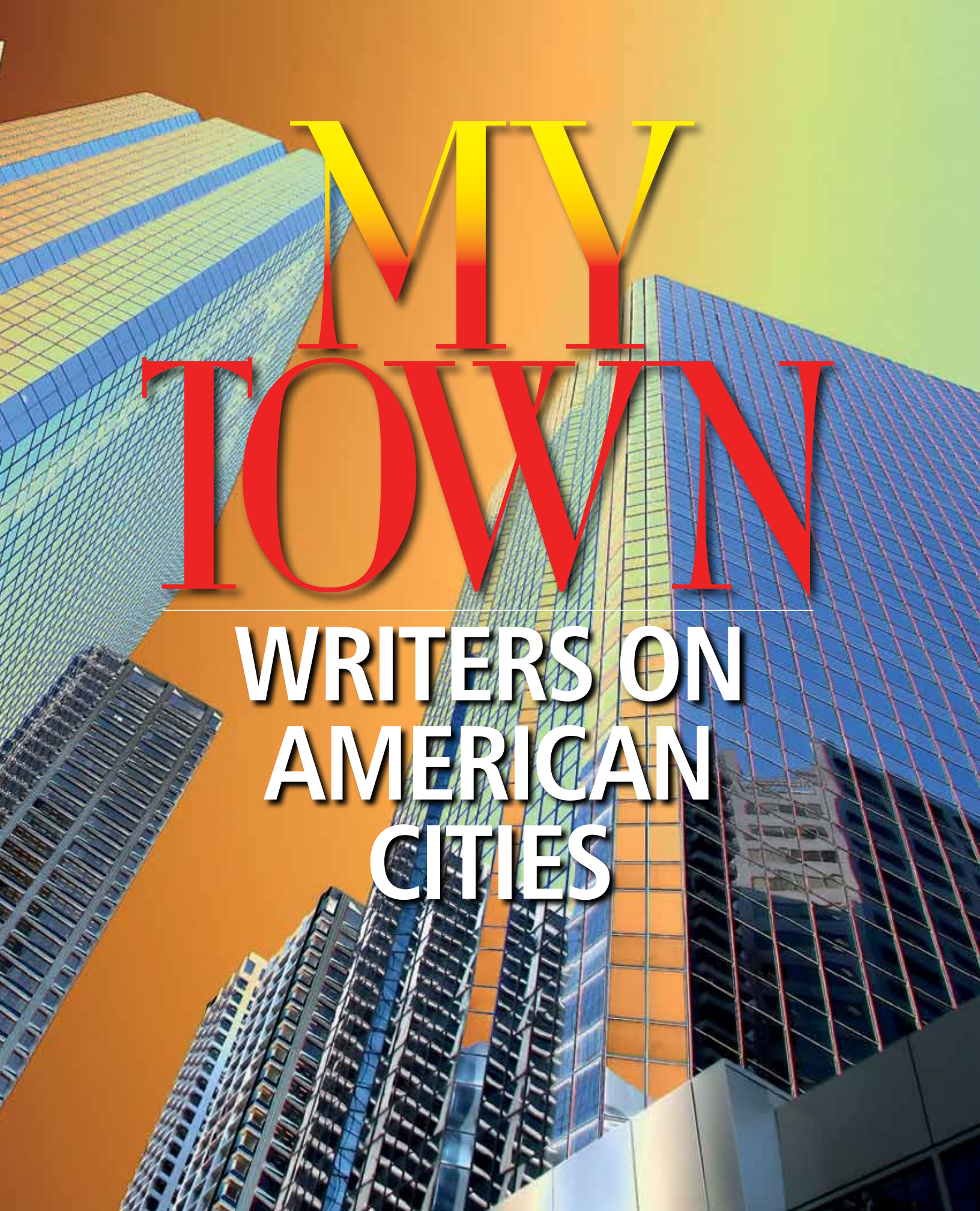
MY TOWN
WRITERS ON AMERICAN CITIES

MY TOWN

WRITERS ON AMERICAN CITIES

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INTRODUCTION

by Claire Messud

Claire Messud is the author of three novels and book of novellas. Her most recent novel, *The Emperor's Children*, was one of the *New York Times* 10 best books of 2006. Twice a finalist for the PEN/Faulkner Award, she has received fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation, the Radcliffe Institute and the Humanities Center at Harvard. She lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts, with her family.

More than three-quarters of Americans live in cities. In our globalized era, it is tempting to imagine that urban experiences have a quality of sameness: skyscrapers, subways and chain-stores; a density of bricks and humanity; a sense of urgency and striving. The essays in this collection make clear how wrong that assumption would be: from the dreamland of Jonathan Kellerman's Los Angeles to the vibrant awakening of Edna Buchanan's Miami; from the mid-century tenements of Pete Hamill's beloved Brooklyn to the haunted viaducts of Stuart Dybek's Pilsen neighborhood in Chicago; from the natural beauty and human diversity of Charles Johnson's Seattle to the past and present myths of Richard Ford's New Orleans, these reminiscences and musings conjure for us the richness and strangeness of any individual's urban life, the way that our imaginations and identities and literary histories are intertwined in a city's streets and buildings, in its smells and sounds.

We create our cities in our minds, sometimes before ever we see them, sometimes after we have despaired of them, from the snippets and stories we have gleaned, the writers we have read. In this way, David Bottoms grew up in a small town in the South, imagining his cosmopolitan Atlanta into existence; and Steve Stern rediscovered his native Memphis through the Bashevis Singer-like fables of its immigrant Jews. Carlo Rotella's Boston is haunted by its ghost-life, unearthed on his night-time runs: the herons and coyotes, to be sure, but also its dead citizens, whose names adorn parks and boathouses, reminders of their deeds and whimsies. Jonathan Yardley's Baltimore

Atlanta

Baltimore

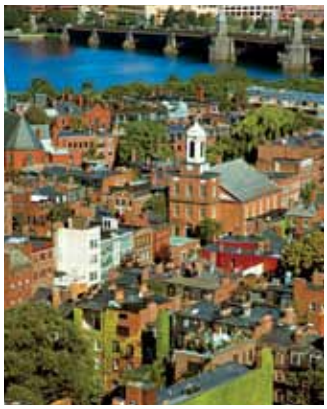
is a literary conversation between past and present, from Edgar Allan Poe to Anne Tyler.

For any of us, a given city only exists in relation to ourselves. Precisely because it teems with so many lives, it has no objectively true or independent life. You could not say that Donald Trump's New York is more or less real than that of a street vendor originally from Karachi. In this way, our individual imaginary is our only route to a city's heart. Any general claim will be belied by a particular experience. Anything you think you know can be disproven — which does not therefore make it untrue. This, of course, is what makes urban environments so liberating: not only does each of us create them for ourselves, but in them we too can create ourselves anew — a theme which recurs in many of the essays collected here.

To belong in a city is, then, a matter of choice. Unlike a smaller town, where unrootedness and disaffection set one apart (Lorrie Moore has said, jokingly, of her adoptive hometown of Madison, Wisconsin: "Some people have thought I was critical. If you write with an outsider's eye, that's fine. But after you do that, you have to move...That's the mistake I made. I didn't get out of town." [interview in the London Observer, April 11, 2010]), cities can accommodate the uncommitted as readily as the zealous converts, the adoptees and the natives, the intensely embedded and the gadflies alike. By its very nature, a city is an ideal lover: it gives without demand, and gives more the more you ask of it.

For all its fluidity, however, each city bears its individual character, its specificities, its atmosphere. The taste of the air, the breadth of the streets, the tenor of the traffic, the history, the stones, the overheard conversations — a city is made of these concrete things that cannot be imagined away. Mysteriously, each of us will find the city of our personal life story, even if it takes time (as it did for Edna Buchanan to find Miami), or even if we return to a place we thought we'd fled (as Steve Stern did in Memphis), or if our story involves marriage to one city and romance with another (as for David Kipen with San Francisco and LA).

I, for instance, live now in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and say more generally that I live in Boston. For a number of years, after returning to the United States from abroad, I lived in Washington, D.C. For that span — from 1995-2003 — I suffered an uneasy relation to that city, as if in exile. I didn't belong, nor did I want to. For all the years we lived there (on account of my husband's work, not mine), I looked around


Boston

Chicago

Houston

Los Angeles

and imagined that everyone else did belong, whether because they were in politics, or because they were Southerners, or because they inhabited the comfortably belonging state of not-belonging, journalists or diplomats posted to the city for a fixed duration, with the amiably detached relation to the place that such a posting entails.

I lived those years initially in love with New York, my unrequited and unattainable (where I have never lived, although I wrote a novel set there as a way of consummating my passion), dashing up to stay with friends at every opportunity and applying for jobs I would never have taken. Having finally given up on New York, I spent the remainder of my time in Washington trying to get away. First, at my instigation, we repaired to an artists' colony in France; then spent three months in Paris. I took a teaching post in Tennessee for a semester, then dragged my husband to Western Massachusetts for a two year stretch, still without letting go of our ties to DC, renting out our beloved little flat in Adams Morgan, behind the infamous Hilton where I swam blissfully in the pool six months of the year. ('Beloved' because although I officially did not like to live in Washington, we had, over time, built there a little life that I loved.) After Massachusetts, a semester in Ohio; and a return to Washington only to sell up, take a last swim, and drive north, in the early September swelter, in our lumbering U-Haul.

If Washington was the restless relationship of my thirties, Boston has proven the settled marriage of my forties. I went to boarding school here, many years ago, and so my life now has the logic of peripheral acquaintances: I run into long-lost classmates occasionally at the hairdresser or in the playground, pleased to find them still breathing, and to move on. Once again, it's my husband's job that has determined our locale, but I am no longer resentful of this fact: I enjoy my freedom to come and go, to flirt with other cities and imagine other lives, but always in the knowledge that we are fundamentally content, that the city, while not perhaps exciting, is complex and beautiful and interesting, blessed with great art and glorious music, with secret islands, with its glistening river, its nearby beaches and mountains, and with a disproportionate number of fascinating people, many of them young on account of the innumerable universities. It is a city whose past is more illustrious than its present, and there is a relief, an ease in this. It feels like Amsterdam, in that regard.

In many ways I don't belong — I'm not a local; I don't engage particularly with the city's lore, or its people; I remain, as I say, professionally unaffiliated here — but rather I skate along the city's lovely surface like a water boatman on a pond. I marvel at my children's heartfelt attachment to this place, the only one they've really known. I love that they can feel a sense of belonging I've never experienced nor ever will: I feel grateful to Boston for that.

The question remains whether, had the order of my cities been reversed, I would have experienced

Memphis

Miami

New Orleans

New York

Boston, in my thirties, with restless reluctance, and embraced Washington as my family's home, if not my heart's. How much did the cities themselves determine my experience, and how much I alone? Certainly the Washington of my memory is shaped by my soul at the time, by its yearnings and losses and hopes, all for other things. But it is also true that the flora and fauna were alien to me (the great, waxy magnolia leaves looming in front of apartments; the overgrown swampy twists of Rock Creek Park; the summer cockroaches skittering in hordes across 19th Street at night, while the rats danced on their hind legs on the patch of lawn outside our apartment block), and the weather (the virtuosic downpours; the Burmese heat) and the sleepy movements of the city's inhabitants, the suspensionless sway of the battered taxis along the wide and empty streets, the half-closed eyes of the monumental white buildings downtown — all of it was foreign to me, and exacerbated my estrangement.

A city is its myths, but also its plants and animals and bricks. In Boston, I have rediscovered the raccoons and skunks of my Canadian childhood, even as the seasons of the maple trees, from budding leaf to twirling key to autumn riot, ring familiar in each particular. There are angles of sunlight — a cold, clear winter light, almost without shadows; a glaucous summer morning light, a haze like love — that echo in my memory, and bring me joy simply for that. There are the city's ghosts to which Carlo Rotella refers in his essay; but for me, too, there is the ghost of my adolescent self, in tatty thrift store clothes, hair unevenly chopped, wandering the Public Gardens and Newbury Street in a gaggle of girls, sipping coffee and smoking clove cigarettes in Harvard Square, playing at being grown up, experimenting with my first freedom. She doesn't bother me much, this ghost, but she reassures me that this place is real.

Proust wrote that the landscape of his childhood walks "formed for me for all time the contours of the countryside's where I would like to live" [p.188]: "Whether it is that the faith that creates has dried up in me, or that reality takes shape in memory alone, the flowers I am shown today for the first time do not seem to me to be real flowers." [p.188]. For any place, but in particular for any city to live, you must have faith in it, in its reality and significance. It isn't enough to be a tourist, blandly to admire its plazas and alleys. You must grant it its myths, or at least yours. How many opportunities this country affords us, to have faith in different rhythms and constructs, in the abundant and diverse realities and their attendant dreams that stretch from Seattle to Houston, from Boston to Los Angeles. The essays in this book attest to that diversity, to the concrete and imaginary life that teems and swells in every corner, and in each flickering and creative mind.

Seattle

Washington, DC

ATLANTA

THE POETRY OF BRIDGES

by David Bottoms

David Bottoms has published seven books of poetry, two novels, and a book of essays/interviews. His many awards include the Whitman Award of the Academy of American Poets and an Award in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. He holds the Amos Distinguished Chair in English Letters at Georgia State University and serves as Georgia Poet Laureate.

Robert Penn Warren, born and raised in Guthrie, Kentucky, was asked once if he considered himself to be a Southern writer. His response was, "What else could I be?" By that he meant that the place of his birth and his upbringing had molded his character in a distinct and inconvertible way. His every interaction with the world was colored by the history and social code of his region. This is not to say that he was always proud of that history or that he always agreed with that code, only that he could not live independently of them.

The South is plagued by a great number of misconceptions held by folks in other parts of the world, and all writers born below the Mason-Dixon Line must eventually come to terms with both the myth and the actuality of "The South." This involves facing some disturbing truths concerning intolerance, violence, and racial exploitation. Still, it bears remembering that these human defects are not exclusive to our region. The popular line is that the South has terrible sins in its past and its present, but that it also contains many distinguishing virtues. This is certainly true, but might be said of any part of the world. What distinguishes the American South is the fact that it lost a war fought largely over its intractable immoralities. This seems to me a particularly cogent point when regarding the work of its writers. The South is a wounded region, and the wounded heart always seeks transcendence. When the wound is cultural, the personal response tends to find recourse through religion or art. In this broad sense the post-civil-war South has become a land of preachers and poets.

Any writer who does any amount of public speaking will inevitably be asked how he or she became a writer. And any writer from the South will eventually be asked how growing up there has influenced his or her work. I've pondered these questions because they've always been mysteries to me. I was raised in the 1950s, in the foothills of the north Georgia mountains, and nothing in my family or my community would have ever suggested that I might scribble a word onto a page.

I didn't come from a reading family. Not once in my childhood did I ever see either of my parents pick up a book for the purpose of pleasure. They simply were not book people. They were children of the Great Depression, and they worked hard all their lives. Television was the only entertainment they had time for. Most of the books in our house belonged to me, and most of those were school books. My Granny Ashe had ten

The Georgia Dome. Opposite page: The Atlanta skyline is seen behind the 17th Street Bridge.

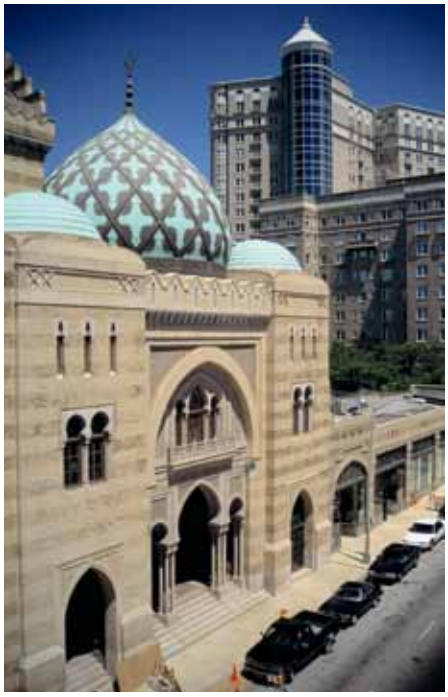
or so novels stacked neatly on a small bookshelf in her living room — two of those were Margaret Mitchell's "Gone with the Wind," a hardback and a paperback.

Oddly enough, I did grow up loving to read. This was primarily because of my mother's encouragement and a little bookstore that belonged to my second grade teacher. As a boy, though, I spent most of my spare time playing sports — in my case baseball. Playing sports was expected of a boy in a small town such as Canton, while books, serious music, art, and almost anything called cultural were deeply suspect. If not reined in, they were pursuits that might eventually take issue with the doctrines of fundamentalist Christianity.

We lived in the Bible Belt, and sometimes it felt like we lived right on the hardest part of the buckle. An irony here is the fact that my earliest memories concerning poetic language go back to the mid-1950s and the basement of the Canton First Baptist Church. I still remember the rows of little round-backed chairs facing the chalkboard where the children of the Sunday school's Primary Department met as a group to sing. In that room I first encountered the beauty, praise, and anguish of the Psalms.

Even then, as a 7- or 8-year-old boy, I felt something in that antique and exotic English intimating the other-worldly, the sacred. I'm talking, of course, about the King James translation. What poet could argue with this torturing lament from Psalm 102: "My days are like a shadow that declineth; and I am withered like grass." Or the equally beautiful and infinitely more hopeful message of Psalm 23: "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want./ He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters."

Top left: Early morning comes to the city of Atlanta. Top: The marquee of Atlanta's old Fox Theater Above: "Gone With the Wind" premieres at the Loew's Grand Theater on Peachtree Street in 1939.



Left: The Fox Theater, which was originally built in the 1920s as headquarters for the Yaarab Shriners of Atlanta, blends Islamic and Egyptian architecture Above: Children play in the fountain of Atlanta's Centennial Olympic Park, built for the 1996 Olympic Games..

Another source of poetry that washed across me in waves of language and imagery were the hymns we sang in church. "Rock of Ages, cleft for me, let me hide myself in Thee," or one of my favorites, "Shall we gather at the river, where bright angel feet have trod?" My Grandma Bottoms used to croak out two old gospel songs, one after the other, almost constantly as she did her housework — "I'm gonna lay down my burdens, down by the riverside" and "Some glad morning when this life is o'er, I'll fly away." There's a thought. These psalms and songs — expressions of hope for a great many small-town Southerners — were my first experiences with language as art. They were also my first encounters with the figurative meanings of language, with language seeking transcendence. In many ways it was the sort of introduction I could have received only in a small town such as Canton.

Atlanta, about forty miles south on Georgia 5, was a radically different place. It was a place of culture. It had museums, libraries, colleges, art galleries, a symphony. The state house was there, and under its gold dome legislators made the laws that ruled the state. But more than all of this Atlanta had a history, a history that had evolved into a powerful myth.

During my early childhood, the first historical event to really impress me was the American Civil War. In elementary school the notebooks of my classmates were covered with doodles of the Confederate battle flag, and at home my grandmother told stories about women she'd known in her childhood who'd actually witnessed Sherman's troops burning their way through Georgia. My experience was far from unique, and my friends and I drew a certain common identity from all of this, without knowing very much about the actual causes and execution of that war. Things

The Georgia State Capitol, completed in 1889, is a landmark in the history of 19th-century American architecture.

simply were what they were, and we found ourselves, inexplicably, part of a culture where blacks lived and worked on one side of a deep chasm and whites on the other. It all had to do with history, and our primary connection to that history was the city of Atlanta, a mysterious place few of us had every visited.

My first memory of that city was a trip to the Fox Theater. I was 12 years old when my best friend's mother drove us to a matinee showing of the movie "Gone with the Wind." The Fox was easily the most exotic building I'd ever seen. Built in the 1920s as the headquarters for the Yaarab Shriners of Atlanta, its mixture of Islamic and Egyptian architecture made it a very strange presence on Peachtree Street.

The movie we saw that Sunday was exotic in a completely different way. "Gone with the Wind," of course, popularized the myth of the "Lost Cause" and the Confederates who fought to preserve the values of the Old South. I bought into it, as did most of my friends, or a large part of it anyway, though we all felt a nagging sense that something was wrong with that picture, just as something was wrong with the society we lived in. At least one group of Southerners, those folks on the other side of the chasm, viewed history from an entirely different perspective, and they had found a powerful voice rising from a pulpit in Atlanta, a voice that was starting to build a cultural bridge. That pulpit belonged to the Ebenezer Baptist Church on Auburn Avenue, and the voice belonged to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Oddly enough, my own experiments with language and poetry began around the time I first became aware of the Civil Rights Movement. Some of this, of course, is simply coincidence. I was a teenager and just becoming

Top: The original Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta is where Martin Luther King Jr and his father served as pastors. Above: Visitors to the Martin Luther King Jr National Historic site pass along Auburn Avenue during the national holiday celebrating the civil rights leader's birthday, January 20th.

aware of my world and feeling the need to express my feelings on paper. But as I remember, a very large number of those early attempts at poetry dealt with social injustice, racial and otherwise.

My generation is the last to have lived in a segregated South, and on the streets of Canton in the 1950s and early 60s I rarely saw a black person. In fact, no one I knew talked much about race. What I learned of the Movement as a teenager came mostly in snippets from the TV news.

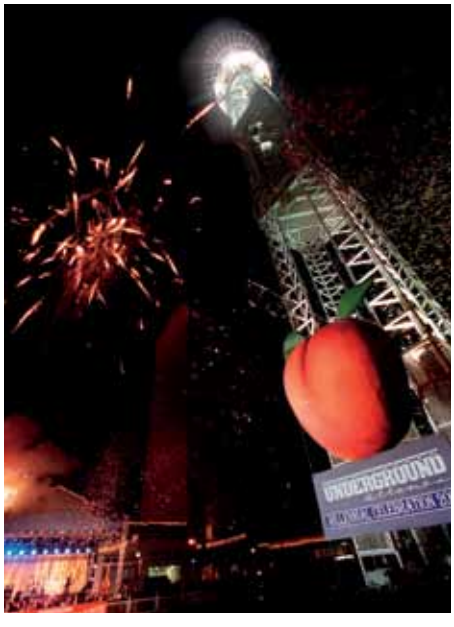
A few names became familiar — Martin Luther King, Joseph Lowery, Andrew Young — but the knowledge I was able to gather about the African-American struggle wasn't deep. These snippets, however, served not only to reinforce the questions I had about the status quo in the South, they also created an empathy that led me to books such as James Baldwin's "Blues for Mr. Charlie" and Ralph Ellison's "Invisible Man".

For most of my teenage years the struggle for civil rights was something that happened in Atlanta and other large cities. The people I knew had no idea what was happening in the local black churches or the Ralph Bunche School, and they were shocked when the African-American community attempted to desegregate the Canton Theater. There was some violence — a car was turned over in the street — and the threat of much more, but no one was seriously hurt. That was just about the extent of my personal experience with the struggle for civil rights. Atlanta was my connection, my bridge to a greater awareness of the human community and the growing role I would need to play in it.

And speaking of bridges. My wife and I recently saw a news story on television about a young boy asking President Obama why so many people hated him. The president hugged the boy and told him this was mostly politics and people didn't really hate him. This was a crystallizing moment, a painful reminder that some people still lag behind, but also a hopeful reminder that enduring bridges have been built. President Obama was not elected solely by African-Americans, but by all Americans.

A few years ago a young writer asked me why I hadn't written more about race. I scratched my head and told her that all poems were about race because, on some level, all poems are about humanity. Basically, the message I've taken from poetry is this: There is only the one life — the one life with infinite variations. We all share that life — we're born, we aspire, we struggle, we search for meaning, we die. Poetry is the art of metaphor, which is the art of making connections, the art of discovering bridges. Poetry's great message is the message of commonality, of our fundamental humanity, the significance of being a human creature at our particular moment.

A young girl copies the epitaphs on the crypt of Martin Luther King Jr. and his wife, Coretta Scott King.



As fireworks explode in the background, a giant peach travels to the bottom of a tower, signaling the beginning of the new year in Atlanta's famous Underground area.

BALTIMORE

GOOD OLD BALTIMORE

by Jonathan Yardley

Jonathan Yardley was born in 1939 in Pittsburgh. He is a 1961 graduate of the University of North Carolina, where he was editor of the student newspaper. In 1968-69 Yardley was a Nieman Fellow in journalism at Harvard University. He joined the *Washington Star* as book editor in 1978 until the paper's demise in 1981, when he became the book critic of the *Washington Post*. In 1981 he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Distinguished Criticism.

Baltimore, one of the oldest major cities in the United States and the largest city in the state of Maryland, has a rather peculiar literary history. A great many writers have lived there over the years, some of them quite distinguished, and much literary activity still takes place there, but you can count the real "Baltimore writers" — those whose chief subject matter is the city and its people — on the fingers of one hand. Unlike Chicago and Los Angeles, which have inspired numerous writers and have created their own distinctive literary traditions, good old Baltimore is something of a literary stepchild.

In many respects Baltimore is a great big small town. Its neighborhoods tend to be insular, each with its own distinctive character and traditions, and though its importance as a port and manufacturing center has declined significantly, it is still very much a working-class city. For generations it has nursed an inferiority complex with regard to the greater cities to its north and south — New York, Philadelphia and Washington — which probably helps explain its suspicion of outsiders and reluctance to welcome newcomers. I lived there through the 1980s and 1990s and was very comfortable, but I could have stayed another two or three centuries and probably still would not have been considered a real Baltimorean.

All of these aspects of Baltimore's character can be found in the work of the four true "Baltimore writers" — H.L. Mencken, Russell Baker, Anne Tyler and Laura Lippman — and I will discuss them presently. First, though, we should take a quick look at Baltimore's literary past and present.

Its literary history begins in September, 1814, when a young Marylander named Francis Scott Key stood on the deck of a sloop and watched the British bombardment of Fort McHenry, at the entrance to the harbor. He was so moved to see the American flag standing tall through the battle that he wrote a poem, which he called "The Defence of Fort McHenry," and which was published in a Baltimore newspaper soon after the battle. He set it to a melody called "To Anacreon in Heaven," which many Americans to this day regard as unsingable, but it has been the National Anthem for nearly a century and is universally known as "The Star Spangled Banner."

Nearly two decades after Key wrote his poem, the first truly famous writer arrived in Baltimore. Edgar Allan Poe lived in Baltimore for three years beginning in 1832 and wrote both poems and short stories while

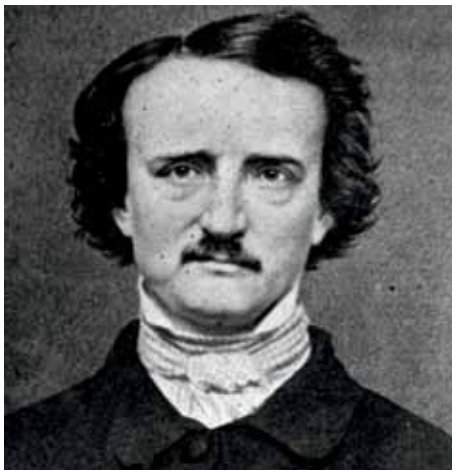
This painting depicts Francis Scott Key who wrote "The Star Spangled Banner" after seeing the American flag flying over Baltimore Harbor during the War of 1812. Opposite page: The venerable USS Constellation in Baltimore harbor in 2004.

he was there, but in Baltimore as in everywhere else he lived he was impoverished and inebriated. He is most celebrated in Baltimore not for having lived there but for having died there, in 1849, while stopping off en route from Richmond to Philadelphia. He was buried near the center of the city, and his grave continues to draw tourists. Each year on the anniversary of his death a mysterious nocturnal "Poe Toaster" leaves red roses and a bottle of cognac at the gravestone. This person's identity is a close secret and the ritual is now a cherished Baltimore tradition.

Little of literary interest happened in Baltimore during the rest of the 19th century, but during the 20th century four important writers — James M. Cain, Dashiell Hammett, F. Scott Fitzgerald and John Dos Passos — spent significant periods of time there. Cain worked for the *Baltimore Sun* in the early 1920s and became friendly with Mencken, who was then editing the important national magazine, the *American Mercury*. Mencken encouraged Cain's writing ambitions, which by the time he had moved to California in the 1930s resulted in pioneering works of "hard-boiled" detective fiction, including *The Postman Always Rings Twice* and *Double Indemnity*.

An even more important hard-boiled writer, Dashiell Hammett, arrived with his family in Baltimore around 1900 at the age of 6. He quit school at 14 and went through a succession of jobs, the most important as a Pinkerton detective. He left Baltimore when he was still young and the city doesn't figure directly in his famous novels — *The Maltese Falcon* and *The Thin Man* — but his Pinkerton experience laid the groundwork for those and his many other books and short stories.

Scott Fitzgerald came to Baltimore in 1932 because his wife, Zelda, was undergoing psychiatric treatment at a clinic there, and he stayed for about five years. He said that he loved the city, and he wrote parts of *Tender Is the Night* there, but his own descent into alcoholism was well under way and his Baltimore years were not productive. As for John Dos Passos, the best of his work — the famous trilogy, *U.S.A.* — was well behind him when he arrived in Baltimore in 1952. He lived there to the end of his life two decades later, but he wrote nothing of consequence and seems to have been content with quiet domesticity.



Top: An undated photo of Edgar Allan Poe. Above: Since 1949, a mysterious visitor has left roses and cognac on Poe's grave each year to commemorate the writer's birthday on January 19th.

H.L. Menken

Russell Baker

James M. Cain

Dashiell Hammett

F. Scott Fitzgerald

One of his neighbors, as pointed out in the useful if unfinished Web site the Baltimore Literary Heritage Project, was Ogden Nash, the greatest of all American writers of light verse. He moved to the city in 1934 upon marrying a Baltimorean and made it his home until his death in 1971. He was happy there and rooted enthusiastically for its professional football and baseball teams, but the city had almost no influence on his verse, wonderful though that verse ("Candy is dandy,/ But liquor is quicker") most certainly is.

Today literary activity in Baltimore is centered around the writing programs at Johns Hopkins University and Goucher College. A few published writers have taught at these programs, and a very few of their students have gone on to writing careers, but Baltimore itself has almost nothing to do with them beyond being a place for teachers and students to live. College and university writing programs are now a central fact of American literary life, and not always a welcome one, as they encourage the false promise that anyone can be a writer and they tend to produce assembly-line fiction in which one writer sounds very much like every other.

A daily presence in the lives of the city's writers is the *Baltimore Sun*, which in the first several decades of the 20th century was one of the best

Top: A view of Baltimore's skyline and inner harbor. Above: Since 1980 when Baltimore's Inner Harbor was revitalized, it has been the city's premier tourist attraction and one of the city's crown jewels. Among its attractions are the National Aquarium, the Maryland Science Center and a host of restaurants and shops.

John Dos Passos

Laura Lipman

and most influential newspapers in the United States. Between 1910 and 1995 there were two Sun papers, morning and evening, and through their newsrooms paraded some of the best American journalists, of whom the most famous and respected remain, to this day, Henry Louis Mencken and Russell Baker.

No one contributed more to the high national reputation once enjoyed by the *Sun* than Mencken. After an apprenticeship on a couple of smaller Baltimore newspapers, Mencken arrived at the *Sun* in 1906 and remained connected to it until his death in 1956. He was a reporter, an editor and a company executive, but mainly he was a columnist and critic, and in both capacities he had an effect on American cultural life that can scarcely be exaggerated. His prose was strong, original, inventive and inimitable (though many have tried), and his opinions were fierce. His columns for the *Sun* metamorphosed into essays for the *American Mercury*, which in turn were collected in book after book.

Baltimore was incalculably important to Mencken. His youth there is the subject of his three classic memoirs (*Happy Days*, *Newspaper Days*, and *Heathen Days*, all still in print), and although by the 1920s he was the most famous newspaperman, critic and essayist in the country, he resisted all temptation to move to New York. With the exception of his brief marriage in the 1930s (it ended with his wife's early death), he lived in the house where he had been born, and his Hollins Street neighborhood was the center of his world. But however provincial his personal life may have been, he was the most influential literary critic of his day, and he did more than any other American to lift the country out of the backwaters of cultural Puritanism and into the modern age.

Mencken was still a vivid presence at the *Sun* when Russell Baker arrived there in 1947 fresh out of college, though there is no reason to believe that the two ever met. Mencken was world-famous and Baker was a mere police reporter. He stayed at the *Sun* for several years, getting to know the city well and refining a writing talent that, though entirely different from Mencken's, was of a comparably high order. It was when he went to the *New York Times* in the 1950s that he really came into his own, first as a reporter and then as the author of an immensely popular column, "Observer," which tended to focus on ordinary life rather than great events and was written in a low-keyed, wry style.

Baker's claim to be a true Baltimore writer rests on his two memoirs, *Growing Up* and *The Good Times*. The first is the story of his boyhood in Baltimore and the second is substantially concerned with his apprenticeship at the *Sun*. *Growing Up* is widely considered a masterpiece of American memoirs, while *The Good Times* recalls a newspaper life now forever lost and a raffish Baltimore that is quite hard to find today in the shadows of tall, modern office towers.

Top: An aerial view of downtown Baltimore. Above: Fells Point, a historic waterfront community in Baltimore.

Yet another Baltimore writer to come to the trade through the *Sun* is Laura Lippman. The daughter of a prominent *Sun* editorialist and columnist, she worked at the *Sun* throughout the 1990s, covering a broad variety of beats and developing a particular familiarity with the city's criminal world, a world made internationally known by two television series, *Homicide: Life on the Street* and *The Wire*. In the late 1990s she began to write novels about a newspaper-reporter-turned-private-detective named *Tess Monaghan*. The first two, *Baltimore Blues* and *Charm City*, were published as paperback originals in 1997.

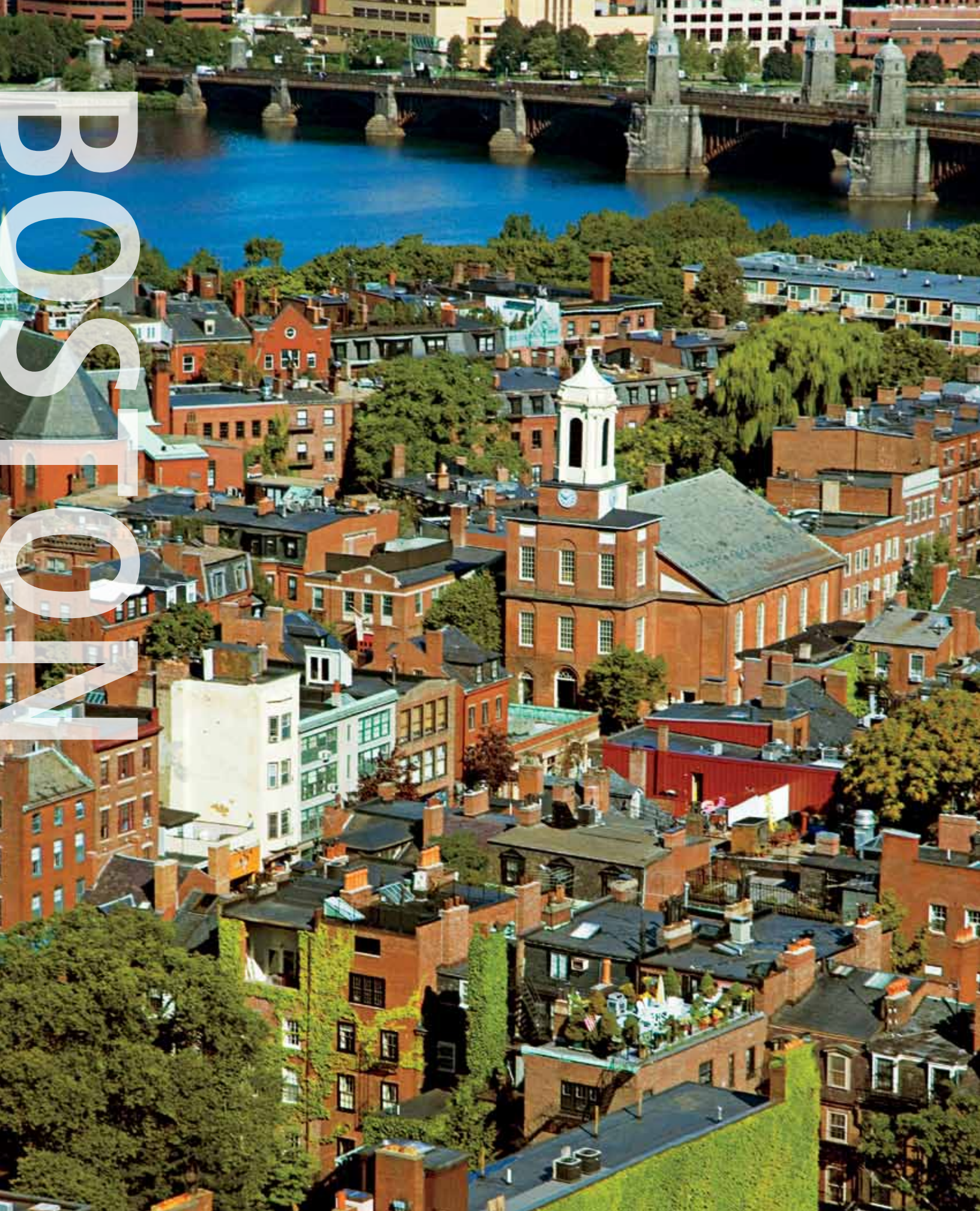
Since then Lippman has published 15 other books, both Tess Monaghan mysteries and what she calls "stand-alone" novels. That's a remarkable rate of production, and what's even more remarkable is the high level of quality she's maintained. She still calls herself a "crime novelist," but she's much more than that. She creates characters with great skill, she brings Baltimore to life as a character in and of itself, she writes exceptionally well, and she concerns herself with serious themes. She has many years ahead of her and all her admirers have much to look forward to.

Finally, there is Anne Tyler. She is the one exception to the rule that Baltimore doesn't welcome outsiders. She didn't arrive in the city until the early 1960s, when she was in her 20s, married and the mother of two daughters, and the author of a well-received first novel, *If Morning Ever Comes*. It was not until 1974, with her fourth novel, *The Clock Winder*, that Baltimore emerged as the setting for her fiction. It has remained that ever since. From the outset she revealed a deep sympathy for the city's agreeable eccentricities and oddities, and from the outset her fellow Baltimoreans embraced her and her vision of their city, and made her one of their own.

In the 1980s Tyler became a nationally best-selling novelist with her two most famous (and best) books, *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* and *The Accidental Tourist*. Now in her late 60s, she continues to write steadily and to bring out a new novel approximately every three years, invariably to critical praise and popular success. Her reputation early in her career was as a literary writer, and she has maintained high literary standards as she has taken her place among the most popular and beloved American writers of her day. She declines all interviews and other forms of publicity, a remarkable and admirable policy in this age of unceasing self-promotion.

Tyler (for her novel *Breathing Lessons*) and Russell Baker (for *Growing Up*) are the only two Baltimore writers to have won Pulitzer Prizes for literature. Their positions in the American literary firmament are as secure as Mencken's, and Laura Lippman is well on her way to joining them.

Top: Camden Yards is home to the Baltimore Orioles baseball team. Middle: Mount Vernon is another picturesque and historic neighborhood in Baltimore. Above: Baltimore's downtown Lexington market is the longest running market in the world. It has been around since 1782.


BOSTON

GHOSTS

by Carlo Rotella

Carlo Rotella is the author of *Cut Time*, *Good With Their Hands*, and *October Cities*. He contributes regularly to the *New York Times Magazine*, the *Washington Post Magazine*, the Boston *Globe*, *Slate*, and WGBH; his work has also appeared in the *New Yorker*, the *American Scholar*, and *The Best American Essays*. He is Director of American Studies at Boston College.

My daughter Ling-li, who is 8, has lately been menaced by ghosts. They begin gathering at bedtime, preparing to invade her dreams. Deep in the night, awakened by a particularly vivid nightmare after a string of lesser ones, she pads down the hall to my room and comes around to my side of the bed. "I'm having Bad Thoughts," she says in the dark, her voice low. "Bring everything." I am the resident expert on bad dreams, having had them all my life: half-seen, slavering beasts surging through doors that won't lock and windows too small to fit the frame; a long walk down the corridors of hell with a baseball bat on my shoulder; the same unspeakably hideous movie on every channel and the TV won't turn off and then, somehow, I'm in the movie. Technique is an antidote to fear, I've learned, so I taught Ling-li when she was very small that an ally can enter your dreams to bring you specialized equipment you can use to repel various menaces, and that eventually, as your powers as a dreamer grow, you can dispense with the ally's intervention and train your sleeping mind to produce the equipment when you need it.

Over the years, she and I have assembled an arsenal for her that includes a net for catching monsters; a fire extinguisher, added during her fire-fearing period; a flying castle, and a winged horse to get there; and the Slippery Suit, to foil the bad guys who forever yearn to grab her and spirit her away to their extravagantly unhappy lairs. We've recently added a small, smooth stone you keep in your pocket. When ghosts appear, you put your hand around the stone, which causes a strong wind to blow up, sending those diaphanous sons of bitches scudding away, howling in frustration. But I may have made the case for my own expertise a little too well; instead of training her own sleeping self to carry these items, she still prefers to wake me up and instruct me to bring them to her, as if I were her ectoplasmic gun bearer or attorney.

Ling-li's worries about ghosts date from a recent family outing to Georges Island, in Boston Harbor. We spent a few hours there exploring Fort Warren, in which Confederate prisoners were kept during the Civil War. No doubt some of them died there. In lightless galleries deep within the fort we held hands and shuffled blindly, feeling with our feet for irregularities in the naked stone floor, straining to make out even a faint shape in the blackness, immoderately relieved when up ahead another visitor's cellphone cast a brief, greenish glow. On the return ride on the

The oldest commissioned ship in the U.S. Navy, the U.S.S. Constitution, takes its annual turnaround cruise in Boston Harbor. Opposite page: An aerial view along the Charles River captures the variety of Boston's architectural styles.

ferry, Ling-li and her little sister, Yuan (who is not afraid of ghosts), joined the crowd of kids hanging on the rail at the bow in the watery September sunlight, screaming happily into the wind as the boat sawed through the wakes of other craft. Back on the mainland, we walked past the offices of a company that conducts haunted house tours of Boston. Ling-li approached the guy in a top hat who was drumming up business at a lectern out front. Affecting an archaic accent and a dastardly manner, he at first refused to confirm or deny that ghosts were real, but eventually, upon further interrogation, told her that he himself was a ghost. She absorbed this news without comment, and we went on our way. The encounter with the mock-Victorian tour tout and the spookiness of the fort, reacting together, initiated the current ghost cycle in her dream life.

When people ask me what I like about Boston I usually say that it's old (for a New World city) and you can go almost everywhere on foot. Neither quality is typical of American city life. I grew up in Chicago, a city that now feels to me like an experiment, a cyclopean model train set scattered just the other day across the prairie. All the pyramids and cathedrals of my childhood rose and fell within living memory — the high-rise housing projects marching away along the verge of the expressway, the monumental ruins of steel mills and factories tumbling in slow motion into the high prairie grass that eventually reclaims a deserted lot in Chicago. And Chicago stretches across the flat Midwestern landscape on such an inhuman scale that on a windy February night it feels as if a destination eight blocks distant lies just over the curve of the earth.

To a Chicago-trained sensibility, Boston feels jammed-in, as if long ago someone had gathered up a great deal of urban material — triple-deckers, college quadrangles, bridges of stone and steel, the golden dome

Top: Sail boats crisscross Boston harbor against the city's skyline. Above: The Old State House, built in 1713, it is the oldest surviving public building in Boston.

of the State House, lawn chairs and trash cans placed in parking spaces to reserve them for whoever shoveled the snow out of them — and packed it all tightly into an oddly shaped location at the edge of the ocean. I live in Brookline, a separate town tucked into a concave depression in the boundaries of Boston proper; my neighborhood, my adopted landscape of home, is a collection of familiar wrinkles in the city's scrunched-up fabric. The street I live on, a double row of duplex houses set nearly cheek to cheek, lies between higher ground on one side and train tracks on the other. At night from my windows I can watch the Green Line trains, lit up like excursion boats, passing behind the houses across the street. On winter nights, when I build a fire in the fireplace, the approaching and receding sound of trains comes down the chimney. Bracketed by two fingers of the Green Line track network's handlike spread, the swelling contours of Aspinwall Hill and Fisher Hill, and the main thoroughfares of Beacon Street and Boylston Street, we're holed up here like mice in a niche in an old stone wall.

But coziness requires its own antidote: I like to run at night, after the girls have been put to bed with stories and stuffed bears and night lights. Starting off down the block, I leave the house behind me with the porch light on and another light up in the office window where my wife sits at her desk. I cross Beacon Street and enter Brighton, part of Boston proper, passing houses and then apartment buildings with windows blue-lit by TV. Warmed up and letting out my stride, I cross Washington Street on the diagonal by the police station, the presence of which does not entirely deter the city's famously incompetent and irate drivers from running red lights right in front of it. I follow the gentle downslope of Market Street toward the river. The sidewalks are nearly empty and traffic is light.

Top: Faneuil Hall in downtown Boston is one of the city's many historic sites on Boston's Freedom Trail. Above: In Boston new buildings rise next to some of the oldest buildings in the United States. Below: A lone runner on a wintry day is silhouetted against the downtown Boston skyline.

Top left: Tourists enjoy a ride on the swan boats in the Boston Public Gardens.
Top: People walk past subway trains known as "The T." Opened in 1897, it is America's oldest subway. Above: Historic Faneuil Hall has been revitalized as the centerpiece of a marketplace featuring shops and a food hall

The river, lined on both banks with paved paths, is one of Boston's longest, deepest wrinkles — an intimate natural alley, partially screened by trees and brush, that funnels you semi-secretly through the city, intersecting with streets only where it comes to a bridge. I pick up speed on the riverside path, falling into long-haul rhythm, seized by a growing feeling of insubstantiality as I pass from a stretch of gloom through a better-lit patch and back into gloom again. The occasional rat darts across the path almost underfoot. Sentinel ducks and geese standing watch at the edges of sleeping flotillas of their kind sound an alarm at my approach and then the all-clear when they determine that it's only me. A pale heron rises up with a start from the shallows and with a couple of sullen wingbeats glides away over the water. Once, as I went by a thicket of tall reeds that always stirs whisperingly at my passing, a coyote came out ahead of me into a bar of moonlight, looking back over its hunched shoulder as it crossed the empty road, and paced me for a while before disappearing into a dark wedge of marshy ground on the other side.

I pass the occasional fellow runner or late dog walker; in good weather, courting couples sit on benches overlooking the water. But the living are outnumbered along the river by relics of the dead: Richie Forte, killed in Vietnam, for whom a park in the Nonantum section of Newton is named; David Berray, who died in the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, and is remembered on a plaque next to a playground in Cambridge; Longfellow and Eliot and Weeks and Weld and all the other harrumphing old-timers who gave their names to bridges and boathouses; the legions of long-dead authors whose books gather dust in the stacks of the libraries of the universities that front on the water — Harvard, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Boston University. Not far from the memorial to David Berray there's a granite marker inscribed with a

claim so wishful that it qualifies as a lie: "On this spot in the year 1000 Leif Erikson built his house in Vineland." Ebenezer Norton Horsford, a 19th-century baking-powder entrepreneur with a passion for amateur archaeology of the most poetic sort, is responsible for the marker. He also had a fanciful Viking tower erected farther west on the river, and led the effort to commission the statue of Leif Erikson that peers out at ramp traffic, palm shading brow, from the grassy median of Commonwealth Avenue at the edge of Back Bay. Perhaps Horsford's labors finally calmed the unquiet Viking ghosts that gathered at his bedside, although we'll never know, because Horsford's long dead, too, of course.

Sometimes I try to explain to Ling-li my urge to be out at night, unencumbered, moving fast, fitting myself into the landscape's seams and the cycle of its rhythms. She plainly thinks it foolhardy to choose to be so exposed and alone in the dark, but I try to make her see that the night run is a technique of belonging, of inscribing yourself into a place and the place into yourself. Repeating and varying your routes, you stitch yourself into the texture of your home ground so that you can't be easily pulled from it — not by your enemies, and not even by those who love you. It's true that when you run at night you feel the chill of the thinness of the world, the tenuous weakness of your connection to anyone or anything — especially in the cold and wet, and most especially on a Sunday night in the dead of winter — but she doesn't yet understand how you also strike a blow against this loneliness precisely by seeking it out. As the city's ghosts grow more familiar to you, by degrees you join their fellowship. For every half-seen figure at a second-floor window or in a passing car, for every phantom shape that flickers in your peripheral vision as you pass a stand of trees or a cemetery on a riverfront rise of ground, there are many more you don't see, many more who, rather, catch a glimpse of you: a strangely familiar shadow against the greater dark.

When I return home, I stretch and shower and put on sweats, then pad through the quiet house, turning off lights, checking the stove and the locks on the doors, making sure all is well. My wife has gone off to bed already. Before I join her, I stop in the girls' room to kiss them goodnight in their sleep. I often sit in their room for a minute, listening to their breathing, the house ticking over in the stillness, the muted rumble and whoosh of a late train. I'm the only spark of conscious life in the house, passing soundless and unseen among unheeding sleepers. Yuan once told me, "You're like a bad guy who likes me and protects me from the other bad guys." Sometimes I linger a little longer in the girls' room, waiting to return fully to my body so that I can lie down next to my wife and sleep.

Top: Passersby stroll through an entrance gate to the main campus of Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, a suburb of Boston. Above: A frequent winter scene in the Beacon Hill neighborhood in Boston is digging out from a blizzard.

CHICAGO

CHICAGO AQUAMARINE

by Stuart Dybek

Stuart Dybek is the author of three books of fiction and two books of poetry. His work is often set in the Pilsen neighborhood, where he was raised on the south side of Chicago. His fiction and poetry are frequently anthologized and have won numerous awards, including in 2008 a MacArthur Prize. Dybek is distinguished writer in residence at Northwestern University.

Chicago, a city where the river runs backwards, embraces paradox. Geography ensures that it does. The undeclared capital of the heart of the country, it's an inland city renowned for the skyscrapers that rise from the flatland of the vast, fertile prairie known as the American Midwest. The smell of salt ocean is 700 miles away, and yet Chicago is a water town. Its horizon is aquamarine. The coast of the city overlooks the largest sweet-water sea on the planet, one that contains 20 percent of Earth's fresh water. More than prairie, fields, or parks, it is water that serves as Nature's counterpoint to the girders and concrete of Chicago architecture, and to the grit of its streets. The protection of the public lakefront was the central feature of the Burnham Plan of 1909, a plan responsible for the continued preservation of what is uniquely beautiful about Chicago. The lake mirrors the expansive reflection of the city and gives it back transformed. Water is the city's mythos. Any kid who grew up in the inner city and made the journey in the sweltering summer to the beach or, better yet, illegally wrenched open a fire pump and let it gush into the street while a neighborhood danced in the spray, can tell you that.

Chicago's origin is interwoven with water. In 1674, Louis Joliet and Père Marquette, a Jesuit missionary who spoke several Native American languages, paddled birch bark canoes up the Illinois River and became the first Europeans to camp near the site that would become a metropolis. Explorers fascinated me as a child. At night my bed became a canoe I paddled through the wilderness, imagining the wonder the two Frenchmen must have felt upon seeing it for the first time. The night shift of the city was audible from my window, especially the trains that never slept, rumbling over the viaducts. Our neighborhood was laced with train tracks, and the so-called Sanitary Canal — the brown of an open sewer — sludged beneath railroad bridges just blocks away. But I was on a river that flowed through forest; along its banks, buffalo, deer, bear, and fox came to drink. My father, a Polish immigrant, recalled seeing a plaque that marked a place where Marquette had camped in winter along the river on 27th and Damen Avenue, not far from where we lived, and one day, my friend Eddie Boy and I made a bike excursion out of trying to find it, but if there'd been a plaque, it was gone. Scavenging scrap was common in our neighborhood, where one man's hubcaps might be another man's scrap, and we figured someone stole it in order to junk the bronze.

Downtown Chicago is home to one of the world's top ten global financial centers. Opposite page: The skyline of Chicago, the third most populous city in the United States.

We lived in Pilsen, a Southwest Side, port-of-entry neighborhood named after Plzen, the Czech city that also lends its name to a light, golden lager. Chicago is a city divided between the more residential North Side and a working-class, industrial South Side. It is a city of neighborhoods because it is a city of immigrants. The history of immigrations can be read in the way its neighborhoods are divided along racial or ethnic lines — Bronzeville, Chinatown, Greektown, Andersonville, Little Italy, the Barrio.

Cities, if they're lucky, produce writers that define them — try imagining London without its Dickens. Chicago is that rare American city with a literary tradition resembling London's or Moscow's, and, fittingly, Chicago writers — mostly South Siders — are neighborhood writers: Saul Bellow lays claim to Hyde Park, Nelson Algren to the Polish Triangle along Milwaukee and Division, Gwendolyn Brooks to Bronzeville, James Farrell to what was once the Irish Southeast Side.

Each neighborhood has its own Main Street and 18th Street is Pilsen's. Walk down 18th through the smoky fragrance of taquerias blaring ranchera, past Spanish shop signs and vibrant murals that bring Diego Rivera to mind, and you might wonder why this place is named after Plzen instead of Guadalajara.

Top: The Chicago River flows past the city's tallest building, the Sears Tower. Bottom: The Burnham Plan of 1909 is responsible for the continued preservation of Chicago's public lakefront along Lake Michigan.

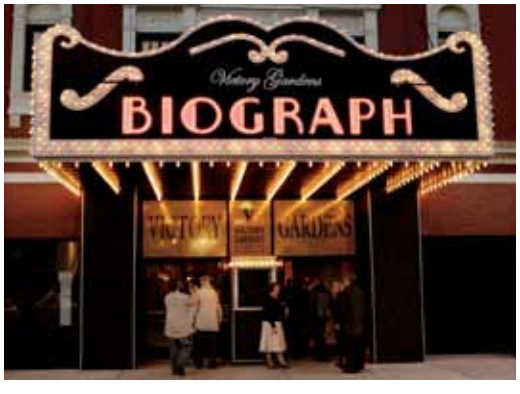
Since the 1960s, the Pilsen neighborhood has been a main port of entry for a Latino immigration that crossed not an ocean but a river to arrive in the USA. Before that, it was a Slavic enclave. Czech immigrants settled there in the mid-19th century, and the neighborhood was one of the few in the city to survive the Chicago Fire of 1877. That same period burned with the fires of labor unrest and social change, and Pilsen, working-class from its inception, figured prominently in the waves of strikes, protests, and brutal retaliations. It was a time when an obscure "melting pot" neighborhood could serve as a cauldron for national events of historic proportion, an era that saw the violence of the Haymarket Riot, social experiments like Jane Adams' Hull House, John Dewey's Progressive Education, and protest literature such as Upton Sinclair's exposé of the Chicago meatpacking industry in *The Jungle*. This brand of a Chicago-grown American liberalism would later extend to the work and theories of the community organizer, Saul Alinsky, whose ideas in turn engaged a young lawyer named Barack Obama.

Despite the historic events that occurred within the 3.5 square miles of Pilsen, my friends and I, growing up there generations later, were largely ignorant of its past. Chicago, which Nelson Algren famously dubbed the "city on the make," can't be counted on to make time for history. Preservation requires care and money, and a place on the make sees more gain in tearing down, rebuilding, and leaving the past and its inconvenient lessons — though not necessarily its grudges — in the rubble behind. The history of class conflict and labor unrest is seldom taught in schools. Still, I wonder if, growing up, we didn't sense the past on some subliminal level.

The philosopher Jacques Derrida coined the term "hauntology," which he defined as "the paradoxical state of the specter which is neither being nor nonbeing." He's speaking metaphorically about how economic forces of the past, forgotten though they might be, continue to haunt the present. There was a railroad viaduct in Pilsen that was rumored to be haunted. Viaducts are spooky tunnels anyway, but the one on 16th Street was supposed to be haunted by ghosts. It was a local rite of initiation to run through it at night. We surmised there'd been a gang murder or a vicious rape or that one of the hobos who rode the rails was found hanged there.

Only as an adult, while researching the history of my neighborhood, did I learn that in 1887 that viaduct was the site of the Battle of the Viaduct. The railroad strike of 1887 had produced general labor unrest. When a crowd of unarmed protesters, including women and children, gathered at the viaduct, police and federal troops seasoned fighting the Sioux who had defeated Custer fired on the crowd, killing 30 and wounding at least a hundred. It is possible to purchase "memorial bricks" supposedly from the bullet-riddled wall of the St. Valentine's Day Massacre, and the façade of the Biograph Theater where John Dillinger was shot has been carefully preserved and remains a tourist attraction.

Top: "The El" or Elevated Train is the rapid transit system serving the city of Chicago and some of its surrounding suburbs. Above: Chicago's City Hall boasts a rooftop garden.



A replica of the Biograph Theater marquee is illuminated for the movie house made famous by the Depression-era bank robber John Dillinger.

Chicago is, after all, known for its adolescent romance with gangsters. But if you visit the viaduct on 16th and Halsted, aside from ghosts, you'll find no memorial for the Battle of the Viaduct.

Even though, like Saul Bellow's Augie March, I can claim to be "an American, Chicago born — Chicago, that somber city," there are times when, returning to my old South Side haunts, I feel like a tourist of my own past. My favorite mode of transport is to paddle my kayak down the South Branch of the Chicago River — the river whose natural flow toward the lake was, in interest of sanitation, reversed in 1900. The South Branch forks into the Ship and Sanitary Canal, which slinks through the Southwest Side. We called it the Insanitary Canal. Legend was that if a toxic drop of it touched bare skin, you'd be plagued with a communicable disease — polio, TB, syphilis — or infested with the bloodworms that thrived on the offal flushed from the stockyards. The canal was known as Bubbly Creek back then when Chicago, to quote Carl Sandburg, was "Hog Butcher for the World," and gas from the decomposing carcasses dumped in the river bubbled to the surface. Although considerable resources have been invested in improving water quality, I'm careful to minimize contact with it when I launch at Ashland Avenue.

The North Branch of the river flows through downtown's glass and steel canyon of world-class architecture. It's a trip worth taking. There's no better perspective for seeing a city from the ground up — be it Paris, Prague, or Chicago — than from its river. The river seems cleaner on the North Branch. Sculling teams row by, people along shore are actually fishing for the inedible fish, and there was a rumor that Mayor Richard J. Daley had considered a fleet of gondolas to ferry people around downtown.

The Sanitary Canal isn't quite ready for gondolas. It smells as it did when I was a kid, of oil, creosote, and the pigeons under the railroad bridges. Its rusted banks are piled with junk and trash. Lake Michigan

Top left: Dancers perform at Chicago's annual St. Patrick's day parade. Top: Once home to immigrants from Eastern Europe, Chicago's Pilsen neighborhood is now the setting for a procession marking Dia de los Muertos, Day of the Dead. Above: In Chicago's South Side, dishes are prepared at a Hyde Park eatery.

Runners race through downtown Grant Park during the annual Chicago Marathon.

reflects the face of the Gold Coast that the city wants the world to see. But an industrial river like the South Branch reveals the backside where the factory windows are broken and scorched black. In high school, I'd come at night to contemplate the sparking acetylene and bolts of blue-hot flame from the night shift foundries flaring off the dark water. In summer I'd explore the acres behind bankrupt factories that were reverting to prairie and wetlands, where wildlife — rabbits, fox, pheasants, heron, frogs, snakes — survived in sight of downtown's hazy range of spires. Like railroad tracks, rivers are flyways and beside the ever-present gulls there are dabbling ducks, mallards, golden eyes, mergansers, Canada geese, migrating swans, egrets, kingfishers, swallows, hawks, and peregrine falcons, the official city bird, there to prey on pigeons.

Under the leadership of Daley, Chicago has become prominent in the green city movement. Once, at a literacy event for inner-city students, I described to the mayor my paddles along the river and amazement at the sight of a beaver dam, a clear indication of improved water quality.

"That's nothing," the mayor told me in his thick South Side accent. "That river's getting so clean the predators are back. A marten came up the South Branch at night, got off at Cermak, snuck into Chinatown and killed half the ducks. I get this call from the Police Department saying the Chinese restaurant owners are in an uproar wanting to know what we're going to do about it. What do they want me to do, arrest a marten?"

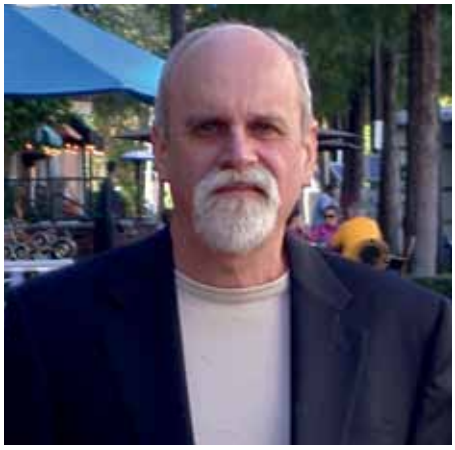
Later, I checked with a local wildlife expert, who told me that, as I suspected, the story was unlikely given that martens had been extinct in Illinois since 1859. "But," he added, considering, "it might have been a mink."

Top left: At a youth center playground on Chicago's South Side, a young boy stands in front of a colorful mural depicting migrant workers. Top right: The Chinese-American Museum in Chicago's Chinatown neighborhood introduces visitors to the history and people who settled there. Middle: The Pullman District in Chicago remains remarkably unchanged from the 1880s when George M. Pullman built homes for workers in his railroad car factory. Above: "Cloud Gate" nicknamed "The Bean," this 110-ton stainless steel sculpture by Anish Kapoor adorns Chicago's Millennium Park.

HOUSTON

HOUSTON: EXPERIMENTAL CITY

by FRITZ LANHAM



Fritz Lanham grew up in a Houston suburb and for 16 years served as book editor for the *Houston Chronicle*. He is currently director of programs for Asia Society Texas Center. A graduate of the University of Texas and Indiana University, he is a member of the Texas Institute of Letters. He and his wife, Kellye Sanford, live in the Spring Branch area of Houston.

Of America's great cities, Houston most thoroughly eludes easy definition. Speak its name and what comes to mind? A downtown of glass towers? Concrete rivers winding through urban sprawl? True enough, but those things don't distinguish Houston from other Sun Belt cities. They don't capture Houston's soul.

Everybody of a certain age has heard of the Astrodome, dubbed the "Eighth Wonder of the World" when it rose on baking prairie in the early 1960s. As a kid I remember getting dressed up to go to ball games there. Men wore coats and ties, women wore hats. You weren't there just to watch the hometown team lose another one, you were there to celebrate Houston's arrival as a major metropolis.

But those days are long gone. Today the Dome sits empty and mostly forgotten, a monument to a wrong turn in sports architecture, its stature as Houston icon gone. Nobody can figure out what to do with it, and someday soon, I expect, it will quietly be torn down.

There's Houston's reputation as an oil and gas town, a place of rowdy roughnecks and hard-drinking oil barons. Every account of Houston's history tells the story of wildcatter Glenn McCarthy's booze-fueled party at the 1949 opening of the posh Shamrock Hotel, by the end of which rich Texas socialites and Hollywood starlets bobbed drunkenly in the swimming pool, a boisterous eruption of civic self-celebration made possible by black gold.

But larger-than-life oil tycoons like McCarthy are long gone, as is the Shamrock Hotel. And while the energy industry remains the most powerful engine of the local economy, its employees toil away in office towers and tend to be about as colorful as accountants. The refineries themselves — vast metalscapes of pipes, tubes and tanks — are confined to the blue-collar eastern half of the county, outside the city proper. Most Houstonians notice them only when they smell them, and prosperous Houstonians rarely suffer that indignity. No, the oil and gas industry doesn't define the city's distinctive nature.

When I consider Houston's identity, I keep returning to its attitude toward the new, toward change, and the past. Terms like Experimental City, Improvisational City, Accidental City come to mind. Houston is a site for building and tearing down, dreaming and discarding. It's a place for remaking physical and social space — throwing up a new building,

A light rail train passes through downtown Houston. Opposite page: In Houston's theater district, the Wortham Center stands out.

launching a new business, starting a new art gallery or dance company.

About half of this new stuff fails, gets discarded and forgotten. But Houston is a city where people try things because there's no one to stop them. Which can sometimes be good, sometimes bad.

My wife and I are about to do a complete renovation of our bland '60s-era ranch-style house, so residential construction has been much on my mind. And residential construction is as good a way as any to illustrate Houston's propensity for the never-ending makeover.

Today, Houston is experiencing a period of rapid "infill," to use the buzz word of the day. People, a lot of them anyway, are tired of living out in the suburban boonies. They want to be closer to their jobs, closer to big-city restaurants and entertainment venues. Everywhere you turn developers are throwing up townhouses, patio homes, apartment units, filling in the empty spaces and making the city denser.

All of this is facilitated by Houston's famous lack of zoning. Twice Houston voters have said no to zoning, deemed a ploy of the communists to deprive a man of his right to do with his property what he damned well pleases.

Actually, most neighborhoods have deed restrictions that do limit the type of building that can go in. Still, you find cozy 1920s-era bungalows sharing a block with metal-clad Mies van der Rohe-inspired modernist masterpieces, all sharp angles and cool, spare functionality,

Above: A group of workers construct temporary scaffolding against the background of Houston's skyscrapers. Bottom: A high angle view of Houston's cityscape.

Left: A walker heads along a trail on a beautiful January day near downtown Houston. Above: the Houston Ship Channel winds through refineries and oil and chemical storage facilities on its way to the Gulf of Mexico.

designed perhaps by one of the ambitious young architects produced by Rice University or the University of Houston. Purists deplore these incongruities, but I like them. It means that strip shopping centers, auto repair shops, $850,000 neo-Georgians (called "lawyer boxes" in these parts), and commercial office buildings rub elbows more closely and in more surprising juxtaposition than in "planned" cities. Houston's totem could be the Imp of Incongruity.

The dark flip side of this openness to the new is a deplorable indifference to preserving the old. Hardly a month goes by that you don't hear of a developer dooming some piece of Houston's past. Recently the finest remaining art deco retail building in town fell to the wrecking ball to make room for a new Barnes & Noble bookstore. As I write, the fate of another art deco masterpiece, the old Alabama Theater, where in 1968 I watched Dustin Hoffman in The Graduate with a girl who later broke my heart, remains in grave doubt. Whatever the owner builds in its stead won't be half as lovely.

There are preservationists in town who battle such depredations, but they're overmatched by the money and influence of developers and the indifference of the citizenry. I cheer for them, but I can't say they're winning the fight, at least not yet.

In certain parts of the city creative destruction is yielding good things. In Midtown, a 40-block-long area connecting downtown and the world-renowned Medical Center to the south, developers are experimenting with medium-rise, pedestrian-friendly projects that combine residential space with street-level restaurants and shops and wide sidewalks conducive to European-style outdoor dining. Houston is famously a city where no one walks, but you're seeing more and more experiments aimed at changing that.

Downtown Houston for most of its modern history has been an area that emptied out at 5 o'clock. About 20 years ago the city and certain visionary private developers began trying to change that too, renovating commercial space into loft apartments. For a while it seemed to work. New restaurants and bars opened, you saw people walking the streets

Top: Houston's Reliant Stadium hosts a sellout crowd for the 2004 Super Bowl game. Above: An intern at Houston's Museum of Fine Arts inspects a work called "New Light" by Thornton Dial.

at night. We got a fine new downtown baseball stadium, Minute Maid Park, and a new basketball arena.

But so far downtown hasn't attracted a real critical mass of residents. You won't find dry cleaners, small grocers, hardware stores, for example, the infrastructure of civilized urban living. Bottom line for downtown: prognosis uncertain, but reasons for optimism.

I've been focusing on bricks and mortar here in part because whatever it is that makes Houston a stimulating place to live arises from the man-made rather than the natural environment. While far more green and lush than many people realize, Houston can claim few natural charms. Look to the horizon and you don't see snow-capped peaks in the distance as in Salt Lake City or Seattle.

The city doesn't sit on a fine natural harbor like San Francisco but rather abuts upper Galveston Bay, 60 miles inland from the Gulf of Mexico. Were it not for the 1900 hurricane that killed 6,000 people in Galveston and ended that city's status as Texas' greatest port, Houston might have remained a literal backwater. Taking advantage of Galveston's misfortune, Houston city fathers pushed through a plan to dredge a channel through Galveston Bay that allowed ocean-going vessels to make their way to Houston. That gave birth to the Port of Houston, and the port, together with the invention of air conditioning, gave birth to Houston as a major metropolis.

Especially the invention of air conditioning. Not only is Houston flat but it's hot, a strength-sapping steam bath for at least six months of the year. One doesn't notice the heat as much as you might imagine simply because the whole city is so thoroughly refrigerated artificially. That said, global warming is not going to do Houston any favors.

The city is bisected by muddy, sluggish bayous, some banked by concrete, others not, whose chief function is to drain rainwater into Galveston Bay. Valiant efforts have been made to make Buffalo Bayou, which runs through the heart of the city, a more inviting waterway. Walking trails now run alongside it in places, and the water quality is better, but I don't expect to see anyone swimming in Buffalo Bayou in my lifetime.

All these unpromising physical properties serve to spur the spirit of innovation and experimentation I've described as the city's fundamental feature. Build this, tear down that, whatever, try something to make the place more attractive and comfortable.

While Houston physically is in an almost constant state of flux, it's also experiencing a demographic sea change, the same one other American cities are going through. But more emphatically so here.

Houston is becoming a brown city, a predominantly Hispanic city. Sixty-three percent of the county's residents are Hispanic. That's the third highest figure in the country for counties with more than a million people. The full implications of this population revolution remain to be felt.

Top: A specially modified jet carries the space shuttle Endeavor as it flies by Houston's Johnson Space Center en route to the Kennedy Space Center in Florida.
Above: The Xydris brothers are shown in their business, the Palace Boot Shop, downtown Houston's last old Western store that closed its doors in 2005.

Ranked among the top 20 U.S. universities, Rice University began operation in 1912 and is known for its applied science programs.

Everyone with eyes in Houston knows the Hispanic population has exploded. What seems to be changing is the socio-economic status of that population. In the past Hispanics remained disproportionately poor and working class. Middle-class Anglos knew them as construction workers, maids, cooks, truck drivers — people doing useful work but a class apart.

But Houstonians of every ethnicity will wake up one day soon and discover that not only do the bricklayers and restaurant cooks have brown faces and Spanish surnames but so do most of the doctors and lawyers and bank executives and store clerks. If you doubt that, sit outside a downtown office tower or wander through one of the larger shopping malls and write down the ethnicity of everyone you see. Totally unscientific, I know, but eye-opening.

How will the radical Hispanicization of Houston change the city? In fewer ways than you might imagine. That's my guess. Admittedly, plenty of non-Hispanic Houstonians experience spasms of anger and anxiety when the notice everyone around them in a store or on a bus is speaking a language they don't understand. Seems somehow un-American. But most Houstonians have already absorbed into their cultural DNA Hispanic food, music, and at least a little of the language. More significant, most of the Hispanic people I know seem to embrace the idea of the Experimental City and the social and physical churn it brings.

I've always considered myself someone in search of the calm center of life rather than one of the hard-charging, get-ahead entrepreneurial types that embody the Houston ethos. That said, for the most part I feel comfortable here, and have now for 25 years. I guess like a lot of Americans, I underestimate my own appetite for novelty and the gambles that come with the new.

Top left: Three young beauties take a break from Ballet Folklorico during Houston's annual Hispanic Pride Parade in honor of Cesar Chavez.. Top: Known for its flea markets, Houston's shoppers browse the Mercado Sabadomingo. Above: Many performers entertain at the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo. The world's largest event of its kind began in 1932 and is a charity to benefit the youth of Texas.

LOS ANGELES

DREAMLAND

by Jonathan Kellerman

Jonathan Kellerman is the author of 31 bestselling novels, six nonfiction books, and numerous essays and scientific articles. Trained as a clinical psychologist, he is Professor of Clinical Pediatrics and Keck USC School of Medicine and Adjunct Professor of Psychology at USC.

On the morning of January 14, 1959, David and Sylvia Kellerman and their three young children descended the steps of a TWA propeller plane and stepped onto the tarmac of Los Angeles International Airport.

The aircraft had taken off the previous midnight from La Guardia Airport in Queens, New York, where temperatures had dipped into the teens during a fierce snowstorm. The Kellerman kids, swaddled in heavy coats over pajamas and wearing hats with earflaps, elicited stares from the ground crew. The weather in Los Angeles was 79 degrees Fahrenheit. The sun was shining. Everything was green. Sylvia thought she'd landed in the Garden of Eden, and maybe she had.

A 9-year-old oldest child, I understood that this trip would be life-changing and I relished the adventure. As I inhaled an olfactory cocktail of jet fuel and freakishly warm winter air, and gaped at a backdrop of palm trees backing the landing field, I thought, "It really is like the movies! This is going to be great!"

It was.

My parents chose to move to LA without a serious plan. Hamstrung by a dismal financial situation that imposed a weekly budget of 35 dollars on our family of five, we were resettling 3,000 miles away as near-paupers. Dave and Sylvia's decision to uproot themselves from family and friends and to abandon the city where they'd both been born was a mixed bag of folly and bravery, narrowly rescued from outright disaster by the welcoming arms of the New American Frontier.

My father, a decorated World War II combat hero who'd seen action at the Battle of the Bulge and Utah Beach, had finally qualified, more than a decade after honorable discharge from the Army, for a G.I. Bill mortgage on a tiny brick tract-home in Bayside, New York. Soon after we moved in, the property was condemned so that an expressway could be built.

A pioneer of television whose prowess in electronics had earned him the sobriquet "The Wizard" from his commanding officer, David Kellerman had grown tired of filling corporate pockets with the fruits of his inventions and decided to start his own company. Printing stationery that made him out to be a sizable enterprise, he began hand-winding precision capacitors in the basement of the squat, soon-to-be demolished bungalow.

"As long as we're forced to relocate," he informed my mother, "let's go all the way to LA. That's where aerospace is really taking off."

With more than 30 beaches along the Los Angeles county coastline, a surfer has his choice. Opposite page: Highways leading into a smog-filled downtown Los Angeles.

The downtown Los Angeles skyline is set against the snow capped San Gabriel mountain range.

Our first home in the City of Angels was the Ranch Hotel, a past-its-prime motor inn on Pico Boulevard in West Los Angeles. Razed long ago, the motel's rutted parking lot is now occupied by the entry gates to the massive Fox Studios film lot. Which, I suppose is a metaphor of sorts.

We lived there for a month or so, sharing two rooms, as my parents traipsed around trying to find a landlord who'd rent to a family with three rambunctious kids. No doubt they were depressed by the transience and shabbiness of our situation. I was thrilled; the place had a swimming pool!

Unfenced and twelve feet deep, the algae-flecked, vaguely kidney-shaped sump that occupied much of the motel's inner courtyard beckoned me like a tropical lagoon. For now that I lived in a city where frigid winters were quickly becoming a distant memory, enjoying a few laps in January was a giddy reality. I quickly taught myself to swim.

Eventually, Mom and Dad scored a two-bedroom rental in a fifties-era dingbat on the fringes of a working class neighborhood. But my home away from home was my bicycle seat.

For much of my LA childhood, I lived on two wheels, covering miles of the brash, wide-open place I now called home, whenever weather permitted — which was nearly every Sunday. Often, I'd pedal 10 miles northeast to Griffith Park, a six and a half square mile gem just north of the leafy Los Feliz district whose mansions had once housed Cecil B. DeMille and legions of his actors.

As is true today, the park hosted a world-class zoo and astronomic observatory, but most of the surrounding acreage was undeveloped. My

Griffith Observatory commands unparalleled views of Los Angeles atop Griffith Park. The observatory reopened after remodeling in 2006.

explorations revealed fern dells and gentle streams where minnows darted and crawfish lurked, gently sloping valleys that bore the tracks of coyotes, deer and mountain lions, and hilltop vistas above which red-tailed hawks and peregrine falcons circled. This wasn't the man-made wonder akin to Central Park; this was untamed wilderness coexisting with stucco and concrete. That same juxtaposition endures into the twenty-first century: for all its traffic jams and choc-a-block development, much of Los Angeles remains curiously unspoiled, bracketed by mountains on three sides and graced by the Pacific Ocean on the fourth.

Another favorite bike ride took me southeast to Exposition Park, near the august campus of the University of Southern California, where I spent solitary hours at the Museum of Natural History, staring awestruck at rooms full of precious gems, boastful displays of gargantuan, award-winning California citrus, pickled sea specimens floating in formaldehyde, and dioramas of massive, shaggy, glassy-eyed mammals. After a quick stop for an ice cream dispensed by the peddler inevitably stationed near the manicured rose gardens rimming the museum grounds, I wheeled home sated physically and emotionally.

LA's gentle climate and lack of obvious boundaries provided a freedom I could never have imagined growing up on the East Coast, and I believe that combination fed my early interest in psychology as well

Above: A cyclist pedals down the bike path adjacent to the boardwalk in the Venice Beach area of Los Angeles. Venice Beach has long been popular with tourists for its carnival-like atmosphere. Below: Children play in the water along the pier in Santa Monica, a city in western Los Angeles County and a prime piece of California coastline.

as my subsequent career writing fiction: there seemed no better way to capture the images, smells, sounds and personalities that came at me like flash-frame movie shots than to study and record the myriad ways people functioned in this wondrous place.

That same dare-to-dream boundlessness fed Dad's aspirations and within a few years, his fifteen hour workdays began to pay off and we were living in our very own home, a modest English-style cottage in the Pico-Robertson neighborhood. Ten years after arriving in LA, Dad became downright successful, amassing 18 patents and achieving prominence as a significant contributor to the space race. He passed away six years ago but Mom, nearly 90 years old, still lives at the same address (though she remodeled back in the sixties and transformed the house into "something modern.") And all three Kellerman sibs continue to call Los Angeles their primary home.

My sister, brother and I, like so many others, love the sprawling, inchoate alternative-universe that took us in 50 years ago. Earflaps and all.

There's a scene in Steve Martin's comic movie *Bowfinger* where the actress Heather Graham, cast as the ingénue Daisy, steps off a bus at LA's Union Station. Bright-eyed and preternaturally perky, she looks around and chirps something along the lines of, "Okay, I'm here. Now where do I go to become a movie star?"

That Olympian level of delusion serves its purpose in the film, eliciting all-knowing laughter from the audience. But Daisy's ludicrously assertive innocence isn't that far removed from Los Angeles's daily reality: this is the place dreamers, as well as those plagued by nightmares, come to reinvent themselves.

Go West, young man, but eventually you'll hit the ocean and have nowhere else to go.

So hatch yourself a scheme.

LA encourages a steady influx of starry-eyed seekers. It's a company town where the primary product is illusion and who knows when The Next Big Star will step off the bus?

The visionaries who created the concept of motion picture as commercial enterprise at the turn of the 20th century were lured to Los Angeles by miles of open land that could be made to mimic anything from Texas to Tahiti, a do-your-own-thing zeitgeist, and, of course, benevolent meteorology. The roots planted by Sennet, Goldwyn, the Warners, and the like have since grown deep and stout. Many of the aerospace companies that lured my father have vanished and manufacturers in the city's hub struggle to compete with low-wage regions around the globe. But the enterprise that calls itself The Industry without a trace of irony, and the ancillary businesses it has spawned — costume rental outfits, stunt specialists, special effects and film editing labs, talent agencies — have expanded exponentially.

Kinetic sculpture is a centerpiece in the California Science Center, Exposition Park, in Los Angeles.

The University of Southern California campus, Los Angeles.

Top left: "Oscar" statues and the traditional red carpet lead the way into the entrance of the Shrine Auditorium in Los Angeles where the Academy Awards are held each year. Top: Ornate buildings abound in the Beverly Hills section of Los Angeles. Above: Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills caters to special tastes and high-end shopping.

To a far greater extent than when I moved here half a century ago, the movie business dominates LA's cultural, sociological and political landscape. Fashion designers who might strive to catch the attention of society women in Chicago, Dallas and Kansas City fix their sights on the red carpet in Los Angeles. If your off-the-shoulder, backless, sequin-studded masterpiece graces the tucked, taut, artfully camouflaged body of an A-list actress on Oscar Night, you can bet on a quick sales spike for your line throughout much of the fashion-conscious world. Similarly, LA night spots and eateries are often graded less by the quality of their cuisine than by celebrity head count.

This is more than a sociological quirk; obsession with celluloid fame feeds the city coffers handsomely by attracting hordes of thousands of tourists, adventurers, even locals, whose fantasies revolve around catching a glimpse of their idols in the flesh. LA's the city that popularized exhibitionism as a commodity and from a commercial standpoint, the results have been spectacular, serving to internationalize the entire region natives call SoCal.

Go anywhere in the civilized world and everyone's heard of Hollywood. The same goes for Beverly Hills and Malibu.

Interestingly, the latter two outcroppings of luxe are actually independent cities engulfed by Los Angeles's seemingly endless geographical corpus. And with the exception of a few over-the-top theaters, Hollywood is a decidedly un-glitzy place, low on glamour and high on cut-rate hucksterism (think bargain-basement Times Square.) But the concept of Hollywood expands beyond mere geography, maintaining a firm grip on our collective unconscious as it continues to lure and entrance.

When the sun shines three hundred days a year, everything sparkles.

Some great cities achieve their charm by way of exquisite planning. Paris is the exemplar of that brand of gorgeous.

Los Angeles's beauty is a wonder of serendipity, the often jarring outcome of parvenus and social climbers indulging their ambitions unfettered by tradition, logic or taste.

Pick a random street in any high-priced neighborhood in LA and you'll find over-scaled, neo-Colonial manses standing cheek to jowl with similarly proportioned neo-Italianate manses sidling up against extravagantly half-timbered neo-Tudor manses butting the razor-edged contours of neo-ultra-contemporary manses.

Travel from the eastern border of Beverly Hills at Sunset and Doheny to the northern rim of Malibu and you'll have traversed forty uninterrupted miles of seven-figure real estate, much of it constructed during the last decade.

We're all about New and Fresh and Groundbreaking and Drop-Dead Gorgeous and if that means razing a few fusty old landmarks, so be it.

LA's two places, really.

There's Los Angeles the City, gargantuan in its own right as it oozes over 1200 square kilometers — half the area of Luxembourg — and houses close to four million residents. Then there's Greater Los Angeles, a virtual nation to itself that encompasses all of LA County and several of its immediate neighbors, including Orange County, home to…Disneyland.

Now we're talking seventeen million people in a region nearly four times the size of Luxembourg.

Given the sheer enormity of our territory, we are, and will always be, the megalopolis locked in co-dependence with the automobile. LA's the first place where shopping centers were designed so that motorists could park their vehicles and enter through the rear. Chatter about mass transit never ceases but the privately-owned chromium horse will never relinquish its status as Los Angeles's primary people mover. Our dimensions are too generous, our schedules too idiosyncratic, and, bottom line, we like to ride alone.

Top left: The new solar powered Santa Monica Ferris Wheel stands over the Pacific Park amusement area on the Santa Monica Pier. Top right: The Disney character Tinkerbell waves during a parade at Disneyland in Anaheim, California, which celebrated the 50th anniversary of the first Disney theme park in 2005. Above: Perched high atop Mount Lee, the tallest peak in Los Angeles, the Hollywood sign, constructed in 1923, is a tourist attraction and an enduring symbol of the glamor of Los Angeles' entertainment industry.

We are a strange approximation of city, decidedly urban at the core. Yet in many parts of LA a half hour drive can whisk you from metropolis to wilderness. Our skies are clearer than ever and we remain a green place, amplified to brilliant emerald when the sun is especially kind. The Santa Monica mountain range frolics through Los Angeles, looming above the arroyos and valleys that its eruption created eons ago. Know your side-streets and silence can be found with surprising ease.

Then there's the matter of our faithful western neighbor, The Big Blue Infinity: a hundred mile slice of glorious, unpredictable, misnamed Pacific Ocean.

Think of all that water as a baptismal font for the religion that is LA.

Drive west into Santa Monica — another adjunctive city swallowed up by Greater LA. — and stop when you can go no further. Find somewhere to park, get out of the car, grab yourself a view spot atop the Palisades just west of Ocean Avenue. Take in the Ferris wheel rotating atop the reassuringly tacky Santa Monica pier. Breathe in the rich, briny air, shield your eyes with one hand and look out to golden sun and thousands of azure miles. If you've chanced upon a particularly clear day, you may catch a glimpse of the Channel Islands eighty miles to the north, materializing like filmy mirages through the maritime haze.

Stay there for a while and imagine your own limitless world.

A few weeks ago, I sat on an out-of-the-way beach in western Malibu and watched a 5,000-pound bull elephant seal frolic at the tide-line for several minutes before waddling into the currents and vanishing. The largest of all pinnipeds occupy a breeding ground 140 miles north of LA, off the coast of San Simeon of Hearst-Castle fame, and they customarily hunt for food two thousand feet below the surface. Logic precludes Elephant Seal visits to the sands of Malibu.

In LA, everyone comes to re-invent themselves.

Surfing says it all. The sport originated in Hawaii but morphed into a cultural phenomenon in Southern California by way of an Orange County genius named Brian Wilson, who'd never actually ridden a board.

"If everybody had an ocean, across the USA…"

They don't, so they come to LA.

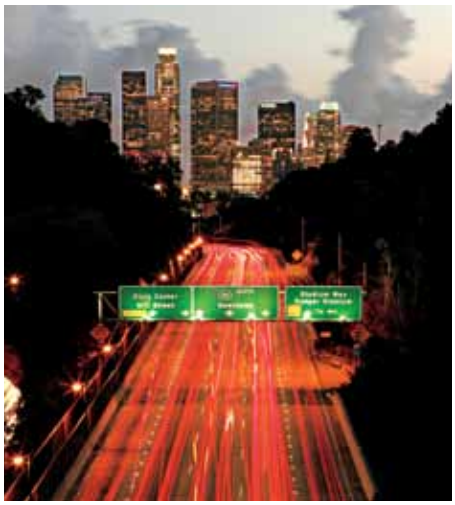
And keep coming.

Where do I go to become a star?

The product is illusion, the fuel is the dream.

May it stay that way forever.

Top: A gazebo frames a glowing sunset in Palisades Park, Santa Monica, in Los Angeles. Above: An array of seasonal bounty is for sale in the Grand Central Market in Los Angeles.



Traffic runs along the southbound freeway to downtown Los Angeles in the early evening.

MEMPHIS

SLEEPWALKING IN MEMPHIS

by Steve Stern

Steve Stern was born in Memphis, Tennessee and currently divides his time between Brooklyn and upstate New York, where he teaches literature and creative writing at Skidmore College. He is the author of nine books of fiction, including the story collections *Lazar Malkin Enters Heaven*, which won the Edward Lewis Wallant Award for Jewish American fiction, and *The Wedding Jester*, which won the National Jewish Book Award. He has been the recipient of a Fulbright grant to teach in Israel and a Guggenheim fellowship. His most recent book is the novel *The Frozen Rabbi*.

I have this recurring dream that the blighted downtown neighborhood along North Main Street in my hometown of Memphis has been revitalized. There are shops, cafes, theaters, people living in refurbished apartments above thriving businesses. So vivid is the dream that, on the increasingly rare occasions when I visit the city, I return to the old neighborhood, called the Pinch, to see if the dream has materialized. In truth, there are some signs of renewed life: an operating trolley, a sports bar & grill; but these are mere gestures in the face of an urban desolation that largely obtains.

The city of Memphis sits on a famous fault line, and the ground periodically emits rumblings as if the earth might be trying to disgorge a past it had not entirely digested. As a kid, I was deaf to those noises. My ideal landscape, something like D'Artagnan's Paris perched atop Tarzan's escarpment, had little to do with the actual situation of Memphis on its cobbled bluff overlooking the Mississippi. That city, according to the ethos of the times, had already razed most edifices that had any claim to history, so that if you looked back you could see no farther than the distance at which you were born. You were doomed to a kind of chronological myopia. Moreover, as a Jew living in a town that declared itself the buckle of the Bible Belt (Memphis boasted more churches than gas stations), I was always aware of my outsider status. On the other hand, the Reform Temple my family belonged to had managed to erase most elements of tradition in an attempt to become virtually invisible. The rabbi wore ecclesiastical robes; a choir sang from a loft appointed in organ pipes. As a consequence, when I came of age I left the city without sparing it a backward glance. With no heritage to speak of behind me and a future overcast by the shadow of the Bomb, I led for a time the life of my generation, medicating myself against the claustrophobia of the moment. At some point I began writing stories in which I tried to mitigate the airless atmosphere of the late twentieth century with unlikely fantasies. After a decade or so, having run out of options, I returned to where I'd begun, ashamed at having so little to show for my wanderings.

Back in the city that had been so conducive to wishing I was someplace else in, I stumbled into a job at a local folklore center. This was not from any love of the subject — I considered folklore a poor relation to literature — but out of sheer expediency. The job, which involved the transcription of oral history tapes, had about it a quality of penance that

The Cooper Young Entertainment district of Memphis is a historic area where artists, galleries, and restaurants coexist. Opposite page: Memphis' ledgendary Beale Street, home of the blues and rock and roll.

suited me, though after a time I discovered to my chagrin that I was having fun. The voices on the tapes were those of old parties recalling the heyday of the fabled Beale Street, once the main street of black culture in the Mid-South. They described the raw vitality of the fleshpots and barrelhouses, the root doctors, razor toters, diamond-toothed high rollers and roustabouts, the copper-skinned dancers of the dark rapture; they remembered the excursion boat and medicine show bluesmen and the river before the TVA levees, when it would flood every spring. Then the bayous would back up and the basin of Beale would become a lagoon, across which its citizens would ferry themselves in lantern-hung wooden skiffs.

As a landscape, I had to admit that this one was more than a match in romance and danger for my spectral Parisian escarpment, and what was peculiarly interesting to me was that there were Jews in it too. For among the black voices were those of the old immigrant merchants and pawnbrokers who had participated wholeheartedly in the life of the street. Unable to keep a lid on my fascination, I was noticed, and my boss, realizing that I was local, worked cheap, and was also a Jew, gave me the title of director of the Ethnic Heritage Project, whose ongoing mission was to research the roots of the Jewish ghetto community of the Pinch.

What I found once I'd located it — for I had never even heard of the place — was a desert of a neighborhood, the only vestiges of its Jewish past being a scrap metal yard owned by three consecutive generations of the Blockman family and a ruined brick synagogue whose final incarnation had been a transvestite discotheque. Otherwise the street was a no-man's-

Top: The Mississippi River and Memphis skyline at dusk. Above: A cruise on one of the Memphis riverboats is a popular attraction for tourists.

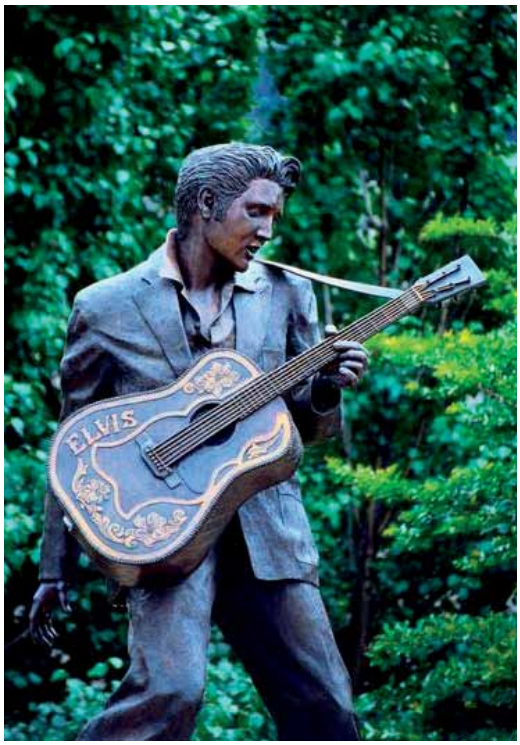
Top left: Beale Street by day offers museums and a 19th century dry goods store.
Top right: Peabody Place, in the heart of downtown Memphis, is the cornerstone of the city's renaissance. Left: Many blues clubs line Beale Street. Above: The Stax Museum of American Soul Music is located on the original site of Stax Records, where legendary blues musicians recorded their music.

land of weed-choked lots, abandoned buildings, a power station, a bridge ramp. But when I began to track down the survivors of that vanished community, all of them advanced in years and living at a suburban remove from North Main Street, something happened: The underground rumblings I had ignored all my life swelled in volume, culminating in a mighty eruption, and the Pinch rose up in all its pungent activity like a lost continent out of the past with its population still intact. That's how it seemed to me, so ready must I have been to receive it. Spellbound by the testimonies of the living witnesses, I was able to make the acquaintance of the dead. These included Reb Dubrovner, the kosher slaughterer, and Avrom Pinsker, the salty teacher of Hebrew; Mr and Mrs Makowsky, the mom-and-pop bootleggers, and their flame-bearded colleague Lazar — who presented himself at his own arraignment, a hostage to piety, trussed in the leather thongs of his tefillin. There was Mook Taubenblatt, the ward heeler, No Legs Charlie Rosenbloom, the hot-headed amputee gambler, and the zaftig Widow Wolf, who taught the greenhorns how to Black Bottom. There were the Galitzianer Chasids in their shtibl above a feed store, who from all reports prayed in midair, and the young Talmud Torah

scholars, who threw catfish in the ritual bath and, on Idle Hour Amateur Night, sawed Rosie Delugach in half. There was the chestnut tree in Market Square Park, under which, on summer evenings when they fled the oven-like heat of their tenements, the entire neighborhood would sleep, while the scholars hopped about in the branches above them as if leaping from dream to dream.

The dreams themselves were crammed with figures out of the legends the immigrants had brought with them from the Old Country along with their featherbeds and samovars — the dybbuk, the dead soul that took possession of Minnie Klepfiscz on her wedding night; the succubus Lilith, Adam's wanton first wife, who visited the bedside of the bachelor Sammy Fuchs; the lamed vovnik, or hidden saint, Fishel Botwinik, a halfwit who lived in a shack behind Blockman's junkyard and for whose sake God refrained from destroying the world. I'd heard life defined as a little gleam in time between two eternities, but for me the Pinch was a station of eternity flanked by time. You could enter it and gather up stories like manna, gather them perhaps forever — an ecstatic occupation. But as it happened, the past was a fly-by-night affair: time quickly began to close ranks and the Pinch to be swallowed up again by the earth, or (in the language of enchantment) the grant money began to run out.

Disposed as I was to linger, I knew better. Greedily appropriating souvenirs — the tale of Lazar Malkin the peddler whom the Angel of Death hauls off to paradise alive; of old Jake Alabaster the tinsmith, who, following a map given him by a mystical rabbi, journeys into the bowels of Gehenna to retrieve his deceased wife Sophie the Tongue — I beat it back to my own moment just as that timeless dimension (think of the Red Sea unparting) was subsumed once again by history. By then many years had elapsed: I was middle-aged. I had published my few books' worth of stories plundered from the Pinch and also apparently outgrown my



Top left: Musicians play at the Center for Southern Folklore whose mission is "to preserve, defend, protect and promote the music, culture, arts, and rhythms of the South." Top right: Since the 1890s, the Orpheum Theatre has survived adverse times in Memphis. Successful rebuilding and refurbishing have given the venue new life. Above: A statue of rock and roll legend Elvis Presley.

near-sightedness; because, looking back, I could now see a considerable distance. I could see as far as the Spanish explorers butchering Indians on the riverbank during their ruthless journey westward in search of gold; I could see the Irish refugees from the Great Potato Famine dismantling their john-boats for the shanties they inhabited around the banks of Catfish Bay. Later on they would swap the butternut of the Confederacy for the linen robes of the Ku Klux Klan, who harried the recently freed slaves along Smoky Row. I could see the bodies stacked up waiting for burial in Elmwood Cemetery during the plague of yellowjack, from which the city in some ways never recovered; I could see in the near distance the spot where the Jews once settled and moved on, a district later decimated by so-called urban renewal that coincided with the assassination of Martin Luther King, which was effectively the declining city's coup de grâce. It was an event that consolidated the curse the Chickasaws had long ago flung at the burgeoning town, when they were driven into exile from their native bluffs.

But still my wishful dreams persist, and in them the dead streets are resurrected in a bustling afterlife, the ravaged downtown neighborhoods dense with foot traffic and a lively mercantile carnival. So vital is the scene that I'm drawn back periodically to inspect the waste of North Main, if only to see if the dreams have left some trace — maybe a splinter from that distant collision of time and eternity or a spark from the nostalgic little trolley that I can try to fan into flame. Then the flame might flare up into a conflagration out of which one might pluck phoenix-like — what? Perhaps another story.

Top left: Visitors to AutoZone Park in Memphis look at a new mural being painted on a nearby building. Top right: The National Civil Rights Museum features a statue of Rosa Parks, riding at the front of a bus. Above: A young visitor touches the plaque in Memphis marking the place where Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated April 4, 1968.

MIAMI

MIAMI, HOME AT LAST

by Edna Buchanan

In Miami, a few figures are regularly discussed by first name among people they have never actually met. One of them is Fidel. Another is Edna.
– Calvin Trillin, *New Yorker*

Edna Buchanan, Pulitzer-Prize winning journalist and award-winning mystery author, has written eighteen books, fifteen of them novels, and thousands of articles and short stories. She lives in Miami, the hottest city on the planet, with her husband, Michael, two dogs, and a gaggle of cats.

Lost and out of place, I wandered through shades of gray until Miami's brilliant blue sky startled me awake. My life began that day.

It isn't that I didn't know what I wanted. I knew I was a writer at age four, in Paterson, New Jersey, where I was born. I couldn't read yet, but my mother read to me and I was already hooked on stories. I told everyone that I would write books when I grew up. Fiction was what I had in mind, but it wasn't easy.

My mother soon went to work and no longer had time to read to me, so I searched elsewhere. I wasn't allowed to cross the street, so I circled the block. With a book tucked under my arm, I accosted everyone I met, the letter carrier, neighbors and complete strangers, pleading with them to read to me. They were all too busy, so I learned to read early and quickly became addicted to the newspapers my father bought for the race results.

A newspaper is a gold mine for a new reader hooked on stories. My father was one of 10 children. His Ukrainian-born mother, who almost always wore a babushka and almost never wore shoes, had been widowed young in a Pennsylvania coal mine disaster. Left pregnant with a number of small children, she married her dead husband's best friend, a huge and forbidding Polish factory worker. In a photo taken in the old country, my grandfather, in military uniform, is astride a horse. It's unclear to me exactly what army he served in, but he wore a sword and a formidable scowl.

They lived right down the street. My grandmother could read no English. But no problem. Now I could, and I burned with fervor to share the stories. She puttered barefoot in her kitchen while I sat in a wooden chair at her table and read to her from the newspaper.

Occasionally she laughed, most often she was shocked. Her sheltered world revolved around her warm and fragrant kitchen, her lush vegetable and flower gardens, and her large close knit family. She would mutter tearfully in her native tongue, convinced that I had made up those startling news stories. It was the first time, but not the last time, I would be accused of such a thing.

I began to write my first novel at age seven and filled several black and white composition books, but my mother threw them all away when I wasn't home. My father deserted us that same year and I never saw him again.

Flamingoes settle into their new home in Parrot Jungle Island, a favorite roadside attraction in Miami. Opposite page: The Miami Skyline is outlined against blue skies.

A typical scene along Miami's ocean front.

Soon after, I discovered my maternal grandmother's family tree book. She was a descendant of French Huguenots who arrived in the new world by way of Holland two years before the Indians sold Manhattan. One ancestor, Samuel Provost, the first Protestant Episcopal bishop of New York, officiated at the inauguration of President George Washington. Another served with General Washington during that long and terrible winter at Valley Forge.

The patriotic adventures of long dead ancestors kindled a lifelong love of history.

My grandmother rejected her wealthy fiancé to marry my grandfather, the son of a German sailmaker. She waited for my grandfather, a poor school teacher, while he fought in France during World War I. She died when my mother, their only child, was 12.

Four years later my mother and father eloped. She was 17 and headstrong when I was born. After my father left, she severed all family ties and we moved frequently. Always the new girl in school, I was the tallest girl in my class, nearsighted, clumsy, and terrible at athletics. Self-conscious and gawky, I wore hand-me-downs that coworkers gave to my mother. I thought everyone laughed at me, with good reason. A hopeless, recalcitrant student with no prospects, I hated school.

Books, newspapers and my seventh grade English teacher Mrs. Tunis were the only bright spots in my childhood. She once asked me, in front of the entire class, if I would dedicate a book to her someday. Her belief that I could write made me believe it, too. I showed her my first form rejection from the *Saturday Evening Post*.

A prudent sailor secures his craft in preparation for strong winds brewing off the coast of Miami.

"You'll get lots of these," she said, "but don't ever give up because you will write and sell books someday." They became words to live by, burned into my 11-year-old brain.

Decades later I did dedicate a book to Mrs. Tunis; she never knew. She died at age 48, when I was still in the eighth grade. Were she still alive, she probably would not remember me, but I will always remember her, proof that in this great tapestry we call life, some small act, or a few words spoken, can resonate for years to come and even change lives years later.

We all can be somebody's Mrs. Tunis.

My increasingly troubled mother encouraged me to quit school and work full time. I obliged. Nothing changed. I continued to feel like a displaced person, adrift with neither rudder nor destination after the warfare of my childhood and the long, cold, gray winters. February was the worst; it seemed that spring would never come. My childhood dreams of writing seemed just as hopeless.

My first summer vacation, a week at the Jersey shore, was as dreary as my life. Heavy rain pounded for the entire time and seaweed blanketed the beach, which smelled of dead fish. Never again. Next time, I swore, I will find a sun-drenched beach beneath brilliant blue sky.

Where else but Miami and Miami Beach, the Magic City and the Playground of the World?

I sought blue sky and sunshine, but found so much more. My first glimpse of Miami from the back seat of a taxi cab a year later became a surprisingly emotional experience. Tears stung my eyes. This was no vacation, it was a homecoming. I had never been to Miami but recognized it instantly. I was home at last. I had left the gritty black-and-white newsreel behind and stepped into Technicolor, CinemaScope, and real life. Due to some cosmic mishap I had been born in the wrong place, but, thank God, I had found my way home.

The robust pulse beat of this all-American city, about to morph into an exotic foreign capital — and the nation's new Ellis Island — touched my soul. Even the sky was so different. White clouds sail like pirate ships over Miami at night, and nowhere else in the country does a crescent moon rise upended, like a bowl turned upside down, in a star-studded sky streaked by pink, purple, and gold. When I saw the five stars of the Southern Cross, which cannot be seen north of Miami, I forgot New Jersey.

Miami jump-started my creativity and I began to write and write. Stories filled my head, characters clamored to be heard, as the words flowed like rushing rivers of fire. At a creative writing class, I met kindred spirits, including a man employed by a small Miami Beach daily newspaper in need of a reporter.

I applied, took a writing test and, to my astonishment, was instantly hired, despite my total lack of experience.

Top: Luxury hotels, condos, and miles of white sand beaches attract tourists to Miami's ocean front. Above: Friends chat in the park overlooking Biscayne Bay in the Coconut Grove section of Miami.

"Congratulations," my new editor said, shaking my hand. "You are now a journalist."

I suspected there had to be more to it than that.

But I had always loved newspapers. The most memorable headlines had been over stories about the dark princes of my childhood: Willie (the Actor) Sutton, the Babe Ruth of bank robbers; George Metesky, New York's mad bomber; and Lucky Luciano, the man who organized the mob.

I'll be a newspaper reporter by day, while writing the Great American novel at night, I thought happily. How naive. Little did I know that the whirlwind of daily journalism leaves no time to read a novel, much less write one.

Buoyed by the energy and exuberance of youth, I learned as I labored six and seven days a week and loved it. The reason was that after my

Top: Palm trees provide the greenery for Miami's upscale hotels and condos. Above: Art deco designed hotels are bathed in neon light on Ocean Drive, one of Miami's famous thoroughfares. Bottom: The South Beach section of Miami Beach is still a vibrant monument to the art deco designs of the 1920s and 30s.

Top left: The entrance to the Miami Book Fair International. Top right: In the Little Havana section of Miami, people line up for Hispanic delicacies. Above left: Dancers celebrate Puerto Rico's Commonwealth Day in Miami's Wynwood neighborhood. Above: A young girl watches the festivities at the Miccosukee Arts Festival in the Florida Everglades.

first breath of steamy summer air, as heat waves shimmied off sizzling pavement and palm trees feathered against a brilliant blue sky, I was a different person, in the right time and the right place at last. I could think, and even see, more clearly in Miami's incredible light.

I interviewed celebrities; covered politics, crime, the courts; wrote a column, features, and obits; picked the dogs for the sports department; became a news photographer; learned to layout pages, read upside down, set hot type; and began to win awards for reporting and photography.

Then I was hired by the *Miami Herald*. The first story this Jersey refugee wrote for the *Herald* featured a Cuban refugee whose Russian parents had fled the Bolsheviks to settle in Havana in 1918. Now the son, his wife, and their children had fled Cuba, settled in Miami and, thanks to a Small Business Administration award, had set up shop as the only American flag manufacturer in the southern United States.

I quickly gravitated to the lowly police beat, probably influenced by the dark princes. The job blew me away, every day. What a gold mine. The police beat is Shakespeare in the raw. Every day I met Hamlet, Othello, Romeo and Juliet, or King Lear on Miami's mean streets. On some bad days, I met them all.

So many seekers risk, and some lose, their lives in pursuit of the Miami dream. Most are refugees on the run from war, dictators, poverty

Thai Buddhist monks chant during morning services at a temple in Miami.

— and their own personal demons. Then the sunset turns the sea blood red, a gigantic full moon rises over Miami, the temperature soars, the barometric pressure drops, and all hell breaks loose.

It's a great place to be a reporter. Most of all, I loved to write about the heroes because, of course, the best and the bravest among us are not super cops or firefighters, but ordinary people who rise to the occasion and do the extraordinary when they must.

You don't have to be Rambo to be a hero. Some of the heroes I wrote about were nearsighted housewives and overweight truck drivers, stouthearted children and elderly widows.

Sometimes, just surviving is heroic.

Many don't. The first of many visits to Miami's morgue left me indignant. A writer's consciousness is raised by the plight of the downtrodden, the little guy pushed around, the victim of injustice. Death too soon, at any age, is an injustice. I burned to investigate and write the stories of each and every one. What happened? What went wrong? How could they have been saved?

What a great city for writers, who gather from everywhere each fall to celebrate its diversity at the annual Miami Book Fair International. Hundreds of thousands of readers throng to the week-long event to hear hundreds of writers from all over the world. The lone drawback for novelists is that it is sometimes difficult to write fiction in a city where truth is stranger.

Miami is full of surprises.

Like the giant Burmese pythons, green anacondas, North African pythons and boa constrictors, all pets who grew too large — to as much as 20 feet long and 400 pounds — then either escaped, were abandoned, or were freed by their Miami owners. Tens of thousands of the giant reptiles now inhabit the Everglades, rapidly multiplying and alarming authorities as they face off with the native alligators.

Red sand, scooped aloft by Africa's wild desert winds, is caught in the air currents that stream west. Huge sandstorms, monster clouds of red dust, five hundred to a thousand miles wide, swirl across the Atlantic to South Florida. Miamians awake and find their cars coated. The sky turns milky with a whitish haze, and at night, the moon hangs fat and low, a sinister silver dollar tarnished by Sahara dust.

After the sandstorms and the annual Everglades wildfires subside, the vast night sky seems close enough to touch, so bright and brilliant that a Miami International Airport air traffic controller once gave Venus permission to land.

And who would have thought that the recalcitrant student, the misplaced person, would write thousands of news stories, 17 books, and win the Pulitzer Prize. Nobody who knew her back in New Jersey would ever believe it.

Top: In Little Havana, cigar rollers apply outer wrappers to their product. Middle: Fruits and vegetables are sold from a truck of one of the many Cuban-born immigrants to Miami. Above: In Domino Park in Miami's Little Havana, a traditional game helps pass the time.

None of it would have, could have, happened anywhere else. Miami has a short memory. Where you come from, your prior accomplishments, or lack of them, do not matter.

Miami is a place where anything is possible.

Sometimes I float in my pool in the soft, moist early evening and laugh as I watch mountainous pink and gold clouds, like those painted by old masters, drift in a sapphire sky as the rosy neon of South Beach glows seductively from across the bay.

My most enduring love affair is with Miami and all its residents and would-be residents, living and dead, from the brave pioneers who suffered hardship and heartbreak to settle this wild semi-tropical frontier at the bottom of the map, to today's tough, diverse and resilient Miamians who persistently ignore red traffic lights and the fact that they live at the end of a sea level peninsula that juts out into a dangerous and turbulent stretch of sea known as Hurricane Alley.

Mother Nature has blessed us in many ways, but can also be homicidal, with hurricanes, tornadoes, water spouts, and more frequent lightning strikes than anywhere else in the nation.

You can always try to leave Miami, but it never leaves you. It hooks you for life.

Top: An alligator glides through the waters of Everglades National Park. Above: The 26-mile Loop Road runs through the Big Cypress National Preserve where indigenous birds and plants can be seen.

NEW ORLEANS

SEEING NEW ORLEANS

by Richard Ford & Kristina Ford

Kristina Ford is the Chief of Staff for Facilities, Infrastructure and Community Development for the city of New Orleans and the former Director of City Planning. She is the author of the recently-published *The Trouble With City Planning* (Yale). Richard Ford is a novelist, storywriter and essayist. His work has been translated into 28 languages. He won the 1996 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for *Independence Day*.

These days, seeing New Orleans clearly is harder than it used to be. And it was never easy to get a reliable read on the place. That was always its allure — to the world that came from afar, and to its own citizens, too. New Orleans, if only for a moment, could become whatever good place you wanted it to be, keeping its other parts tucked (not always tidily) out of sight. It was a city of convenience, of private, shifting accommodation — of surfaces — beneath or to the side of which were different versions we didn't need to pay attention to, but nevertheless were part of what the city was. The whole was always difficult to take in.

I've been to other cities — grander ones, more splendid, more powerful and central to their countries' maps and cultures. But New Orleans leads all in being the constant topic of its citizens' daily discourse and attention. For visitors, too. People simply can't get enough of New Orleans, which is another way of saying that it eludes us. Were we to listen in on all that's said there in a single year's time, the words "New Orleans" would out-number all the other words by a multiple of a hundred. New Orleans fascinates. Those of us who care always seek it, pry its surfaces, lift its edges, venture nearer, turn it askew to see more, hear more, know more, while disavowing as little as we can. New Orleans is a fetish we attend to out of a yearning we can't quite explain.

Of course, generalizations about any city's character never describe it very well. Soubriquets and mottos get defeated by the exceptions. "City With Big Shoulders," "A Town That Won't Let You Down," "The City of Angels." "The City of Brotherly Love." All these have to do with the observer's needs more than with the city's true nature and ability to measure up. Oh, yes, in New Orleans, there's the general lenience that entices outsiders to come do what they'd never do at home. In that way it is "The City That Care Forgot." But in America, cities have always promised lenience — to bumpkins and church-going conventioneers and solitaries drifting toward the metropolis from the inland empire. It's the same in Europe — probably in China and Kenya as well. The city has always seethed.

Still. I can make a claim to clear-sightedness simply by saying what I like most about New Orleans. I like its faux-European, one-off impertinence to the stale, urban-American prototype (K.C., Omaha, St. Louis, Dallas, Atlanta). I like its dramatic and improbable placement on

Tourists enjoy a carriage ride in the French Quarter. Opposite page: St. Louis Cathedral dominates Jackson Square.

the earth's surface — a hopeless, lowering land between a river and a lake — which makes life there feel happily dodgy. I like its location on our American map — a sink into which a great deal of everything American eventually trickles and reveals itself. I like the fruit salad of cultures which renders me pleasantly invisible. I like the latitudinal feeling of torpor and stasis, which inexplicably encourages enterprise — in me, anyway. I like the city's convoluted sense of its own history, which upon me confers a freedom from history. I even like New Orleans' smothering self-regard, which finally dictates little about how I should see it, and causes me (not too seriously or for very long) to feel myself a renegade. And I like the fact that thinking about New Orleans — seeking it, prying it, gazing at it as I do — eventually makes my mind wander outward toward all of America, to how it's different from New Orleans and how it's alike, and why. It's similar to the way tourists see America more vividly when they're abroad. New Orleans is our own private foreign country, where we speak the language.

What's happened, of course, and made everything harder to see now, is Katrina – five plus years behind us, but numinously, relentlessly the present tense for everything. "What an opium is instilled in all disaster," Emerson wrote. "It shows formidable as we approach it, but there is at last no rough rasping friction, but the most slippery of surfaces." What Emerson meant was that disaster lulls us, makes us think we understand and see clearly what we don't. Disaster makes its object and even itself elusive. It's disaster that's made New Orleans harder to see.

Post-Katrina, language itself has become a basic thing that's blurred. (We often see with words.) New Orleans, especially to the outsider — (though insiders struggle, too) — has for now come to mean Katrina,

Top: An aerial view of the Greater New Orleans Bridge. Above: On a long stretch of road outside New Orleans, the Mississippi River is channeled between traffic lanes.

Top left: In pre-Katrina New Orleans, late afternoon traffic passes the Louisiana Superdome. Top right: Wrought iron filigree graces the balconies of New Orleans' French Quarter. Above left: An aerial view of swamplands on the Mississippi River outside New Orleans. Above: A traditional streetcar serves St. Charles Avenue in New Orleans.

whereas before New Orleans meant other things — all those qualities I described. It's the way that "Detroit" signifies an exhausted industry, or "Washington" connotes a government out of whack. It's our sad metonymy. Katrina — for the moment, anyway — has become a subversive brand. It taints everything about the city — words, thoughts, possibility, the past, the future. When we say "New Orleans" — always an utterance rich with complexity and nuance and eye-winking partial truths — we now, whether we want to or don't, summon up a wider, grainier, more bemusing set of mind pictures: the hurricane, all those people on those roof-tops, — or floating; — houses crushed, streets denuded, the shining slick of toxic water, smirking politicians, people patrolling their streets with guns; humans rescuing other humans. What's been lost, or barely survives, or persists against odds, must now be fitted in with all that used to be to make up our present. If New Orleans was once a city of grinning, back-slapping, boozy incongruity and teasing dissonance (it was rich, it was poor, it was the south — only it wasn't, really; it was black, it was white, it was beige; it was French, Spanish, Cajun, Creole, Indian, American), it's now a city wrecked and whole at once! Hard to find a motto or a soubriquet to make that whole picture come clear.

Above left: Workers rebuild a 19th century Creole-style house in the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans, an area hard hit by the 2005 hurricane, Katrina. Above middle: Participating in a jazz funeral, Mardi Gras Indian Chief Walter Cook is adorned with feathers and beads. Above: A young man in Spanish matador costume poses in the French Quarter of New Orleans.

This fall, on the hot breeze down Royal Street and up Prytania, out St. Claude to the Parish line, and along Elysian Fields to the Lake, one hears hopeful-baleful words: "We're coming back." "We're almost back." "Will we ever be back?" "Can New Orleans be the same?" These might be words we'd expect from New Orleanians — citizens in love with their city, used to gazing at it raptly, through a gauze. New Orleans is a conserving city. It embraces and asks an embrace, holds on to as much as it can, just as it holds its unsteady place on the subsiding earth. "Coming back" is just a way of registering loss and of redeeming loss. Which means, in practical terms, that even a New Orleanian who detests his circumstances would rather detest them in New Orleans than be in some other place. Fatalism aside, it isn't the worst character a city could own.

Even so, we do New Orleans a disservice to say prescriptively that we know it, or even that we share with each other a certain sense of its unique character. It's a smallish city (smaller now with so many lost and moved away). It may just be that our asseverations about its nature overlap and

Musical greats perform at the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival: left to right: Warren Prejean Sr., Keb' Mo', Roger Lewis, and Dr. John.

crowd together and seem truer than they are. Disaster, however, has the consequence of making us look more closely, and of bringing into question what any city actually is. What real uses it serves. What good it does. What ill. Cities offer different vocabularies for their investment in their citizens' lives. But the mystique wears through. And the investment is much the same, city to city: we want to make what's next better than what was.

Only a politician with something to gain would dare give advice to an entire city — especially a city famous for never heeding even good advice, a city where disaster (remembering it, smiling into it, currying its favors) has always felt familiar. So, advice is not my intention. But my best bet is that the civic vocabulary in New Orleans will soon change — if it hasn't already. "Going on" will presently take the place of "coming back," since there's no coming back anyway. No one could agree about what back was, or how it looked, or who benefitted. "Back" becomes just another illusion tailored to our separate needs. "Going on" will one day soon be seen as a version of what would've, could've, might've happened anyway, even if there hadn't been a terrible storm.

When we gaze at New Orleans, at its incongruities, when we hear its dissonances, our yeaning is to understand, to make all the disparate pieces fit together. We do this quite as much as we revel in its oddities, its intransigence. At heart, we're puzzling over what's normal. Is this normal? Is this all right? Am I feeling normal? Am I all right? That's how any citizen gauges life in any city. In New Orleans eventually the answer will be yes.

Top left: Burial services for victims of Hurricane Katrina are accompanied by a traditional jazz band. Top right: Crowds fill the streets of New Orleans' French Quarter during the 2009 Mardi Gras celebration. Above: Bourbon Street at night in the French Quarter, New Orleans.

NEW YORK

SON OF BROOKLYN

by Pete Hamill

Pete Hamill has been the editor in chief of both the *New York Post* and the *New York Daily News*. In his writing for these publications as well as the *New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, and *Newsday*, he has brought the city to life for millions of readers. Mr. Hamill who resides in New York City is the author of novels, short story collections, biographies, and a memoir.

Every writer starts as a reader, and I had the great good fortune to be a reader from a time before memory. There was no classroom epiphany, no moment of breakthrough when I could decode these small symbols called letters and make them into words and have the words form pictures in my mind. That meant, almost surely, that my mother taught me to read.

My mother and father were immigrants to New York from Northern Ireland, Catholics from the hard, dark industrial city of Belfast. They came separately and settled in the huge beautiful borough of Brooklyn. In those years, Brooklyn was a place of blue-collar workers, immigrants and their sons who worked off the commerce of the port. The subways made it possible for them to work in one place and live in another, and Brooklyn was special: filled with what I later thought was a Vermeer light. Even the tenements looked beautiful at certain hours of the evening, or at dawn. In New York City, the sun rises in Brooklyn, announcing the day. No wonder the Dutch loved it so.

Life was not easy for Billy Hamill and his wife Anne Devlin. Back in the Old Country, my father had finished the eighth grade. My mother had completed the equivalent of high school, but when she came to America at 19, an orphan, she arrived in 1929 with perfect Irish timing on the day the stock market crashed. In 1927, my father was playing a Sunday game of semi-pro soccer when he was kicked viciously, hauled to a hospital, spent the night sedated, and in the morning, with gangrene racing through the ruined leg (and penicillin not yet invented) he lost his leg above the knee. My mother worked in a department store and then as a domestic, caring for the young child of a well-off family in Brooklyn. They met at a dance in 1934. A fact that made my father laugh years later, since nobody could dance much with a wooden leg. I was their first American child, and there would be seven of us by the time the family was fully formed. That surely meant that Anne Devlin Hamill had time to sit alone with me and show me a book, and read it to me while one of her fingers traced the words.

One of my favorites was "A Child's Garden of Verses" by Robert Louis Stevenson, and I must have loved the rhythms of the words and the illustrations and the way they combined to make a luminous childhood world. In some ways the verses resembled the Irish songs my father would sing when friends or neighbors arrived in our flat. Songs with stories. Some of them filled with martyred heroes. Most of them full of defiant laughter.

A long view of Manhattan Bridge, which connects Lower Manhattan with Brooklyn. Opposite page: The Statue of Liberty is a beacon to travelers arriving in New York City.

Left: The Empire State Building dominates the New York skyline in this southward view. Above: Looking towards midtown, this aerial view shows lower Manhattan.

Top: About 16 million people came through Ellis Island from 1892 to 1924 when waves of immigrants were interviewed for admission to the United States. Above: Ellis Island, now a national monument, is visited by tourists who arrive by ferry boat.

For many of those childhood years, we lived in a Brooklyn tenement, in a cold water railroad flat. I was born in 1935, in the depths of the Great Depression, but I have no memory of brutal hardships. There was always food on the table. I had many friends from the block, or from school. I learned the street game of stickball, played with a stripped broom handle and a pink rubber ball called a "spaldeen" (a corruption of the manufacturer's name, which was Spalding). On some Saturday mornings, we began playing at eight o'clock, as the sun spilled over us from Prospect Park, and were still playing at dusk. There was no television then but on days of rain there were other diversions. The Saturday morning movies were 12 cents until noon and we cheered for cowboys and marveled at the vistas of the American West. In the middle of the war, I discovered comic books and loved "Batman" because his Gotham resembled my Brooklyn, with its deep shadows, ominous warehouses, sinister cobblestoned alleys. But even better, I loved an immense (to my eyes) stone palace of wonder three blocks from our house: the Prospect Branch of the Brooklyn Public Library.

Again, my mother took me there for the first time, and the second, and probably the tenth. She showed me the children's room with its immense carved fireplace, made certain I got a library card, explained alphabetical order, and started me on a life as a writer. I was astonished when I learned I could bring home books that were on those low shelves. I devoured the Babar books, wishing I could meet an elephant in a green suit, and go with him to some city called Paris. A city that did not look at all like Brooklyn.

By the third grade I was visiting the library on my own (it was considered shameful to need your mother to walk you anywhere, but particularly to school). I didn't know until decades later that it was put

Top: A view of downtown Brooklyn with high-rise buildings in the distance. Above: Framed by the Brooklyn Bridge, a young mother takes her son to school on a sled after a record snowfall.

there by my favorite rich guy, Andrew Carnegie. At the same time, a teacher at my grade school (her name was Miss Smith) ordered us all to copy the maps of the war from the pages of the *New York Daily News* (then two cents a copy). I learned from that task where North Africa was, and France and Germany and England and Italy and, of course, Ireland. I realized how immense the Pacific was, and where Guadalcanal was, and Midway, and Japan too. The teacher reminded us that many of the young men from our neighborhood were in those places, and that when we saw a gold star in a window it meant that one of them had been killed. By the end of the war, there were gold stars all over that neighborhood, and many more across the country.

When we finished making the maps, she told us to start reading the stories too. And then to canvas our neighbors and get addresses for the men who were off at the war. Then we wrote letters to them, even if we didn't know them, thanking them for all they were doing to keep us free.

That word "free" was in the air. I'd hear my father's friends arguing about something, and even a guy who disagreed would say, "Hey, it's a free country." It seemed to mean a lot to them, and after a while I understood that most of them had come from countries that were not free. Places where they suffered for their religion. Places where you could not speak your piece, as they said, without hearing a knock on the door at midnight. My mother and father always spoke their piece. In bigoted Belfast, that wasn't possible. In America, my father never bellowed. The male style of Northern Ireland was defined for me decades later by the title of a poem by the Nobel Laureate Seamus Heaney: "Whatever you say, say nothing." In America, they could say whatever the hell they wanted to say. They didn't need to shout.

All of those free spirits, those factory workers, firemen, ironworkers, dock wallopers, taught me many things, most of which have survived in my writing. You could be tough, without being mean. If you looked for trouble, you would usually find it. The most important thing in life was work. And the unforgivable sin (after cruelty) was self-pity. My father lived to be eighty, and I only heard him regret the loss of his leg once. My mother worked too. She had to, in order to raise a large family during lean times. Neither of them had time for self-pity. They were too busy. Each worked until they could work no more.

During this time, before the end of the war, I was reading the sports pages of the newspapers, too, and the great narrative strips of the time: "Dick Tracy," "Smilin' Jack," and above all "Terry and the Pirates." The last was my mother's favorite, and I cut out each day's strip and pasted it into a scrapbook for her. I didn't fully understand the strip, because its superb creator, Milton Caniff, wrote and drew "for the guy who bought the paper." But I began to inhale some basic principles of narrative: this happens, and this happens, and as a result, THIS (s.c.) happens.

Top: Colorful brownstone buildings along the Brooklyn Promenade in New York give the neighborhood a small-town feel. Above: Astroland visitors enjoy a spin on the cyclone roller coaster in Coney Island, an amusement park in Brooklyn, New York.

A couple enjoys a horse drawn carriage ride through New York's Central Park, the first urban landscaped park in the United States.

Top left: In New York's Time Square, billboards advertise Broadway shows. Top: New York's St. Patrick's Day parade features young dancers in Irish costumes. Middle: Students from Taiwan cheer at New York's New Year's Eve festivities in Time Square. Above: A baker at the Bagel Store in Brooklyn makes a batch of special bagels.

I could draw well enough to copy the great villains from "Dick Tracy," and sketch a reasonable version of Fat Stuff from "Smilin' Jack." I could never draw the Dragon Lady. But around this same time, another important event happened. I read a book that was all text and got to the end. The book was not from the library but from a bin at a used comic book store a few blocks from where we lived. It was called "Bomba the Jungle Boy at the Giant Cataract" and it swept me off to the Amazon jungle where a boy my age, survivor of a plane crash, was in search of his lost father. In the years after the war, I began buying every copy of this series, usually for ten cents, traveling in my mind to exotic places and facing immense dangers. A dozen Bomba books are stacked on my shelves to this day. The writing is sometimes racist ("Bomba knew that white blood flowed in his veins") but I didn't notice at the time. I wanted to know what happened next.

And at the library I was long past Babar. I found my way to "Howard Pyle's Book of Pirates," full of lush illustrations, stolen treasure, swordfights on the decks of galleons — and up ahead were Robert Louis Stevenson and Alexander Dumas. There was never enough money in our flat, but I lived an amazingly rich childhood and adolescence. After all, I sailed to Treasure Island with Jim Hawkins. I fought the agents of Milady at the side of D'Artagnan. I spent one entire summer as the Count of Monte Cristo. Classic Comics were my CliffsNotes, except that they served more as a reading guide than a cheat sheet, provoking searches in the library for the actual books. I didn't just look at those books; I entered them; I lived them.

Years later I read an essay by Stevenson in which he urged aspiring writers to read like predators. I realized that long before I formed any ambition to be a writer I was doing just that. And I wasn't alone. For aspiring writers, as well as the serious reader, great literary works are food. They nourish the imagination, provoke curiosity about the lives of others,

make clear that a vast world exists beyond your own parish. Great books also ask implied questions of the reader that only the reader can answer. Questions about the meaning of their own lives. About the moral choices each of us might face. About the consequences of choice and actions. By the time I was twelve, I wanted to be a comics artist. The more I read of great works of history and literature, the more such an ambition faded.

Now that I am old, I wonder sometimes if I'd have become a writer had I been brought up in the glorious landscapes of the American West, or in dark Belfast. It's a question I can't ever answer. If I'd had the same parents, perhaps. But I had the geographical luck to rise to consciousness in the densely layered world of Brooklyn, with its secrets, its variety of religions and ethnicities and languages, its codes of conduct. From our rooftop, I could see the towers of Manhattan, scraping the sky. My own version of Oz. I see it still as a son of Brooklyn. There were few saints on those Brooklyn streets, and many sinners, but then sin is always a better story. It was also the time before television, which by its nature is a passive medium. You can sit in front of the screen and do no imaginative work at all. The music tells you what to feel. The laugh tracks guide your laughter. Reading is active. It requires attention to these little squibbles of letters, formed in words, and the experience is completed by the reader's own imagination. They can make you see the streets of your own part of the world, or take you to the Giant Cataract. They remind us always that first we imagine, and then we live.

That was underlined for me about 20 years ago. As a reporter, I had covered the fall of the Communist regime in Prague, a thrilling revolt led by a writer. When that extraordinary story climaxed, and Vaclav Havel went to the Castle, my wife and I left for Berlin. It was a morning nasty with rain. I had arranged for a driver to take us into Stalinist East Berlin, and we passed through the Brandenburg Gate into one of the ugliest cities in Europe. I had been there fifteen years earlier, and it was now even worse. The architecture of enforced paranoia was everywhere.

We pulled into a wide main street and after a few blocks, we saw on our left a long line of people in heavy coats, four or five across on the sidewalk, many with umbrellas.

"What is this?" I asked the driver. "Are they waiting for food, or something?"

"No," he said in a low, emotional voice. "Today is the first day that the books have come from the West."

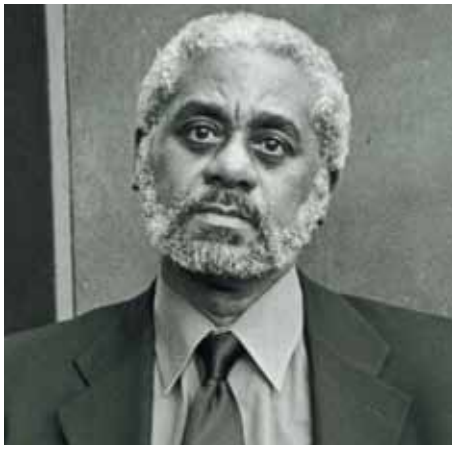
And I had to struggle against tears.

Top: Two performers of the New York City Ballet perform works by Russian émigré choreographer George Balanchine, who founded the School of American Ballet in New York City. Above: A sightseeing bus drives past the Apollo Theater and turns at the intersection known as African Square in the New York neighborhood of Harlem.

SEATTLE

IN SEATTLE, A NORTHWEST PASSAGE

by Charles Johnson



Charles Johnson, a Ph.D. in Philosophy and a professor at the University of Washington, has received both a National Endowment of the Arts grant and a Guggenheim Fellowship. In 1990 he received the National Book Award for *Middle Passage*. Dr. Johnson was a 1998 MacArthur fellow and in 2002 he received an American Academy of Arts and Letters Award for Literature.

I was hired in 1976 to teach at the University of Washington, and so made the cross-country drive to Seattle from Long Island, where I'd been a doctoral student in philosophy at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. But before leaving for a part of the country completely unknown to me (I'd never been west of the Mississippi), I mentioned to my friend and mentor, the novelist John Gardner, that my wife, newborn son and I were moving to the Pacific Northwest. I remember he paused, pushed his vanilla-colored Prince Valiant hair back from his eyes and looked as if a pleasant image had flickered suddenly through his mind. Then he said, "If my daughter ever married a black man, the first thing I'd do is ask her to move to Seattle."

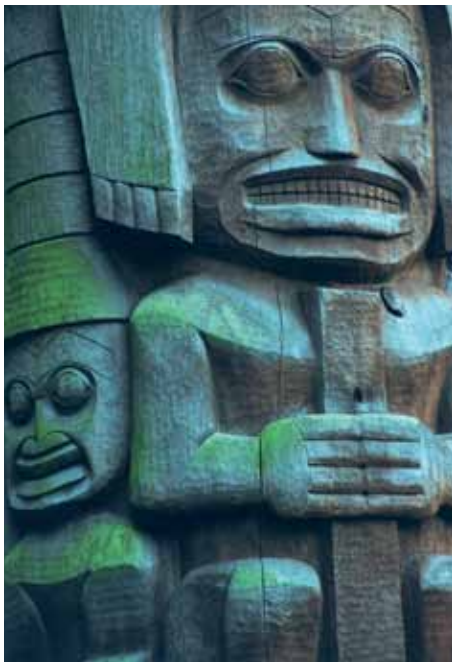
Now I knew how fiercely Gardner loved his children, but at the time I was unable to unlock his meaning. The first day I set foot in this city, however, I began to glimpse what he meant. It was peopled with every sort of American I could imagine: Native Americans, whites who sprang from old Scandinavian and German stock, Chinese and Japanese, Senegalese and Eritrean, Hindu and Sikh and Jewish, gay and lesbian, and blacks whose families settled in the territory in the late 19th century. It was a liberal city remarkably similar in texture and temperament to San Francisco (both are built on seven hills, have steep streets and have burned to the ground).

Former UW president William Gerberding once referred to the Northwest as "this little civilized corner of the world," and I think he was right. The "spirit of place" (to borrow a phrase from D. H. Lawrence) is civility, or at least the desire to appear civil in public, which is saying a great deal. The people — and especially artists — in this region tend to be highly independent and tolerant. My former student and native Northwesterner David Guterson, author of the best-selling novel *Snow Falling on Cedars*, recently told me that the people who first journeyed this far west — so far that if they kept going they'd fall into the Pacific Ocean — came mainly to escape other people. Their descendants are respectful of the individual and of different cultural backgrounds and at the same time protect their privacy. They acknowledge tradition but don't feel bound by it. As physically far removed as they are from cultural centers in New York, Boston, Washington, D.C. and Los Angeles (the distance from those places is both physical and psychic), they are not inclined to pay much attention to fashions or the opinions of others and instead pursue their

Colorful sailboats on Seattle's Lake Union. Opposite page: The Space Needle is one of Seattle's landmarks that officially opened on the first day of the Seattle World's Fair in April 1962.

own singular visions. I'm thinking of people like Bruce Lee, Jimi Hendrix, Kurt Cobain, Ray Charles in the late 1940s; playwright August Wilson; artists such as Jacob Lawrence and George Tsutakawa; and writers such as Sherman Alexie, Octavia Butler, Timothy Egan, Theodore Roethke and his student David Wagoner (serial killer Ted Bundy once took one of his poetry workshops). Jonathan Raban, an immigrant from England, captures the ambience of this book-hungry city perfectly:

"It was something in the disposition of the landscape, the shifting lights and colours of the city. Something. It was hard to nail it, but this something was a mysterious gift that Seattle made to every immigrant who cared to see it. Wherever you came from, Seattle was queerly like home.... It was an extraordinarily soft and pliant city. If you went to New York, or to Los Angeles, or even to Guntersville [Alabama], you had to fit yourself to a place whose demands were hard and explicit. You had to learn the school rules. Yet people who came to Seattle could somehow recast it in the image of home, arranging the city around themselves like so many pillows on a bed. One day you'd wake up to find things so snug and familiar that you could easily believe that you'd been born here."



Above: At Seattle's Burke Museum, a replica of a Haida totem pole attracts visitors.
Below: The double-decked Alaskan Way Viaduct runs between the waterfront and downtown Seattle.

Top left: Majestic Mount Rainier towers above the waters of Puget Sound. Top: The Olympic Mountains are a backdrop as a Washington State ferry emerges from a fog bank near Bainbridge Island. Above: Whale watchers near Lime Kiln State Park on San Juan Island, Washington, spot three Orca whales as they surface.

In other words, this is an ideal environment for nurturing innovation, individualism and the creative spirit. (Those words are probably somewhere in the mission statement for Microsoft, which in 1997 sent me for two weeks to Thailand to write about "The Asian Sense of Beauty" and whose campus is just a 25-minute drive from my front door.) Here we find poetry in the lavish scenery right outside our windows, which dwarfs, predates and no doubt will long outlive everything we write about it. The mountains rise up to 14,000 feet above the sea. There are magnificent, rain-drenched forests, treeless desert lands, glacial lakes, some 3,000 kinds of native plants and hundreds of islands in Puget Sound: an enveloping landscape as plentiful and prolific on its enormous canvas as I suppose we as artists would like to be on our smaller ones. Thus, it has always struck me as fitting that Sea-Tac was among the first airports in America to set aside a room specifically for meditation. (After traveling through Puget Sound or visiting the waterfront in Pioneer Square, you need to sit quietly for a while and savor being so delightfully ambushed by such beauty.)

The Pacific Northwest's geographic diversity, its breathtaking scale and our Lilliputian niche in the shadow of such colossi as Beacon Rock on the Columbia River or majestic Mount Rainier humble a person's ego in the healthiest way. It reminds me of my place as one among uncountable creatures in a vast commonwealth of beings that includes the Canada lynx, bobcat, white-tailed ptarmigan and quail. It never fails to deflate my sense of self-importance. It tips me easily toward a feeling of wonder and awe at this overly rich and inherently mysterious world in which I so fortunately find myself.

If you're standing, say, on Orcas Island, you can see whales cavorting in viridian waves, and the air out there on the islands is so clear, so clean, that each breath you draw feels like some sort of blessing. This sort of Northwest experience helps me take the long view on life's ephemeral

Travelers enjoy a modern setting in Seattle's Sea-Tac (Seattle-Tacoma) airport.

problems. Need I add that this opportunity to step away from the hectic pace and cares of city life whenever one wishes is a stimulus for art, philosophy and spiritual contemplation? And all those inward activities are enriched by the misty, meditative mood invoked by the Northwest's most talked about feature — rain — and the wet evening air that causes portions of the geography to gleam and hazes other parts, sfumato, from November through February, in an atmosphere that is a perfect externalization of the brooding inner climate of the creative imagination. As a child growing up in Illinois, I shoveled snow. Here, you might say, we shovel rain, but with weather like this, it's easy to stay inside, reading and writing, until spring.

Being a transplant like Raban and a Buddhist practitioner means that even after living here for more than half my life, I don't take the gift of this beauty — nor the room to stretch out spirit and body — for granted. I don't mean that metaphorically. I taught kung fu for ten years at Phinney Neighborhood Center, sharing that space with a yoga class, and our students at one time included a scientist, an architect, UW professors

Above: A quiet Seattle neighborhood. Bottom left: In Seattle's Olympic Sculpture Park, the 19-foot-tall "Typewriter Eraser, Scale X" by artists Oldenburg and van Bruggen stands in view of the passing traffic. Bottom right: "Thunderbird Mask and Regalia" is part of the Northwest Coast Native American art on display at the Seattle Art Museum.

and a Zen abbot. My wife, Joan, born and raised on Chicago's South Side in a sometimes violent housing project called Altgeld Gardens, and I happily raised our children here. They can truly call this place — accurately described as a "city of neighborhoods" — home. On Capitol Hill two years ago, our daughter, Elisheba, a conceptual artist, opened Faire Gallery/Café, which features jazz performances and the occasional play or open-mic poetry night as well as art shows and comedy performances by young local talent. Faire is where I hang out these days, conducting my classes and keeping appointments in a vibrant atmosphere — straights and gays, students and goths — that recalls the freewheeling creative vitality of Berkeley in the late 1960s.

For Seattle is, whatever else, a place where the young, single, iconoclastic and open-minded seem to thrive. Remembering Gardner's words from three decades ago, I imagine he would give that same advice today. The Rev. Samuel McKinney, once pastor of Mount Zion Baptist, the largest black church in the region, was a Morehouse College classmate of Martin Luther King Jr. and invited him to Seattle in 1961. On March 12, 2007, King County (where I live) changed its official logo from an imperial crown to an image of the great civil rights leader; MLK joins Chief Sealth (Seattle), who represents the city, and George Washington, avatar on the state's seal.

Were he alive today, King might not describe the Pacific Northwest as the Promised Land, but I believe he would be pleased by how Seattle's citizens — however imperfect we may be — strive to realize his dream of a "beloved community" in a city poised at the edge of the nation's western end.

Top left: A runner jogs in view of the downtown Seattle skyline. Top right: Shoppers frequent Seattle's famous Pike Place Market. Above: Discriminating shoppers choose from an array of fresh fruits and vegetables at the Pike Place Market.

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WASHINGTON, DC

A WRITER'S CAPITAL

by Thomas Mallon

Thomas Mallon's seven novels include *Henry and Clara*, *Bandbox* and *Fellow Travelers*. He is also the author of nonfiction books about diaries, plagiarism and letters. His work appears in *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *The New York Times Book Review* and other publications, and he is currently director of the Creative Writing program at the George Washington University.

American writers have a long, if intermittent, history of "going into the government" for a while. Franklin Pierce, America's not-very-successful 14th President, appointed his friend Nathaniel Hawthorne to be the U. S. consul in Liverpool, a reward for Hawthorne's having written Pierce's campaign biography. The poet Archibald MacLeish served as Librarian of Congress during the New Deal and Second World War, and Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. went from Harvard to the White House as a counselor to John F. Kennedy.

I have hardly operated on as grand a scale as these gentlemen, but as a writer who lives in the company town of Washington, D. C., I can't say I was much surprised when, for a relatively short time, I found myself working for the company. During my stint as Deputy Chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, I left home each morning for 1100 Pennsylvania Avenue, Washington's Old Post Office, built in the 1890s and now home to both the NEH and the National Endowment for the Arts.

The OPO is a grand structure with fat Romanesque arches and a romantic clock tower that one can spot from far across the Potomac. I'm afraid I liked the building more than I did my job, and even now I occasionally miss my big late-Victorian office on the fifth floor. Wood paneling ran halfway up its walls; an old-fashioned frosted window and heavy brass knob enlivened its wooden door; and a big flag behind the desk lent a comic-operatic touch to my never-terribly-pressing responsibilities. I lasted little more than a year, long enough to learn that the first occupant of this huge room had been the "Superintendent of Rate Increases" for the U. S. Postal Service under President William McKinley. For all I know, he went home each night, as I did, to work on his novel.

Washington has been for me not so much workaday world as theme park of the imagination. Several of my novels have been set amidst the city's streets and its history, which is always a local as well as national matter. The assassination of Abraham Lincoln was an American catastrophe, but it was also a personal one for Major Henry Rathbone and Miss Clara Harris, the engaged couple who shared the box at Ford's Theatre with the president and Mary Lincoln on April 14, 1865. Henry and Clara's presence at the killing shadowed their entire subsequent married life, which ended in 1883 with another murder — that of Clara, by her

The United States Capitol in Washington, D.C. is marked by a central dome above a rotunda and two wings. Opposite page: The White House, which has served as home to 45 U.S. presidents and their families.

husband. Most of their unhappy years together were spent in Lafayette Square, near a stretch of it that would, in the late 19th century, also be home to both Henry Adams, one of the city's most mordant observers, and John Hay, another literary-minded man who passed in and out of the government, once as a personal secretary to Lincoln and, much later, as secretary of state under Theodore Roosevelt.

My partner and I have Christmas dinner each year at the Hay-Adams Hotel, built in the late 1920s on the site of those two men's houses. On the way to or from our meal, we usually have a look at the Christmas tree on the lawn of the White House, a mansion that sits in the center of the city the way the mill owner's house used to sit on the hill of other company towns. At some moment during the walk my eyes will be drawn to the site of the Rathbones' old house, and I'll give a thought to those two dark lives that I tried to reconstruct in one of my novels about 15 years ago.

Only about 10 blocks — hardly long enough to walk off Christmas dinner — separate Lafayette Square from where I live in Foggy Bottom. My house is in the neighborhood's "Historic District," a patch of tiny brick dwellings put up in the 1890s, when warehouses, gas works and breweries filled the surrounding area. These days the houses are dwarfed by apartments, university buildings and the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, which at night glows with the same white light bathing the Lincoln Memorial, also nearby.

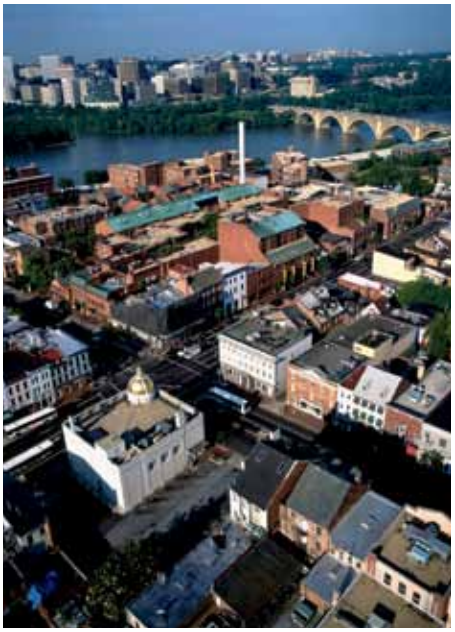
Above: A full moon rises over three Washington, D.C. landmarks. In the foreground is the Lincoln Memorial, the Washington Monument at center, and the U.S. Capitol is in the background.
Below: An aerial view shows the Lincoln Memorial and surrounding park.

Top left: Exploring historical treasures through interactive technology, these schoolchildren enjoy an exhibit at the Library of Congress. Top: Preservationists saved Washington's Old Post Office Building from demolition. Middle: Children peek out of the glass elevator after visiting the clock tower of the Old Post Office Building. Above: Classical sculpture and columns adorn the pediment of the U.S. Capitol building.

Foggy Bottom's most improbable structure — and survivor — is the old U. S. Naval Observatory, a dream of President John Quincy Adams that came to unwise life on the swampy, mist-shrouded banks of the Potomac River during the 1840s. Practicing astronomy there was like growing orchids in the Arctic or snow-sculpting on the banks of the Amazon: the stargazers often had to go home early because their telescopes couldn't pierce the fog. And thanks to the mosquitoes thriving by the river, they fell victim to malaria even more frequently than other Washingtonians did. And yet, in the summer of 1877, the astronomers succeeded in making the sensational discovery that Mars has two moons.

This breakthrough was aided by the Observatory's use of "computers" — women who did the mathematical calculations that would otherwise have been such drudgery for the astronomers themselves. It was one of these computers — or at least a fictional embodiment of them that I decided to call Cynthia May — who became the main character in a novel of mine called *Two Moons*. I imagined Cynthia living in a boarding house on F Street and just barely getting by, part of the new army of clerks who after the Civil War swelled the ranks of the government and the District — enough, in fact, to make Washington into something like a real city for the first time.

After their discovery, Washingtonians came flocking to the Observatory's telescope for a peek at the Martian moons, a sight that provided celestial relief from the usual brutal summer weather. Abraham Lincoln had sought a deeper cosmic comfort by visiting the Observatory dome to have a look at the star Arcturus a month after the slaughters at Gettysburg, and I myself can still see sunlight striking the dome (now devoid of any telescope) when I bicycle along the Potomac on the Virginia



Top left: The Harry S. Truman building became home to the U.S. State Department in the late 1940s. Above: An aerial view of the Georgetown waterfront captures the variety of architecture in this old section of Washington, D.C.

side, giving my lungs a workout. Residents of Washington no longer suffer from malaria, but asthma is common here and I've developed enough of it to make me feel like a native instead of a transplant. A high incidence of the affliction may be the price we pay for a spectacularly floral city; come April, when the cherry trees bloom, tourists get thicker underfoot than lobbyists.

Without having planned it, I've been writing a fictional Washington tetralogy, some of whose locales are visible, or nearly so, from my own small front yard. If you leave the Observatory and cross E Street, you'll reach the State Department, more or less what I did when I finished *Two Moons* and began writing *Fellow Travelers*, a book set inside that precinct of the government during the 1950s. My current preoccupation — the curved buildings of the Watergate complex — can be seen through the window of my upstairs study. Back in 1972, the offices of the Democratic National Committee were burglarized there, and the rest, as they say, is history — or, in my case, historical fiction.

The complex's once wildly modern swirls are looking slightly chipped and antique these days, just as in the current digital age the audiotapes at the heart of the Watergate scandal now seem almost as quaint as parchment. But the buildings remain, like the Capitol and Washington Monument, a magnet for the tourist's eye. One can sometimes see visitors posing for photographs in front of them, arms raised and fingers wagging in President Nixon's old victory gesture. Residents of Foggy Bottom frequent the complex to shop in the supermarket or pharmacy on its lower level; they otherwise pay it no more mind than New Yorkers do the Statue of Liberty or Empire State Building.

I'm still something of a New Yorker myself. I spend a few days each month in an apartment I keep in what even now I call "the city," a completely different urban world — compressed and treeless — from the one we have in Washington. In Manhattan, novelists are as common as waiters struggling to be actors; in Washington we're slightly exotic.

Ben's Chili Bowl has become recognized worldwide as the "must go" place to eat when visiting Washington.

Down here if you're introduced to someone as a writer, the assumption will be that you're a political journalist.

The two cities are different in dozens of ways large and small. In New York, hotels often convert to apartment houses, whereas in Washington the change more frequently runs in the other direction. An air traveler coming to Manhattan sees it rising inside the ring of its low-lying suburbs like some astonishing Everest, but one flies into Washington almost as if onto the field of a stadium. Built low to the ground, the capital is becoming dwarfed by the condominiums around and outside it. Reagan-National airport is very close to downtown, but even so, it's over in the state of Virginia. Washington may be the country's center of government and "the capital of the free world," but it barely makes the list of major U. S. cities. In population, it ranks 27th, between Nashville and Las Vegas (two other company towns).

Disparagement of Washington is always in rhetorical fashion. John F. Kennedy famously mocked its "Southern efficiency and Northern charm," and contemporary politicians make sure to remind voters that they long to be back out "beyond the Beltway," where clearer thinking and sounder values are thought to prevail. But the city's residents, accustomed to seeing presidents and congressional leaders come and go, these days feel generally

Top left: The Smithsonian Institution's administration building, called "The Castle," is located on Washington's National Mall. Top right: The Museum of Natural History, one of the Smithsonian's most popular museums, marked its 100th anniversary in 2004. Above: The spacious National Air and Space Museum holds many historic aircraft and flight memorabilia. Bottom: The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts shines in the evening light as it prepares to host music, ballet, theatrical productions, cultural programs and special events.

good about the place. The District's own government has grown markedly less corrupt in recent years, and scars from the 1968 riot that followed Martin Luther King's assassination are for the most part no longer visible downtown. Even in the midst of recession, the skyline is festooned with construction cranes.

The stretch of Pennsylvania Avenue that runs past the White House was closed off to cars even before 9/11, and traffic — already crazy enough in a city laid out on a grid subverted by diagonals and circles — has never fully recovered. And yet, the pedestrian mall now bordering the White House has made that building feel closer than it used to for the passerby. When in Washington, tourists like to see not only the White House but also the offices of their senators and congressmen — each one of those places being a kind of pied à terre. Citizens traveling to Washington may say, as one does about New York, that "it's a nice place to visit, but I wouldn't want to live there," and yet they say it with a certain pride in the knowledge that, by democratic proxy — thanks to the Constitution — they do live here.

Top: Cherry blossoms surround the Jefferson Memorial as many enjoy paddle boating, a favorite pastime in Washington in the spring. Above: As part of the Father's Day Rose Remembrance event each June, roses are placed at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial to honor fathers who died serving in the Vietnam and the Iraq wars.

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