

## LOOK HOMEWARD, UTICA

November 3, 2012

IT'S A PLEASURE TO BE IN HAROLD FREDERIC'S UTICA, WHICH CAN LAY LEGITIMATE CLAIM TO BEING, POUND FOR POUND, THE LITERARY CAPITAL OF NEW YORK STATE--ESPECIALLY IF WE GRANT YOU THE NEARBY WRITERS EDMUND WILSON AND WALTER D. EDMONDS. (WE IN THE WESTERN PART OF THE STATE ARE A LITTLE TOUCHY ABOUT EDMUND WILSON, WHO ONCE WROTE THAT PEOPLE WEST OF SYRACUSE "SEEMED VERY LOW GRADE... ONE WONDERS HOW THESE MEN AND WOMEN CAN FEEL ENOUGH MUTUAL ATTRACTION EVEN TO BREED MORE OF THEIR UNATTRACTIVE KIND." WELL...SOMEHOW WE DO. WE CAN'T ALL BE AS HANDSOME AS BUNNY WILSON.)

BUT BACK TO UTICA: THROW IN A GREAT COLORFUL POLITICAL TRADITION—HORATIO SEYMOUR, ROSCOE CONKLING—AND CONTEMPORARY WRITERS SUCH AS SOME OF THE PEOPLE HERE TODAY--FRANK BERGMANN, EUGENE PAUL NASSAR, BOB PAQUETTE--AND YOU HAVE, I THINK, A CULTURAL JEWEL.

I HAVE BEEN, FROM AFAR, A GREAT ADMIRER OF UTICA, AND IN FACT NEXT SPRING WILL BRING THE RELEASE OF A MOVIE I ADAPTED FROM A SHORT NOVEL BY HAROLD FREDERIC WHICH IS SET IN ONEIDA COUNTY. IT'S NOT BASED ON A COMIC BOOK OR AN

OLD TV SHOW; IT'S NOT A SEQUEL; AND DESPITE HEAVY PRESSURE EXERTED BY MY FRIENDS, THERE ARE NO NUDE SCENES. CINEPLEX, HERE WE COME.

HAROLD FREDERIC LEFT UTICA FOR LONDON BACK IN THE 1880S, BUT MY SUBJECT TODAY IS NOT EXPATRIATION BUT REPATRIATION—COMING HOME. OR—EVEN MORE COUNTERCULTURALLY, BECAUSE IT VIOLATES EVERY POPULAR NOTION OF “SUCCESS” IN AMERICA: STAYING PUT. IN BOOKER T. WASHINGTON’S PHRASE, CASTING DOWN YOUR BUCKET WHERE YOU ARE.

THAT IS WARNING SHOT ACROSS THE BOW THAT I INTEND TO WAX AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL. THIS IS MUCH EASIER TO DO WHEN FAR FROM HOME. I LIVE 150 MILES TO THE WEST IN GENESEE COUNTY, THE RURAL COUNTY IN WHICH I WAS BORN AND RAISED, IN WHICH MY ANCESTORS WERE BORN AND LIVED AND DIED. THERE IS A KIND OF “TRUTH SQUAD” EFFECT OF LIVING IN ONE'S HOMEPLACE. YOU CAN'T PLAY THE FEY AESTHETE OR THE OTHERWORLDY ARTIST WHEN EVERYONE REMEMBERS YOU AS A SNOT-NOSED KID misplaying a grounder in the Little League playoffs (it was a bad hop) OR AS COUNT NO-ACCOUNT, AS HIS NEIGHBORS IN OXFORD, MISSISSIPPI CALLED WILLIAM FAULKNER.

IN 2003 I PUBLISHED A BOOK CALLED *DISPATCHES FROM THE MUCKDOG GAZETTE*, WHICH IS, MEGALOMANIACALLY, A KIND OF MEMOIR ABOUT MY RETURN TO MY HOMETOWN OF BATAVIA, BUT IT'S ALSO ABOUT THE WAY THAT BATAVIA--AND BY EXTENSION ALL THE BATAVIAS FROM SEA TO DIMMING SEA--HAVE STRUGGLED TO

MAINTAIN A DISTINCT IDENTITY, A CHARACTER, RATHER THAN JUST BECOMING ANOTHER FORMLESS WATTLE ON THE CONTINENTAL BLOB. MY STORY TODAY IS MOSTLY ABOUT BATAVIA, BUT I HOPE YOU CAN SEE UTICA IN MY MIRROR.

TO THE WORLD, BATAVIA IS MERELY EXIT 48 ON THE NEW YORK STATE THRUWAY, THAT HIDEOUS GRAY SCAR ACROSS OUR GREEN AND LOVELY STATE, THAT DRAB VERSION OF THE ERIE CANAL DEDICATED TO THAT DRAB MAN THOMAS E. DEWEY, WHO WAS, BY THE WAY, THE BOYTOY OF THE IRREPRESSIBLE “TO TELL THE TRUTH” FIXTURE KITTY CARLISLE. ONE SHUDDERS TO IMAGINE THAT COUPLING.

I DON'T KNOW HOW MUCH ANYONE HERE KNOWS OF BATAVIA—I'M AFRAID WE KEEP OUR LITTLE LIGHT WELL HIDDEN UNDER THE BUSHEL—BUT I WILL SKIP LIGHTLY OVER THE FIRST 160 OR SO YEARS OF OUR HISTORY AND SAY ONLY THAT IT IS RICH, MYTHOPOEIC, NEVER MORE SO THAN WHEN IN THE LATE 1820s A GARRULOUS DRUNKARD NAMED WILLIAM MORGAN WAS MURDERED BY MASONS FURIOUS AT HIS BETRAYAL OF THE SECRETS OF THE ORDER; ALMOST OVERNIGHT, AN ANTI-MASONIC MOVEMENT AND POLITICAL PARTY GREW OUT OF BATAVIA, THE FIRST THIRD PARTY IN AMERICAN HISTORY. I GUESS THAT'S WHY I HATE TO VOTE DEMOCRAT OR REPUBLICAN.

BATAVIA BECAME A PROSPEROUS LITTLE CITY, MANUFACTORY OF COMBINES AND TRACTORS AND SHOTGUNS. ENGLISH AND SCOTS AND GERMANS WERE THE EARLY SETTLERS, COEXISTING UNEASILY WITH THE LATE 19<sup>TH</sup>-CENTURY POLYGLOT INFLUX OF ITALIANS AND POLES. I'M A MONGREL, A MIXTURE OF SEVERAL OF

THESE STREAMS—THOUGH MY BELOVED LATE ITALIAN GRANDMOTHER INSISTED THAT WE WERE “NORTHERN ITALIAN—ALMOST SWISS.” SO IN MY BOOK I GAVE MYSELF LICENSE TO WRITE FREELY, EVEN RAUCOUSLY, OF THE ETHNIC CONFLICTS THAT ONCE CLEAVED BATAVIA—BUT ALSO GAVE IT A GOOD DEAL OF ITS CHARACTER.

IN SOME WAYS WE WERE A TYPICAL SMALL AMERICAN CITY BUT IN OTHER WAYS WE WERE “BATAVIA”—OUR OWN PLACE. WE DID NOT YET BOW DOWN BEFORE THE NEW AMERICAN ROYALTY: BURGER KING AND DAIRY QUEEN. OR, MORE RECENTLY, DONALD TRUMP AND LADY GAGA.

THEN, AS JOSEPH HELLER WOULD SAY, SOMETHING HAPPENED. URBAN RENEWAL. MY OLD BOSS PAT MOYNIHAN ONCE SAID, WHEN DRIVING THROUGH AUBURN, WHICH WAS DECIMATED RATHER AS BATAVIA WAS—I WOULD DO MY MOYNIHAN IMPRESSION BUT I’M ABOUT SIX DRINKS SHY--“IN THE 1950S, WITH A PROGRESSIVE GOVERNMENT AND NEWSPAPER, YOU GOT INTO URBAN RENEWAL AND DESTROYED EVERYTHING OF VALUE IN YOUR TOWN. IF YOU’D HAD A REACTIONARY NEWSPAPER AND A GRUMPY MAYOR, YOU MIGHT STILL HAVE IT.” (TRY TO IMAGINE ANY STATEWIDE NEW YORK POLITICIAN TODAY SAYING SOMETHING ONE TEN THOUSANDTH AS PERCEPTIVE.)

BATAVIA’S URBAN RENEWAL WAS AN ACT OF PARRICIDE, REALLY, UNEQUALLED THIS SIDE OF RUMANIA, WHERE THE VAMPIRIC CEAUCESCU ONCE WAGED WAR ON PRE-COMMUNIST ARCHITECTURE WITH ALL THE DECORUM OF VLAD THE IMPALER. OUR CITY FATHERS RUSHED HEADLONG INTO THIS MAD PROGRAM

WHEREBY THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT PAID BATAVIA TO KNOCK  
DOWN ITS PAST: THE MANSIONS OF THE FOUNDERS, SANDSTONE  
CHURCHES, THE BRICK SHOPS OF MAIN STREET—THE WHOLE  
DAMNED—OR, RATHER, BLESSED—THING.

THEY WERE LIKE THE CHARACTER IN THE ROBERT FROST POEM:

TO HIM THE LOVE OF COUNTRY MEANS  
BLOWING IT ALL TO SMITHEREENS  
AND STARTING ALL OVER AGAIN

APART FROM THE NOBLE LANDMARK SOCIETY OF GENESEE  
COUNTY, ORGANIZED OPPOSITION TO THIS DESTRUCTION—THIS  
WHOLESALE VANDALISM—WAS MEAGER. FOR THIS WAS  
“PROGRESS,” THE AMERICAN RELIGION, THE TRUE AND ONLY GOD  
OF THE GREATEST GENERATION, TO BORROW A PHRASE FROM  
TOM BROKAW’S GHOSTWRITER.

I WAS YOUNG THEN—OR MAYBE I SHOULD SAY I WAS SO MUCH  
OLDER THEN, I’M YOUNGER THAN THAT NOW—BUT I RECALL MY  
FAMILY GROUSING ABOUT URBAN RENEWAL. THEY UNDERSTOOD  
THAT EVERY BUILDING CARRIES WITHIN A FUND OF MEANING  
AND MEMORY THAT CAN NEVER BE DUPLICATED OR REPLACED,  
AND I THINK THEY SENSED THAT WHEN THESE BUILDINGS WERE  
GONE, THE MEMORIES MIGHT REMAIN BUT THE CORPOREAL  
EVIDENCE OF A LIFE LIVED DISAPPEARS, AND WE WOULD BECOME  
AS GHOSTS, STRANGERS FLITTING THROUGH A STRANGE LAND.  
THE CHILDREN WOULD LEAVE, BECAUSE THEIR ANCHORAGE WAS  
NO LONGER VISIBLE. WHEN THE SIGNPOSTS OF YOUR LIFE

VANISH, IT DOESN'T MAKE MUCH DIFFERENCE WHERE YOU LIVE. OR SHOP. ONE PLACE IS PRETTY MUCH THE SAME AS THE NEXT—NOT HOSTILE TO OUR RESIDENCE THEREIN, BUT MERELY INDIFFERENT.

I AM NOT FROM WHAT YOU'D CALL A BOOK-READING FAMILY BUT I WAS BLESSED IN THAT I GREW UP WITH A SENSE THAT MY PLACE HAD A HISTORY, A CULTURE, AN ACCENT, ALL ITS OWN. IT WAS RAVAGED, IT HAD OFTEN BEEN MISTREATED, OUTSIDERS MIGHT THINK IT A FLAVORLESS DUMP, BUT TO ME IT HAD PITH AND SOUL AND WAS A SOURCE OF ENDLESS FASCINATION. MY DAD USED TO TELL US THE STORIES, SOME PROBABLY APOCRYPHAL OR LIBELOUS, BEHIND THE HOUSES: WE'D GO AROUND TOWN AND HE'D SAY THAT'S WHERE THE TOWN WHORE LIVED; OR THAT'S WHERE VINNY THE BOOKIE SET UP, A GUY WHO NEVER DID A DAY'S WORK IN HIS LIFE. PARENTHETICALLY, A FRIEND OF MINE WHO'S A MUSICIAN, ALSO A REPATRIATED NATIVE SON, HE AND I SAY THAT'S OUR AMBITION: THAT WHEN WE'RE OLD MEN WE'LL BE WALKING DOWN THE STREET AND FATHERS WILL POINT US OUT TO THEIR SONS AND SAY, "THOSE TWO GUYS NEVER DID A DAY'S WORK IN THEIR LIVES."

AH, DARE TO DREAM.

ANYWAY, I GREW UP WITH THE KNOWLEDGE THAT BATAVIA CONTAINED THE STUFF OF MYTH AND DRAMA AND TRAGEDY AND FARCE; EVERY STORY YOU COULD EVER HOPE TO TELL. I KNEW THAT WHERE I WAS FROM MATTERED, EVEN IF THE CORPORATE MEDIA RELENTLESSLY POUND INTO THE SKULLS OF EVERY KID WHO DOESN'T LIVE IN LA OR MANHATTAN OR DC THE MESSAGE

THAT YOUR LIFE IS RISIBLE, IT'S TRIVIAL, WHY EVEN BOTHER TO LIVE IF YOU'RE NOT SMOKING DOPE WITH LINDSAY LOHAN OR TALKING DIANETICS WITH TOM CRUISE. AS A GIRL BAND FROM LOS ANGELES SANG MANY YEARS AGO, "THIS TOWN IS OUR TOWN/IT IS SO GLAMOROUS/BET YOU'D LIVE HERE IF YOU COULD AND BE ONE OF US."

OR MAYBE NOT. THERE ARE SAGER, KINDER SPIRITS TO FOLLOW. CONSIDER THE BRITISH WRITER G.K. CHESTERTON, A MARVELOUSLY WISE MAN WHO WROTE IN HIS 1904 NOVEL *THE NAPOLEON OF NOTTING HILL* THAT THE PATRIOT "NEVER UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES BOASTS OF THE LARGENESS OF HIS COUNTRY, BUT ALWAYS, AND OF NECESSITY, BOASTS OF THE SMALLNESS OF IT." THE SMALLNESS OF YOUR COUNTRY. WHILE I LOVE AMERICA, MY AMERICA, THE AMERICA IN MY HEART AND MEMORY, NOT THE HORRORSHOW ON THE TV SCREEN, THE VERY WORDS "I'M PROUD TO BE AN AMERICAN" ARE THE STUFF OF SCHLOCK MUZAK. BUT TO BE A UTICAN; AH, NOW THERE'S SOMETHING TO BE PROUD OF.

I ALWAYS FELT AN INTENSE HOMESICKNESS NO MATTER WHERE I WAS. SO IN 1988, I PERSUADED MY WIFE LUCINE, A LOS ANGELENA, THAT WE SHOULD COME HOME TO MY OWN SMALL COUNTRY, FOR WHAT I SAID WOULD BE A ONE-YEAR EXPERIMENT. THAT YEAR, IT TURNS OUT, IS MEASURED IN OLD TESTAMENT TERMS, A LA METHUSELAH.

I HAD WORKED PRIOR TO THAT AS A LEGISLATIVE ASSISTANT TO THE LEGENDARY SENATOR PAT MOYNIHAN AND AS A MAGAZINE EDITOR IN DC AND SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA BEFORE A VAGUE

SUSPICION THAT I HAD NURSED SINCE COLLEGE CONCRETIZED INTO A MASSIVE AND UNSHAKEABLE CONVICTION: THAT A LIVE LIVED ANYWHERE BUT IN MY NATAL PLACE WOULD BE FUGITIVE, EVANESCENT, MEANINGLESS. SO WE WENT BACK.

ACCORDING TO THE POPULAR CULTURE DEFINITION OF SUCCESS, GOING HOME—DOING WHAT I DID--IS THE ACT OF A LOSER. HOME MAY BE WHERE THE HEART IS, BUT THE BODY IS USUALLY LONG GONE. IN THE TYPICAL AMERICAN SUCCESS STORY, THE HEART IS THE ONLY ORGAN THAT IS *NOT* TRANSPLANTED. THESE POISONOUS ASSUMPTIONS ARE EVEN EMBEDDED IN OUR LANGUAGE. CONSIDER A PAIR OF COLLOQUIALISMS: "HE'LL GO FAR," APPROVING ELDERS SAY OF PROMISING YOUNGSTERS, THE ASSUMPTION BEING THAT SUCCESS CAN BE MEASURED IN TERMS OF THE DISTANCE ONE HAS TRAVELLED FROM HOME. IF, ON THE OTHER HAND, WE SAY OF A BOY, "HE'S NOT GOING ANYWHERE," WE ARE NOT PRAISING HIM FOR HIS STEADFAST LOYALTY BUT DAMNING HIM AS AN AMBITION-LESS SLUGGARD. WE ARE EXPECTED TO LOOK AWAY, TO PRIZE THE DISTANT OVER THE NEAR-AT-HAND, TO CARE MORE ABOUT WALL STREET THAN GENESEE STREET.

WELL, ABSENCE MAY MAKE THE HEART GROW FONDER, BUT LOVE'S TRUEST, GREATEST EXPRESSION, I HAVE COME TO BELIEVE, IS IMMOBILITY. FIXITY.

YET THE MOBILE RULE. LEAVING HOME--FORSAKING HOME--IS JUST SOMETHING EVERY BRIGHT-EYED MIDDLE-CLASS AMERICAN CHILD IS EXPECTED TO DO, LIKE WISING OFF TO HER PARENTS OR WHINING ABOUT HOW NOTHING EVER HAPPENS IN THIS HICK



TOWN OF HERS. FROM LITTLE FALLS TO GRAND FORKS, THIS "HICK TOWN," SOURCE OF MUCH OF WHAT IS GOOD ABOUT THIS COUNTRY, IS DISAPPEARING INTO THE GREAT AMERICAN NOTHINGNESS. WE'RE BEING TACO-BELLED OUT OF EXISTENCE. AND I WANT PEOPLE TO CONSIDER WHAT IS BEING LOST. AND TO THINK ABOUT THE MEANS OF REGENERATION. MUCH OF MY WORK IS THEREFORE A DEFENSE OF IDIOSYNCRASY, OF ECCENTRICITY, OF THE RIGHT OF A PLACE LIKE BATAVIA OR UTICA TO BE ITSELF, TO BE DIFFERENT FROM OTHER PLACES, TO HAVE ITS OWN PACE AND LANGUAGE AND CHARACTER AND EVEN ITS OWN SINS.

We now live five miles north of Batavia in Elba, apt address for an exile. Lucine, my wife, is our town supervisor—and I like to think she may be the nation's highest ranking Armenian-American elected official, or at least she is until the voters of California send Kim Kardashian to the U.S. Senate. I should add that as first husband, my role model is Mamie Eisenhower, not Hillary Clinton.

DANA GIOIA, THE EXCELLENT CALIFORNIA POET WHO BY SOME STRIKE OF LIGHTNING BECAME THE CHAIRMAN OF THE NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS UNDER GEORGE W. BUSH, HAS A POEM IN WHICH HE WALKS THROUGH A CALIFORNIA CEMETERY--DEPRESSING, TREELESS, STONELESS, GRIEFLESS PLACES; NO WONDER PEOPLE OUT THERE WANT TO LIVE FOREVER. THE POET HEARS THE VOICES OF THE DEAD--THE ROOTLESS DEAD

WE LIVED IN PLACES WE NEVER KNEW.

WE COULD NOT NAME THE BIRDS PERCHED ON OUR SILL,

OR SEE THE TREES WE CUT DOWN FOR OUR VIEW

WHAT WE POSSESSED WE ALWAYS CHOSE TO KILL.

THESE SHADES--SHADES THAT CAST NO SHADOW--ASK THE  
POET, WITH A KIND OF DESPAIRING INSISTENCE:

BECOME THE VOICE OF OUR FORGOTTEN PLACES.  
TEACH US THE NAMES OF WHAT WE HAVE DESTROYED.

TEACH US THE NAMES OF WHAT WE HAVE DESTROYED.

IT IS OUR RESPONSIBILITY, OUR ENNOBLING DUTY, TO THOSE  
WHO HAVE GONE BEFORE AND THOSE WHO WILL COME AFTER, TO  
SAY THE NAMES, TO TELL THE STORIES THAT ATTACH TO THOSE  
NAMES, TO EMBROIDER THOSE STORIES, TO MAKE MYTH OF THE  
QUOTIDIAN, TO MAKE POETRY OF THE PROSAIC.

"AMERICA, TURN IN AND FIND YOURSELF," URGED THE IOWA  
POET PAUL ENGLE. WE ARE GOING TO HAVE TO DO THIS ON OUR  
OWN, WITHOUT ANY HELP FROM THE TV NETWORKS OR YAHOO  
NEWS OR THE CORPORATE MUSIC LABELS. DIY, AS THE OLD PUNK  
ROCK ETHOS WENT. DO IT YOURSELF. AND ACROSS AMERICA,  
PEOPLE ARE DOING IT THEMSELVES.

I'LL GIVE YOU AN EXAMPLE OR TWO FROM GOD'S COUNTRY.  
BATAVIA'S NOT-SO-FAVORITE LITERARY SON WAS THE 1970S  
NOVELIST JOHN GARDNER, AMONG THE LAST AMERICAN WRITERS  
TO GROW UP ON A FARM. GARDNER HAD SOMETHING OF AN  
AMBIVALENT RELATIONSHIP WITH HIS HOMETOWN. WHEN ASKED  
BY AN INTERVIEWER WHAT FUNCTION BATAVIA SERVED IN HIS  
FICTION, HE REPLIED THAT IT WAS "A GOOD SYMBOL...OF THE

DECLINE OF WESTERN CIVILIZATION."

IT'S KINDA HARD FOR THE CHAMBER OF COMMERCE TO PUT  
*THAT* ON A BROCHURE.

Nevertheless, Gardner was ours. As another Upstate New York writer, the drunken scamp Frederick Exley, once said of his birthplace, "Watertown is not in my marrow--it is my marrow." So, too, with Gardner. And so every October we have an evening of Gardner readings in his favorite diner, the unselfconsciously funky Pokadot, outside which now sits our purple and yellow John Gardner bench, upon which you all are invited to sit your literate selves when next you're in our fair town. (Because Gardner's novel *The Sunlight Dialogues* begins with a wild man being arrested for painting LOVE at Batavia's Thruway exit, we were going to emblazon LOVE on the bench, but we feared that the passionate and randy youths of our amorous town might take it a bit too literally.)

I also wrote and played a role in our county's bicentennial play a few years ago. As an actor I have all the emotional range of Desi Arnaz Jr., but few things have ever given me as much satisfaction as doing that play to packed houses, honoring our forbears, making myth of their lives at the same time we tried to celebrate the everyday moments of holiness in their—and our—lives.

These are small, person-to-person acts, I know. But I don't see how anything larger is practically possible, or should I say desirable. You end up with a forest but no trees. As the painter John Sloan replied when asked if he favored a federal Department of Art, "Sure, it would be fine to have a Ministry of the Fine Arts in this country. Then we'd know where the enemy is."

BOB DYLAN'S FAVORITE POET, THE ANTEBELLUM SOUTH

CAROLINIAN HENRY TIMROD, COMMANDED:

POET! IF ON A LASTING FAME BE BENT  
THY UNPERTURBING HOPES, THOU WILT NOT ROAM  
TOO FAR FROM THINE OWN HAPPY HEART AND HOME,  
CLING TO THE LOWLY EARTH, AND BE CONTENT

BE CONTENT.

THAT'S EASIER SAID THAN DONE, I SUPPOSE. OR MAYBE NOT.  
MAYBE IT'S EASIER DONE THAN SAID. AMERICA, THE LEGEND  
GOES, IS A LAND OF PERPETUAL MOTION, OF RESTLESS PIONEERS  
STRIKING OUT FOR THE WEST, OR IN OUR TIME, OF RESTIVE  
TELEVISION ADDICTS LIGHTING OUT FOR LAS VEGAS WITH THE  
MINI-SET IN THE SUV PLAYING "TWO AND A HALF MEN" DVDS SO  
THAT UNLIKE THE JOADS, MEMBERS OF THIS FAMBLY DON'T HAVE  
TO TALK ONE ANOTHER. WE ARE, SUPPOSEDLY, ALWAYS MOVING,  
NEVER STOPPING, CONSUMED BY WHAT WILLIAM CULLEN BRYANT  
CALLED "THE VAIN LOW STRIFE THAT MAKES MEN MAD."

AND YET THE BEST AMERICAN WRITERS—EVEN THOSE WHO  
FOLLOW THEIR CHARACTERS ON RAFTS DOWN THE MISSISSIPPI,  
EVEN THOSE WHO TITLE BOOKS *ON THE ROAD* OR *YOU CAN'T GO  
HOME AGAIN*—ARE ALMOST ALWAYS ATTACHED TO A PLACE. NOT  
SIMPLY A MAILING ADDRESS OR A HOME PAGE BUT A REAL,  
PALPABLE PLACE THAT'S DIFFERENT FROM ANY OTHER PLACE ON  
EARTH. SARAH ORNE JEWETT IN SOUTH BERWICK, MAINE.  
SINCLAIR LEWIS IN MINNESOTA. WENDELL BERRY IN HENRY  
COUNTY, KENTUCKY. THOREAU IN CONCORD. PHILANDER DEMING

IN THE ADIRONDACKS; GENE NASSAR IN EAST UTICA. THE LIST GOES ON AND TAKES IN EVERY STATE, EVERY REGION, AND IF IT DOESN'T, ALAS, INCLUDE EVERY HILL AND VALE IN OUR LOVELY LAND, WELL THAT'S ALL THE MORE INVITATION FOR YOUNG WRITERS TO STAKE THEIR CLAIMS.

I SEEM TO HAVE STRAYED FROM AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND INTO SERMONIZING, BUT PERHAPS IT IS JUST AS WELL. FALSE MEMORY SYNDROME IS THE OCCUPATIONAL HAZARD OF THE MEMOIRIST. WHEN I WAS WRITING *DISPATCHES FROM THE MUCKDOG GAZETTE* I SEEMED TO RECALL MY HIGH-SCHOOL DAYS AS A BLUR OF FOUR-TOUCHDOWN GAMES AND PASSIONATE COUPLINGS WITH THE HEAD CHEERLEADER. BUT I THINK I WAS REMEMBERING SOMEONE ELSE'S PAST.

I WAS VERY MUCH STRUCK BY AN INCIDENT A FEW SUMMERS AGO, WHEN WE SPENT A DAY IN COLUMBUS, MISSISSIPPI, HOMETOWN OF TENNESSEE WILLIAMS, A CITY OF BEAUTIFUL ANTEBELLUM HOMES UNTOUCHED BY THE WAR. FIRST PLACE WE STOPPED WAS A LITTLE RESTAURANT. I AM A HOPEFUL ROMANTIC AND EXPECTED TO FIND VATIC OLD MEN, WHITE AND BLACK, WHITTLING ON BENCHES, AND LACONIC LOAFERS PLAYING CHECKERS AND DRAWLING WITTILY ON COURTHOUSE STEPS, AND TOMBOYISH NELL HARPER LEE HIDING IN THE BUSHES, TAKING IT ALL DOWN. EH, NOT QUITE. THE FIRST COLUMBIAN WE ENCOUNTERED WAS A SULLEN YOUTH FROM TEENAGE CENTRAL CASTING, PLAYING THE USUAL CORPORATE SCHLOCK ON HIS BOOMBOX. WE ENTERED THE EATERY AND WERE SEATED BEHIND FOUR LADIES WITH LOVELY AND MELLIFLUOUS MISSISSIPPI

ACCENTS. THEY SPENT THE NEXT HALF HOUR RECOUNTING THE PLOT OF THE PREVIOUS NIGHT'S EPISODE OF *FRIENDS*, THAT SMUTTILY WITLESS SHOW BY WHICH ARCHEOLOGISTS OF THE 23RD CENTURY WILL CONDEMN OUR CIVILIZATION. I WANTED TO CONFRONT THEM, TO PLEAD WITH THEM: "LOOK, HERE YOU ARE, DAUGHTERS OF A POOR REVILED STATE WHICH IS NEVERTHELESS ONE OF THE CULTURALLY RICHEST STATES IN THE UNION; YOUR HOME GAVE US THE DELTA BLUES, EUDORA WELTY, SHELBY FOOTE, WILLIAM FAULKNER, MUDDY WATERS, AND YET YOU CONSUME THE COMMERCIAL PRODUCTS OF COCAINE-ADDLED GREEDHEADS IN MANHATTAN AND LOS ANGELES, PEOPLE WHO HATE YOUR GUTS, WHO DESPISE YOU AS IGNORANT CRACKERS AND STUPID REDNECKS. GET OFF YOUR KNEES, MISSISSIPPI! THERE ARE NEW ROBERT JOHNSONS AND EUDORA WELTYS IN YOUR MIDST; SUPPORT THEM; LOOK INWARD; LOOK HOMEWARD; WITH A LITTLE HELP, THE FLOWERS IN YOUR OWN BACKYARD WILL BLOOM A THOUSAND TIMES MORE BRILLIANTLY THAN ANYTHING ON YOUR HIGH-DEFINITION TV SET."

WELL I DIDN'T SAY THIS, BEING A POLITE WESTERN NEW YORKER. BUT I WANTED TO. THE TOOLS OF OUR REVIVIFICATION ARE AT OUR FEET, IF WE'D JUST LOOK DOWN. LOOK AROUND. EVERY MAIN STREET AND OAK STREET AND ELM STREET DESERVES ITS OWN RECORD, ITS OWN POEM.

DESPITE MY AVERSION TO BUSYBODYISM I'LL OFFER A PIECE OF ADVICE. KEEP YOUR CHILDREN [AND GRANDCHILDREN] AWAY FROM THE IDIOT BOX. WE NEED CITIZENS, NOT SUBJECTS. SO TO HELL WITH THE LATEST VIDEO GAME; GIVE A KID A BOOK OR A

BASEBALL OR A PAINTBRUSH OR SOME SEEDS AND A SHOVEL OR A FIELD GUIDE TO THE STARS OR THE BIRDS OR THE FLOWERS. GIVE HIM A CHANCE, FOR GOD'S SAKE. (I SPEAK HERE, OF COURSE, IN THE USUAL CONDITION OF SEMI-HYPOCRISY, KNOWING, AS I DO BY HEART, THE WORDS TO THE THEME SONGS OF BOTH *THE BRADY BUNCH* AND *THE PARTRIDGE FAMILY*.)

GIVE THE KID A BASEBALL.

BATAVIA IS A CHARTER MEMBER OF BASEBALL'S NEW YORK-PENN LEAGUE, FOUNDED IN 1939, ONE OF THE OLDEST MINOR LEAGUES IN THE COUNTRY. MY DAD WAS A BATBOY IN THE '40S. I GREW UP ONE BLOCK FROM DWYER STADIUM, NAMED FOR THE KINDLY IRISH CATHOLIC SHOESTORE OWNER WHOSE LABORS OF LOVE KEPT BASEBALL ALIVE IN BATAVIA. IT'S BEEN A GATHERING PLACE ACROSS THE GENERATIONS, A HAVEN OF FELLOWSHIP AND GOOD CHEER, AND AS VICE PRESIDENT OF THE BATAVIA MUCKDOGS, A CLUB PERENNIALY ON THE FINANCIAL LEDGE, I'M TRYING TO KEEP IT ALIVE NOW FOR THOSE WHO'LL FOLLOW, SO THAT MY DAUGHTER, WITH WHOM I HAVE SHARED HUNDREDS OF SOFT SUMMER NIGHTS IN THE THIRD-BASE BLEACHERS, MAY ONE DAY DO THE SAME WITH HER CHILDREN. IT'S THOSE DREAMS OF CONTINUITY THAT SUSTAIN ONE. OR SUSTAIN ME, ANYWAY. WHEN I LOOK OUT OVER THE CROWD I SEE THE DEAD AS WELL AS THE LIVING. THE PRESENCE OF THOSE WHO'VE GONE BEFORE—IT'S NOT AN ANNOYANCE, OR A GRIMLY OBLIGATORY PULL—IT HALLOWS THE PLACES WE LIVE.

This is not to say they're Edenic. In fact, when you're living in a place rather than idealizing it at a distance—which is easy to do, and I've done it;

as Lord Acton said, exile is the nursery of nationalism—WHEN YOU'RE ACTUALLY LIVING IN A PLACE you see, you even embrace, the imperfections. Consider our ill-fated Baseball Poetry Night, or as we called it, Shoving Culture Down Fans' Throats Night. Muckdogs President Brian Paris and I misconceived the idea a couple of years ago; with the recitative assistance of my daughter Gretel and our friend Pat Weissend, we filled the between-innings air of a game against the Auburn Doubledays with baseball verse by everyone from Charles Bukowski to Grantland Rice. My favorite was Bukowski's "Betting on the Muse," which begins, "Jimmie Foxx died an alcoholic in a skid row hotel room." I thought of it as a cautionary tale for the boys.

Baseball Poetry Night was a catastrophe. My Batavia, God bless her, is poetry in repose to me, but as for poetry response...let's just say that when Brian asked the fans over the p.a. system, "Do you want another poem or a song?" the shouts of "Song!" rivaled the New Testament crowd's cry of "Free Barabbas!"

Or I think of a recent season when the team unwisely scheduled "Bill Kauffman Day." I thought every day was Bill Kauffman Day, but...I had to throw out the first pitch that night. I shambled out to the mound, told the crowd over the mike that my brother had promised to buy everyone in the stands a beer if I threw a strike, and I threw a fastball right down the pipe. I think the radar gun clocked it in the low 80s—others estimated the mid-40s.

That night my daughter Gretel and her friend Megan sang the national anthem, MELODIously. During the seventh-inning stretch, now unfortunately scored in so many ballparks by that empty cloud of bombast



“God Bless America,” the girls ignored post-9-11 protocol and instead sang my favorite, “America the Beautiful.”

Gretel and Megan weren't past “Oh beautiful...” when a heckler started in from the beer deck: “Wrong song! Wrong song!” The girls got a huge kick out of it. How many singers have ever been jeered during “America the Beautiful”?

So Batavia reminds me every day that it's an imperfect world. Flawed. But why are we here if not to love the damaged, the marred, each other? And how can we love each other unless we know each other, and how can we know each other unless we live in small communities, face to face? Otherwise we're just passin' through, man.

In Chesterton's wonderful novel *The Napoleon of Notting Hill*, a character explains his attachment to a seemingly ordinary neighborhood: “I was born, like other men, in a spot of the earth which I loved because I had played boys' games there, and fallen in love, and talked with my friends through nights that were nights of the gods. And I feel the riddle. These little gardens where we told our loves. These streets where we brought out our dead. Why should they be commonplace? Why should they be absurd?...Why should anyone be able to raise a laugh by saying, 'the cause of Notting Hill?'--Notting Hill where thousands of immortal spirits blaze with alternate hope and fear.”

Why indeed?

Notting Hill. UTICA. Batavia. Our world is healthy only insofar as these places mean something. I saw the distinct identity—the meaning--of my own place fading and that's why I raised my voice.

Each of us needs a home; a place where we feel connected, feel a part of something bigger than just ourselves. Seldom does this home look like

paradise; oftentimes, as with my Batavia, perhaps with your UTICA, home has been bent, folded, spindled, and mutilated almost out of existence. Self-mutilated, even. Home can seem, to outsiders, an unlovable place. But it is our task to love the unlovable, to find the sacred in the everyday.

I KNOW WHAT IT'S LIKE TO BE 18 AND TO THINK I'M GONNA SHAKE THE DUST OF THIS HICK TOWN OFF MY HEELS AND SEE THE WORLD. I ALSO KNOW WHAT IT'S LIKE TO HAVE A DEEP AND PROFOUND ATTACHMENT TO A PLACE—TO NEVER WANT TO LEAVE IT.

AMERICAN CULTURE—INDEED, AMERICA HERSELF—IS NOTHING WITHOUT A HEALTHY, VITAL, DISTINCTIVE BATAVIA. WHEN THE POETS AND PAINTERS FORGET UTICA AND BOONVILLE YOU'RE GONNA END UP WITH A VACUOUS NATIONAL CULTURE OF MILEY CYRUS, *ENTERTAINMENT TONIGHT*, AND SNOOP DOGG.

OH, WAIT...THAT'S WHAT WE HAVE.

NOT COMPLETELY.

FOR WE HAVE WITHIN OUR HANDS, OUR WALLETS, OUR HEARTS, THE POWER TO REVIVE, TO REVITALIZE OUR PLACES. IT'S OUR CHOICE. WE CAN SIT SLACK-JAWED IN FRONT OF AN IDIOT BOX WHOSE OVERRIDING MESSAGE IS THAT OUR LIVES ARE TRIVIAL PURSUITS OR WE CAN GO TO A HIGH-SCHOOL BASKETBALL GAME. WE CAN TEND A GARDEN—OR, FOR THE VEGETABLY CHALLENGED, JOIN A CSA—OR WE CAN CHOKE DOWN THE SAME TASTELESS CHAIN FARE SERVED UP IN ANYWHERE USA. WE CAN WATCH *FRIENDS* OR WE CAN MAKE FRIENDS. WE CAN TREAT UTICA AND BATAVIA WITH THE LOVE AND RESPECT THEY DESERVE OR WE CAN TOSS THEM AS THOUGHTLESSLY AS WE

WOULD A BIG MAC WRAPPER.

I SUPPOSE THERE'S A SENSE IN WHICH MY BOOKS ARE A KIND OF VOICE OF THE FORGOTTEN AMERICA, THE UNTELEVISED AMERICA. WE'RE BEHIND 27-1 IN THE BOTTOM OF THE EIGHTH, BUT HEY, YA NEVER KNOW. IT AIN'T OVER TILL IT'S OVER. AND BESIDES, MAYBE IT'S A DOUBLEHEADER. I WOULDN'T SWITCH TEAMS EVEN IF I COULD. AFTER ALL, OUR SIDE IS COUNTRY CHURCHES AND ITALIAN BAKERIES, SANDLOT BASEBALL AND UTICA POETS, VOLUNTEER FIRE DEPARTMENTS AND HOMEMADE BEER...AND HOME. THEIR SIDE IS BOMBS AND TANKS AND TELEVISION. HOW CAN WE LOSE?

THANKS FOR LISTENING. LONG LIVE UTICA!