ominous music.

In the movies, Indians are always accompanied by ominous music. And I've seen so many Indian movies that I feel like I'm constantly accompanied by ominous music. I always feel that something bad is about to happen.

I am always aware of how my whole life is shaped by my hatred of Tonto. Whenever I think of Tonto, I hear ominous music.

I walk into shopping malls or family restaurants, as the ominous music drops a few octaves, and imagine that I am Billy Jack, the half-breed Indian and Vietnam vet turned flower-power pacifist (now there's a combination) who loses his temper now and again, takes off his shoes (while his opponents patiently wait for him to do so), and then kicks the red out of the necks of a few dozen racist white extras.

You have to remember Billy Jack, right?

Every Indian remembers Billy Jack. I mean, back in the day, Indians worshipped Billy Jack.

Whenever a new Billy Jack movie opened in Spokane, my entire tribe would climb into two or three vans like so many circus clowns and drive to the East Trent Drive-In for a long evening of greasy popcorn, flat soda pop, fossilized licorice rope and interracial violence.

We Indians cheered as Billy Jack fought for us, for every single Indian.

Of course, we conveniently ignored the fact that Tom Laughlin, the actor who played Billy Jack, was definitely not Indian.

After all, such luminary white actors as Charles Bronson, Chuck Connors, Burt Reynolds, Burt Lancaster, Sal Mineo, Anthony Quinn and Charlton Heston had already portrayed Indians, so who were we to argue?

I mean, Tom Laughlin did have a nice tan and he spoke in monosyllables and wore cowboy boots and a jean jacket just like Indians. And he did have a Cherokee grandmother or grandfather or butcher, so he was Indian by proximity, and that was good enough in 1972, when disco music was about to rear its ugly head and bell-bottom pants were just beginning to change the shape of our legs.

When it came to the movies, Indians had learned to be happy with less.

We didn't mind that cinematic Indians never had jobs.

We didn't mind that cinematic Indians were deadly serious.

We didn't mind that cinematic Indians were rarely played by Indian actors.

We made up excuses.

"Well, that Tom Laughlin may not be Indian, but he sure should be."

"Well, that movie wasn't so good, but Sal Mineo looked sort of like Uncle Stubby when he was still living out on the reservation."

"Well, I hear Burt Reynolds is a little bit Cherokee. Look at his cheekbones. He's got them Indian cheekbones."

"Well, it's better than nothing."

Yes, that became our battle cry.

"Sometimes, it's a good day to die. Sometimes, it's better than nothing."

We Indians became so numb to the possibility of dissent, so accepting of our own lowered expectations, that we canonized a film like "Powwow Highway."

When it was first released, I loved "Powwow Highway." I cried when I first saw it in the theater, then cried again when I stayed and watched it again a second time.

I mean, I loved that movie. I memorized whole passages of dialogue. But recently, I watched the film for the first time in many years and cringed in shame and embarrassment with every stereotypical scene.

I cringed when Philbert Bono climbed to the top of a sacred mountain and left a Hershey chocolate bar as an offering.

I cringed when Philbert and Buddy Red Bow waded into a stream and sang Indian songs to the moon.

I cringed when Buddy had a vision of himself as an Indian warrior throwing a tomahawk through the window of a police cruiser.

I mean, I don't know a single Indian who would leave a chocolate bar as an offering. I don't know any Indians who have ever climbed to the top of any mountain. I don't know any Indians who wade into streams and sing to the moon. I don't know of any Indians who imagine themselves to be Indian warriors.

Wait -

I was wrong. I know of at least one Indian boy who always imagined himself to be a cinematic Indian warrior.

Me.

I watched the movies and saw the kind of Indian I was supposed to be.

A cinematic Indian is supposed to climb mountains.

I am afraid of heights.

A cinematic Indian is supposed to wade into streams and sing songs.

I don't know how to swim.

A cinematic Indian is supposed to be a warrior.

I haven't been in a fistfight since sixth grade and she beat the crap out of me.

I mean, I knew I could never be as brave, as strong, as wiser as visionary, as white as the Indians in the movies.

I was just one little Indian boy who hated Tonto because Tonto was the only cinematic Indian who looked like me.

www.article.latimes.com/1998/jun/28/entertainment/ca-64216

Sauté the onions in 1 tablespoon of the butter until lightly browned. Add the onions to the buttermilk mixture toward the end of the cooking.

Layer the bread on the bottom of a large serving platter or wide, shallow cooking tray. Pour enough of the buttermilk mixture to soak the bread. Spread the rice over the bread in a low dome. Place the lamb over the rice. Pour the buttermilk over the meat (but not so much that it becomes soupy. Reserve any extra buttermilk sauce and serve it on the side for those who'd like more).

In a small pan, sauté the pine nuts or almonds in 2 tablespoons of the butter until the nuts are lightly browned. Sprinkle over the meat.

Dot the whole dish with slices of the remaining butter before serving.

SERVES 6.

**Shrak* is a very fine, thin bread available in some specialty food stores.

The Language of Baklava: A Memoir
Diana Abu-Jaber
First Anchor Books
2006

FOUR

A House and a Yard

America is a cold breeze that snaps us awake. We've been gone for a year, but once we're back, I keep recognizing types of trees, stores, buildings, and blurting out, "Oh yeah!" We've left Jordan, with its lush winds, dust, and sun-stained air. When I wake in a hotel bed on the first morning back in America, I'm dazed by a blankness around me: the sleekly painted walls, the air slack without the scents of mint, olive, and jasmine, and an immobilizing silence. I close my eyes and conjure the songbirds Mrs. Haddadin kept in a gold cage hanging from a tree branch; the wobble of Munira's singing as she dashed a broom through the courtyard. It is almost too much to imagine I will never hear them again, so I lie in bed for as long as Mom will let me, listening.

We've returned to Syracuse, to a split-level house that does not have another family living in the upstairs apartment or a communal courtyard or thick hedges of mint. But this house does have a generous backyard for tearing around in. All around us are trees and confined, suburban fields.

There is something mothlike about the houses in this new neighborhood—in the morning they look half-dissolved. They are sided in tentative shades of beige, dove gray, avocado, cream, and colonial ivory that shimmer in the cold New York morning fog. There are picture windows, two-car garages, foyers, family rooms, and big basements. The neighbors seem hesitant to emerge from their glimmering homes, and we almost never see anyone outside. But we quickly find out about Mrs. Manarelli next door. She lives in a house nearly identical to ours, with her grumpy husband, Johnny, and her son, Marco, who's my age

and notable for having what could be the world's largest collection of Monkees 45s. Mrs. Manarelli has powdered white down all over her face, two rouged spots high on her cheeks, and a low, peaked hairline. But she also has a gaze that feels soft as kisses on both your cheeks and a way of looking at you that makes you want to lean into her. Her parents were both from Italy, and since she was born in Brooklyn she says that makes her an immigrant, too.

Mrs. Manarelli travels around the neighborhood with covered bundles that at first I think are babies. Then she comes to our house and I find out that it's food: pasta slippery with fresh pesto, or a plate of grilled sausages, or a whole roasted chicken. She cooks and then she looks for people to feed, because Johnny is always on a diet and Marco is delicate and sensitive and allergic to everything. When she and Bud meet, it's as if they've found each other at last. She raps on the glass of the kitchen door as Bud fries some lentils and tomatoes and onions. "Hey, you!" she calls. "Whatcha doing in there? What is that in the pan?"

Bud lets her in and she waves at us on her way to the stove. "You put butter or what in there?"

And so their conversation begins.

She hovers around my father while he cooks, asking accusatory questions about his technique and attempting to doctor the spices. He laughs and tries to hold her back with one arm.

"What you doing it like that for?" she demands, her newly set hair in a stiff wave around her head. Then she bawls through the kitchen door at my mother (who's reading, stretched out easy, long legged, on the couch in the next room), "Pat! He's about to put *something yellow* in this beautiful rice!"

"Sumac wakes it up," says Bud the poet. "You don't know yet. Just wait."

"I don't want my rice awake or sleeping," says Mrs. Manarelli. "Can't I just have it in a bowl?"

But once she tries it, spooning it right out of the pan, she nods with her spoon in the air and says, "Okay, yeah, I see your point."

. . .

My favorite neighbors are my new best friend, Sally Holmes, and her parents. Bud says that they are "real Americans." Sally has a pert turned-up nose and pink freckles and ringlets of ribbon red hair. Her mother wears her hair in a glorious upright pillar called a bouffant. Every year, Sally's parents put up a ceiling-high, rotating, carol-piping, aluminum-silver Christmas tree in their family room. When I first behold this tree, my heart speeds up and little jittery bursts pulse under my skin: I feel shame over our own three-foot, stationary, non-snow-sprayed tabletop version. Sally and I sprawl stomach down on the floor of her darkened living room and play Ouija board by the red, green, and white strobe lights of her tree. We ask, "Who does Harry Meyer like?" and, "Will I ever in my life have a boyfriend?" The planchette flies over the board, spelling out hostile maniac answers like "You wish you, HA HA HA" and "Never you you never now."

Mrs. Holmes comes out of the kitchen with a silver tray of instant chocolate pudding in single-serving aluminum tubs and says, "Cocktail hour, ladies!" It tastes like burnt plastic, but I study the way Sally and Mrs. Holmes scrape their tubs and lick the spoons. Later she pours us crystal cups of gummy eggnog from a carton. I jiggle my glass, fascinated with the way its surface quivers in place.

This is American food, I tell myself. I don't like it, I think, because I've somehow forgotten it. I must remember.

The days grow crisp and sharp. People raise their eyebrows, look at the clouds, and say things like "Yup, it's coming all right."

On the news, the reporters recount stories about how many people were buried alive in cars under snowdrifts in previous years and how many more they anticipate going under this year. Then I look up one day from a book I'm reading in English class to see that the windows of the classroom are filled with whirling, white chaos.

There is no day, no night, just snow and our huddled weak light inside.

Three days after Christmas, Sally's father, Max, unravels the garden hose and floods their backyard; by the next morning the yard has frozen into a skin-smooth skating rink. Sally loans me her old skates and she wears her new Christmas pair, the leather a gleaming bone color. At first my ankles feel loose and untrustworthy and I sway from side to side, but the feeling gradually starts to come back to me, from years of skating at the public rink with my grandmother. As I remember, I begin to relax, to lower my wobbling, windmill hands. Sally and I spend hours that day skating in circles. Mrs. Holmes brings us hot chocolate with tiny crunchy marshmallows floating in it. We sip and warm our fingers, but we stay out on the ice. The sun goes down early and my toes start to tingle and then hurt, but I can't stop.

Finally Mrs. Holmes stands in their back door. The light glows through her apron ruffle and makes a halo of her shellacked hair. It's time for Sally to go in for dinner. "Diana, honey," Mrs. Holmes says, "your mom just called, she's looking for you."

I wave to Sally, who clomps up the back steps in her skates. I'm about to leave as well, but I stay for just one more turn around the rink. Then I think I will take one more. And then one more and one more. Now that I remember skating, I can't quite bring myself to stop. I keep gliding through the expanding dark. After a while, I notice to my surprise that my toes have stopped hurting. How can I stop now? A heavy snow starts to fall, and I hear the warm family murmur and the clink of dinner through the wall of Sally's house, and this gives me a delicious sense of sadness that I press into. I imagine that I am a poor, familyless orphan condemned to skate forever while the rest of the world eats its cozy dinner. For some reason, this makes me think about Jordan, my friends there and the balmy air of the courtyard. I haven't thought of them in months, and the unexpected memory makes my throat tighten, and then my lashes freeze together and my scarf freezes to the breath on my lips.

Eventually, I hear footsteps crunching along the side of the house through the glazed snow and my mother's navy blue sigh through the frozen air. She allows me to walk home in Sally's ice skates. The streets and houses sparkle with cold, and the night looks mauve in the wells and footprints of earlier pedestrians. We pass two cars freshly stranded in snowdrifts and another spinning its wheels on the ice.

"People should just skate everywhere," I remark as I teeter along. "That would solve all kinds of things." I laugh when Mom inquires about my extremities. My toes feel dumb and blocky as chunks of wood. "But they don't even hurt, Mom! Not even a little!" I boast.

"Well, that's nice, dear," Mom says, squinting toward our house.

At home, I sit on the foyer bench, tug off the borrowed skates, and release my toes, which still feel lifeless and blunt. For a moment I flash on Hamouda's wooden leg and wonder if something about this isn't quite normal. Mom peels off my socks, and my feet are an astonishing beet red except for my toes, which are grayish green. "Ooh," says my sister Suzy, touching them. "Lookit."

"Wow," I say, bent over them. "Whooie. They don't even hurt."

Suzy taps one. "It feels like Super Balls."

"Hey . . ." I laugh. "I don't even feel that! Try this one." We work our way down my toes, plonking each one in turn like plates on a xylophone: nothing, nothing, nothing!

Eventually I look up and notice that Mom's eyes are burning. She is staring at my feet and clutching her mouth with her hand. I gulp air as adrenaline charges through me. "Mom, Mom, Mom!" I bleat. *Am I dying?*

Bud appears, eyes wide. "What did you do with your feet?" he bellows, as if I'd given them away.

Mom says, "Should we call a doctor?"

Then something weirder happens: My mouth falls open and I'm shrieking, "No, no, no, nooooo! I don't wanna goooooo!" Tears burst from my eyes. My panic shocks even me—I'm vividly reliving my last

doctor's visit, when we were given six inoculations at once for our trip to Jordan and my arm swelled up as if it'd been pounded with a crowbar. I cling to Mom's leg, fall over my useless feet to my knees. "Please don't make me, please, I'll be goooooood!" I howl, my voice husky with terror. Monica starts crying upstairs in her crib. Suzy starts crying, too; she clings to my arm.

"Okay, okay, okay!" Mom shouts, covering her ears with the flat of her hands.

Besides, there's no easy way to take me anywhere. The snow has started up again, shaking and fierce in the windows, and cars are winding sideways through the unplowed neighborhood streets. While Mom rubs my feet, Bud calls his sister in Jordan, the famous Auntie Aya, who can cure anything.

The sounds of Arabic wash through the room. There is a flash, a soothing memory of my aunt's stone house. I breathe; I begin to edge back down to earth. After he tells her the problem, the first few minutes of their conversation are about Bud apologizing for being such a fancy idiot and moving us all to this dangerous land. This never would have happened in Jordan: "Yes, yes, of course you're right, I know, I know. . . ." Then he is getting instructions. He thanks her, hangs up. There is the sound of water bursting into a pot, then the pot banging onto the stove. A scrambling of cabinets opening, jars clinking.

"Hon?" Mom calls out, her voice taut. "What are you doing in there? What did Aya say?"

"She said make soup!" he cries.

I stare at Mom's face, afraid to look away. "What's going to happen, Mom?" I ask. "What's going to happen?" I can't look at my toes anymore. Now the dead color frightens me. I'm no longer sure they're attached to me or that the ghoulish whiteness won't begin to creep up my ankles. I can't remember exactly how many times I ask what's going to happen, I only know that she doesn't answer.

Finally, Bud brings out his soup, steaming and fragrant in the pot. It smells less like soup than perfume, like oranges and flowers. He

gives me a mug of it, and the mist in my face makes me tranquil and drowsy. He's poured the rest into a big pan, added some tapwater to cool it to a middling warmth, put it on the floor, and told me to place my feet in it. "In the soup?" I look at Mom and she looks at Bud, who doesn't look entirely certain. But five-year-old Suzy claps and says, "Feet in the soup!" So I plunk them in.

For a while not much happens. We all stare at the mysterious soup. Now my feet seem even more alien, like some kind of pink fish asleep in a puddle. I sip at my mug of soup, the bits of herbs bright and appealing, mingled with chewy morsels of orange peel. It is too dark and earthy, to my child's palate, to taste delicious, but something inside of me is called away by it. I start to forget about my sleeping fish feet. Suzy gets bored and goes to bed. Then, as I am starting to nod off, something does happen. I feel it starting like a sliver, deep inside the bones of my toes. A warmth and then a heat that grows and grows and then flashes like a struck match. I shriek and yank my feet out, crying, "The soup is burning me!" And Mom and Bud both grab me as if I might fly away. Mom holds me tightly, and Bud says, "Don't be afraid." And Mom says, "It's not the soup burning, honey, it's your toes."

They hold my feet down in the soup while I shake and my skin turns to silver and my toes bloom red as roses in snow.

Our sprawling neighborhood is filled, in its family rooms and rec rooms and extra bedrooms, with a nation of children. There's Karen, Carl, Lilah, Raymond, Lisa, Donna, Sally, Jamie, the Malcolm twins, and many more all within the first three blocks of the school bus route. Jamie Faraday used to be best friends with Sally Holmes until I appeared in the lunchroom with my bags full of cold roasted chicken kabobs slathered in hummus and wrapped in pita bread. Sally dragged back the seat beside me, plumped her chin onto the heel of her palm, and said, "What you eating?" Down the length of the long linoleum table, I see Jamie abandoned. She lifts her head

and I see myself come into focus; her forehead rises with a look almost like recognition. Now Jamie eyes me warily every time she gets on the bus, takes note of Sally seated beside me, and waves with an enraged little flip of the hand. Then she clatters down the aisle far from our seat into exile.

I notice all this but don't completely take it in: I'm trying to get my bearings. Throughout our first year back in the States, I seem to see everything through a glittering mist. I hear the expression *American dream* and I think that, somehow, this quality of mistiness must be what it refers to. The children in the neighborhood are so soft and babyish that they barely seem to have outlines. In other ways they are deliberate, remorseless, and exacting. The politics of the school bus and the rumor mill of the classroom are fierce, filled with intrigue and menace. It all feels so different from the good-times kids I knew in Jordan, with their shared gum, their sharp, brown shins and broken-toothed grins. In America, I learn there is a certain way to dress (hip-huggers, flared jeans), a certain way to wear your hair (gleaming, Prince Valiant bobs), a certain lunchbox to carry (Barbie for girls, G.I. Joe for boys—I am nearly cast out of fourth grade when I show up with a Flintstones box). And there are, it turns out, many things that—under any circumstances—you do not do.

For example, the neighbors don't barbecue in their front yards. That is apparently what the backyard is for. The backyards here are fenced off and guarded—spaces as private as other people's dreams. But our front yard has the better view and has easier access to the front door, which is closer to the kitchen and hence a very practical place for grilling. Also, the front yard will allow us to share food, cross our legs on the plastic lawn chairs, and gossip with the neighbors, as we did in Jordan. We have survived a long, howling, isolated Syracuse winter that hardened into filthy icebergs of decaying snow. By April, Bud is ready to pronounce it spring and set up his hibachi. On the first warmish sunny day, we drag out the picnic table, digging mud furrows through the half-frozen yard. Bud has chicken

marinated in olive oil, vinegar, rosemary, and a whole head of garlic. Its butter yellow skin hisses and crackles over the coals, and the aroma fills my head. The beautiful charred smell of the grill circulates through the spring air and bare tree branches, still shocked with cold.

❋

"DISTRACT THE NEIGHBORS" GRILLED CHICKEN

This is a delightful, simple dish that will fill the neighborhood with a gorgeous scent.

4 tablespoons olive oil
3 cloves garlic, crushed
Juice from 1 lemon
3 teaspoons brown sugar
3 sprigs rosemary, chopped
¼ teaspoon ground cumin
Salt and freshly ground pepper
½ teaspoon cayenne pepper
2 pounds skinless chicken pieces

In a large bowl, mix the oil, garlic, lemon juice, brown sugar and spices. Add the chicken pieces (you may cut the chicken into cubes, if you prefer), stirring to coat the chicken with the marinade. Cover and refrigerate for 3 hours or longer, turning occasionally.

Place the chicken parts on the grill (if cut in cubes, the chicken can be threaded onto skewers). Grill over hot charcoal for 10 to 15 minutes, turning frequently and basting with the marinade. This is very nice with bread and salad.

SERVES 4.

❋

We set the table, bring out bowls of elegant baba ghanouj and sprightly tabbouleh salad full of bulgur and fresh parsley, a basket of hot bread, and skewers heavy with onion and tomato wedges

to be roasted. We sit, marveling over our good fortune—to live in these rolling green lawns, these creamy houses, and the bold vaulted sky of our new neighborhood. The chicken is crusty and redolent with garlic and rosemary. We eat well, shivering just a bit in our jackets. I have a sense—as I often do when I contemplate this blue moon-stone sky—of the future. It is a broad, euphoric feeling. Does the rest of the family feel this way? I don't know for sure, though I imagine they do. Whenever we all drive home together, Mom asks as we pull in the driveway, "Who do you suppose lives in this little house?"

We are lost in the food, in the smell of grilling, and in the spring when there is a powdery sort of sensation sprinkling down the back of my neck and suddenly I realize a man and a woman are standing at the edge of the street, just a few feet away, staring at us.

I put down my chicken leg, which has rolled juices and smoke between my fingers. "Hi!" I call brightly. New neighbors! They look hungry. The woman starts and blushes, as if she didn't imagine that we could see them. Her eyes are a pale linen blue, of such crisp clarity that she looks as if she could X-ray with them.

Bud stands, maître d' of the front lawn. "Welcome. I'm Gus, this is my wife, Pat—"

The two strangers pull back and lightly bump into each other. I dimly register the sense that they didn't think Bud could talk.

"We just moved here in November." Bud gestures at the house as if they might assume we were picnicking on someone else's lawn. "I hope you're hungry! We've got all this crazy food—shish kabob, baba gha—"

The woman's kerchief white hand flutters up to her throat. There's a pause, and Bud bends back a little and asks me quietly, "*Haddol nawal?*" ("Are they Gypsies?") They look marooned and stateless, standing there mute in the street. But I remember seeing a family of Gypsies once in the old market in Jordan, with their fringed scarves and spangled earrings and high-voltage expressions. These mild, normal people don't look anything like that—the man in belted beige slacks and tasseled loafers and the woman in a milky, synthetic blouse

and culottes. Finally the man clears his throat and says, "Oh no, no, thank you—we . . . we just, um, ate. Um." He blinks. "We, uh . . . we uh . . . we live over there, on Cumberland Drive? We uh . . . well, our neighbors—you know the Tinerkes on Roanoke Circle?"

Bud frowns, trying to process the name. I picture rabbity little Timmy and chinless Bitsy Tinerke sitting in the third seat from the front of the school bus.

"Anyway. Well, see, they live really close by here, too." The man and the woman glance at each other. He puts his hands on his slender snaky hips. "Well, they saw you-all out here eating or burning things or something and then called us to say there might be some kind of—I don't know, exactly—maybe some kind of trouble going on out here? And so we just came on over to check into it—you know, we all like to keep an eye on things—this is a nice neighborhood—and so . . ." His voice trails off; his face is slowly turning an alarming, bruised color.

Bud is still standing there, still frowning, as if this man is speaking in tongues. Then my mother stands and the couple look startled once again. She is nearly six feet tall, with good level shoulders and a long neck and unwavering Cassandra eyes. She also puts her hands on her hips, almost casual. "There's no trouble here," she says in her smooth, leaf-blown voice.

They put up their hands and back away as if she is waving a pistol at them. "No, no, no trouble at all—sorry for the—the—misunderstanding. . . . Welcome to the neighborhood!" Then they are gone.

And that's about when I get the feeling that starts somewhere at the center of my chest, as heavy as an iron ingot, a bit like fear or sadness or anger, but none of these exactly; it is simply there, suspended between my ribs. I look up at the neighborhood and the mist has cleared. All the mean, cheaply framed windows are gaping at us, the sky empty as a gasp.

The next day on the school bus, Jamie climbs on, gives me her hard smile, hesitates, then flounces down on the seat next to me. She tilts

the place where the ceiling meets the wall. "Eat your dessert," she says. "*Jesus.*"

The first spoonful of *panna cotta* is so startling, I want to laugh or sing or confess my sins. It tastes of sweetness and cream and even of the tiny early flowers the cows have eaten to make the cream.

I take another bite of *panna cotta* and another. Before long, without even realizing it, I'm talking, telling all, secrets dissolving like *panna cotta* in the mouth. Mrs. Manarelli scrapes her chair in closer, puts her chin on her hand, and watches me talk about grilled chicken and the Gypsy people in loafers and the school bus and how Sally now likes me better than Jamie and how that is my fault and Jamie's cinched smile and how I don't have the right lunchbox or the right pants or shoes or socks and how things are different from Jordan and how I can never remember my sins in confession so I make up new ones and isn't that a sin of a sin and does that mean I am going right to hell, are they going to kick us out of the neighborhood, and can we move back to our apartment in the courtyard with my boyfriend Hisham?

When I have exhausted myself and have scraped up every bit of *panna cotta* on my plate, Mrs. Manarelli goes and stands at the stove as if she is cooking something, but the little red light on her stove isn't on. She is muttering things in different languages, and her voice sounds serrated: I hear angry odds and ends of words. Finally she turns around and says, "There's nobody going to hell around here except for the ones think they aren't gonna go. That's if you ask me. And they damn better not ask or they'll find out a thing or five they don't want to know!"

This comment raises more questions for me than it answers. While I'm mulling this over, she grabs the phone receiver and shakes it like a mace. "What're their names?" she demands. "I got a few choice words for them."

"Who?"

"The Gypsies! The Gypsies and their loafers!"

"Maria Elena Theresa, do not call the neighbors." Her grouchy

husband's voice erupts from the living room where he is rattling the newspaper. "We are no longer in Brooklyn, we are in civilization up here now. People don't do that kind of stuff up here."

"Don't tell me what people do!" she shouts back. "The Italians invented civilization!"

"I was Italian five years before you was born," he retorts. "I got a PhD in civilization."

She shakes the receiver a few more times at the wall behind Johnny's head, jaw set at an indignant angle, as if she is still arguing with him. But she seems to concede the argument because she slams the phone back down and turns to the counter. Now Mrs. Manarelli is busying herself with a new plan of attack. She wraps up the *panna cotta* in waxed paper, then cloth napkins, like swaddling a big baby. She puts it in a basket with some cold sliced roast beef, some soft white cheese in a jar, some tender roasted red peppers in oil, tiny black olives, and a crusty round loaf of bread. "We're going out!" she shouts at her husband. Then she says to me, "C'mon, kid."

We walk next door to my house and Mrs. Manarelli knocks loudly, then comes halfway in, yelling up the stairs to my mother. Mom comes down the stairs, patting at her new bouffant hairdo, tall and firm and shiny. Mrs. Manarelli holds up her basket, tells her that she's brought a picnic and doesn't want to eat it at the round, speckled table in the kitchen, she wants to eat it outside. Mom starts laughing. "But it's fifty degrees out—and I just got my hair done!" I admire her long neck and towering hair, all of her descending the foyer stairs like a goddess on a trophy.

"Hoity-toity, Pat," Mrs. Manarelli says, and nudges me. "Now, there's a woman."

Mom stares at us a moment as we stand grinning and wind whipped in the doorway, gives a last, regretful pat to her hairdo, and goes in to put on her parka and collect my sisters. Mrs. Manarelli also looks magnificent. Usually she's plump and hunched up, her hair trapped in a net like a dark fish. But once we go back outdoors, she

comes unfurled: Her short brown hair bobs in the wind, her lips are round and scarlet against the whiteness of her skin. She stands straighter, and under her wool church coat the hem of her cotton print dress flails around her knees. It's the end of April and we had the last snowfall four weeks ago, our ill-fated barbecue three weeks ago. The neighborhood windows and doorknobs still stay rimmed with frost an hour after the sun comes out.

The hibachi is stowed away in the garage, but the picnic table floats abandoned on the thawing grass out front, and this, of course, is where Mrs. Manarelli wants to eat. She spreads out a checkered tablecloth, and when we can't get the cloth to stop blowing off the table, we sit on top of it. Mom brings out plates and wineglasses and Kool-Aid for me and my sisters, and there is a look on her face as though we've just told one another a good joke. Her cheeks gleam with the cold, and her high hair unravels in the wind like a ball of yarn. It's so cold that I'm having trouble tasting anything, and Monica says she wants to go back inside and see the rest of her soap opera. (She's only four, but she's already addicted to the high drama of *General Hospital.*) But then Mrs. Manarelli unveils the baby *panna cotta:* It shivers and gleams white as a star. We eat it directly from the waxed paper with plastic spoons.

The neighborhood cars pass, some quickly, some slowly, and we wave at them all with the wave we've seen at Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade, a feathery tilt at the wrist, forearm upright. No one can tell us anything. We are five queens drifting over the suburbs on our own private float.

❋

MRS. MANARELLI'S CIVILIZED *PANNA COTTA*

2 cups heavy cream, minus 2 tablespoons to dissolve gelatin
¼ cup sugar
1½ teaspoons gelatin (½ packet)
4 to 8 tablespoons fruit purée, sweetened fruit, or chocolate sauce

Heat 2 cups of the cream with the sugar in a heavy saucepan and simmer for 15 minutes. In a small bowl, sprinkle the gelatin over the remaining 2 tablespoons of cream. Remove the simmered cream from heat and add the gelatin mixture, stirring to dissolve. Pour ½ cup of this new mixture into 4 lightly oiled metal molds and refrigerate for 4 to 6 hours. Dip the mold in hot water and run a knife around the edge; unmold the *panna cotta* onto individual serving dishes. Serve each with 1 to 2 tablespoons sauce, either fruit purée, sweetened fruit, or chocolate sauce.

SERVES 4.

❋

www.parade.com/articles/editions/2004/editions_07_04-2004/featured_0

July 4, 2004: As America finds itself in the midst of uncertainty, this Nobel Laureate speaks for a nation of immigrants

The America I Love

By Elie Wiesel

THE DAY I RECEIVED American citizenship was a turning point in my life. I had ceased to be stateless. Until then, unprotected by any government and unwanted by any society, the Jew in me was overcome by a feeling of pride mixed with gratitude.

From that day on, I felt privileged to belong to a country which, for two centuries, has stood as a living symbol of all that is charitable and decent to victims of injustice everywhere—a country in which every person is entitled to dream of happiness, peace and liberty; where those who have are taught to give back.

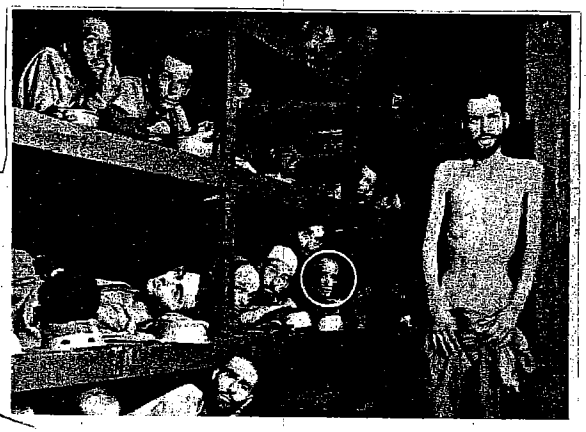
In America, compassion for the refugee and respect for the other still have biblical connotations.

Grandiloquent words used for public oratory? Even now, as America is in the midst of puzzling uncertainty and understandable introspection because of tragic events in Iraq, these words reflect my personal belief. For I cannot forget another day that remains alive in my memory: April 11, 1945.

That day I encountered the first American sol-

Offerings of a generous humanity

For the liberated inmates of the Buchenwald concentration camp (right), the American soldier was a compassionate and heroic figure. (Wiesel, 16, is circled.) Above, GIs reach out to liberated inmates at the Dachau camp in 1945.



diers in the Buchenwald concentration camp. I remember them well. Bewildered, disbelieving, they walked around the place, hell on earth, where our destiny had been played out. They looked at us, just liberated, and did not know what to do or say. Survivors snatched from the dark throes of death, we were empty of all hope—too weak, too emaciated to hug them or even speak to them. Like lost children, the American soldiers wept and wept with rage and sadness. And we received their tears as if they were heartrending offerings from a wounded and generous humanity.

Ever since that encounter, I cannot repress my emotion before the flag and the uniform—anything that represents American heroism in battle. That is especially true on July Fourth. I reread the Declaration of Independence, a document sanctified by the passion of a nation's thirst for justice and sovereignty, forever admiring both its moral content and majestic intonation. Opposition to oppression in all its forms, defense of all human liberties, celebration of what is right in social intercourse: All this and much more is in that text, which today has special meaning.

A playful moment: Iraqi kids squirt water at PFC Tom Dinomenico of the 549th Military Police Company from Fort Stewart, Ga. As a great power, says Wiesel, America has always been concerned with the welfare of others.

GRANTED, U.S. HISTORY has gone through severe trials, of which anti-black racism was the most scandalous and depressing. I happened to witness it in the late Fifties, as I traveled through the South. What did I feel? Shame. Yes, shame for being white. What made it worse was the realization that, at that time, racism was the law, thus making the law itself immoral and unjust.

Still, my generation was lucky to see the downfall of prejudice in many of its forms. True, it took much pain and protest for that law to be changed, but it was. Today, while fanatically stubborn racists are still around, some of them vocal, racism as such has vanished from the American scene. That is true of anti-Semitism too. Jew-haters still exist here and there, but organized anti-Semitism does not—unlike in Europe, where it has been growing with disturbing speed.

Hope is the key word for men and women like myself, who found in America the strength to overcome cynicism and despair.

As a great power, America has always seemed concerned with other people's welfare, especially in Europe. Twice in the 20th century, it saved the "Old World" from dictatorship and tyranny.

America understands that a nation is great not because its economy is flourishing or its army invincible but because its ideals are loftier. Hence America's desire to help those who have lost their freedom to conquer it again. America's credo might read as follows: For an individual, as for a nation, to *be* free is an admirable duty—but to help others *become* free is even more admirable.

Some skeptics may object: But what about Vietnam? And Cambodia? And the support some administrations gave to corrupt regimes in Africa or the Middle East? And the occupation of Iraq? Did we go wrong—and if so, where?

And what are we to make of the despicable, abominable "interrogation methods" used on Iraqi prisoners of war by a few soldiers (but even a few are too many) in Iraqi military prisons?

Well, one could say that no nation is composed of saints alone. None is sheltered from mistakes or misdeeds. All have their Cain and Abel. It takes vision and courage to undergo serious soul-searching and to favor moral conscience over political expediency. And America, in extreme situations, is endowed with both. America is always ready to learn from its mishaps. Self-criticism remains its second nature.

Not surprising, some Europeans do not share such views. In extreme left-wing political and intellectual circles, suspicion and distrust toward America is the order of the day. They deride America's motives for its military interventions, particularly in Iraq. They say: It's just money. As if America went to war only to please the oil-rich capitalists.

They are wrong. America went to war to liberate a population too long subjected to terror and death.

We see in newspapers and magazines and on television screens the mass graves and torture chambers imposed by Saddam Hussein and his accomplices. One cannot but feel grateful to the young Americans who leave their families, some to lose their lives, in order to bring to Iraq the first rays of hope—without which no people can imagine the happiness of welcoming freedom.

HOPE IS A KEY WORD IN the vocabulary of men and women like myself and so many others who discovered in America the strength to overcome cynicism and despair.

Remember the legendary Pandora's box? It is filled with implacable, terrifying curses. But underneath, at the very bottom, there is hope. Now as before, now more than ever, it is waiting for us.