THE REDWOOD COAST
REVIEW

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BOOKS

When He Was Barry

Marc Elihu Hofstadter

DREAMS FROM MY FATHER: A STORY OF RACE AND INHERITANCE
by Barack Obama
Three Rivers Press (2004), 442 pages

Dreams from My Father is a memoir of a man in search of himself. One feels close to Barack Obama as a result of reading the book. Why is this? Well, for one thing, because he writes so clearly and convincingly. He is able to reduce complex constellations of fact—e.g., his own multicultural background—to relatively telling generalizations. In fact, the distillation of a complex background into a coherent pattern is in large part what the book is about. Here is a man who was born of a white American mother and a black African father, who was raised mainly by his white grandparents, who grew up in Hawaii and Indonesia, and who is thus both black and white, loved child and orphan, American and citizen of the world. How can such a person have a stable identity? That is what he seeks in the experiences detailed in the volume and, beyond that, in the very act of writing it. He bares his feelings to the reader with such openness and burgeoning self-understanding that the reader feels taken in and made part of the quest.

For the book is not only articulate and intelligent, it is also emotional. In it Barack Obama describes his powerfully respectful and loving relationship with his mother, his mixed emotions toward his father, his closeness to his doting grandparents, his intimacy with his friends, and his colorful environs: Hawaii, Indonesia, Chicago's black neighborhoods. He is good at exploring the complexities of emotion felt by someone who is brought up not knowing who he is. The book gradually unfolds the rich but ambiguous fabric of his life so that he, and we, come to comprehend it better.

It's interesting that, though his mother was clearly the most formative influence in young Barack Obama's life, the book is titled for his father. While his mother's love gives him stability and self-esteem, he is nevertheless, unlike her, black and male, and as such has the need to pursue his own black roots and male identity by pursuing those of his father. And yet his father is a conspicuously elusive man—successful and failed, remote and loving, absent yet barely present in his young son's life. Will the young Barack Obama be as unaware of some of his feelings as his father was of his? Will he love himself enough to be able to love others in a steady way? Will he create enough of a foundation for his psyche to be able to be more of a success than his father was?

These questions are explored in the pages of the book by means of a series of moments during which Barack comes closer to his true self: early days in Hawaii, the move to Indonesia, the switch back to school in Hawaii, days spent with his black friend Ray, his first day and night in Manhattan, etc. Each moment represents an advance in self-knowledge, and each simultaneously involves a deepening of his connection with others.

See **OBAMA** *page 9*

ROY L. JENNINGS

Ruth Jennings with her children, San Pablo, around 1943

Pearls

A belated letter to my grandmother

Melanie Jennings

I had been reading that address you left in Richmond, along with the tattered scrapbook, your cards and letters to women in Southern states I'd never visited, places I should have spent summers arriving as Ruthie's youngest granddaughter from California, Ruthie's granddaughter who'll ruby if she's left in the sun too long, a girl who's never seen fireflies or hunted possums on hot nights with cousins through the Arkansas hills. I had asked my father for a picture of you and expected it that afternoon when he and my mother would arrive from the Central Valley where they had recently retired. I knew that like you, he is a collector and would take his time to sort and choose. Also, it's not easy for him to let go of things of which he has so little. When they knocked, I set the cards aside and we climbed the stairs to the roof of my San Francisco apartment building and visited, my mother tending my container garden, my father with his hands in his pockets.

Richmond, California. A small town. Rows of shack-houses sprung up the year you and Roy erected the tent and cornered road signs together to put the babies behind during the windy days. You found the breezes off the Bay gave your youngest, JoAnn, an infection in her lungs which made the corners of your mouth fold, as I have seen in those photographs of Richmond, of babies and squinting sunshine, of shipyards. That afternoon on the roof when I was twenty-two, my father said again that you died in the hospital overlooking my building. We stared at it, imagining tiny pearls of lymph clogging your heart, until my mother turned away, bending to the dead tomatoes I'd tried growing in the beach wind and fog. I pictured you in Richmond with that unknown soil, living on the edge of an ocean, a foreigner. Perhaps all you could do was turn your back on it, lean into it, and stare homeward.

Lean-to houses and a hard life are what I will tell my nephews, for they will ask, as they do now, where I was born, where their mama was born, where do they come from, where did we all come from? When I ask how old they are now, they hold their fingers in the air and rhyme "four" with "poor" and "eight" with "late." I hear them imitate my mother's "we was" and "she don't," not yet having their language drilled out of them at school. Watching the boys I think sometimes of Richmond, of all the stories these children will hear, and I wonder which will be blessed with poetry, which will be sensible and strong, which will have your kinky hair when they are grown, and which will name their own child Ruth in hopes of blessings.

Was it Richmond, the refineries scalding the air like the coal mines of home that caused black lung in women who breathed in the open hills? Maybe you thought leukemia was just another California trick, that if you were home you would have died of something simple, something people knew about, a heart attack, or in your sleep. If only we could speak, maybe you would tell me these things. But I have a feeling I could trace all the family silences back to you, and like a true Jennings, you would tighten your apron strings and turn your back, unwilling to place blame even when its empty dust ring reveals the hiding place. I wonder if it was you who answered every problem with a greater problem, as my father did when I was little to make me feel better. "Busted your toe, did you? Welp, Britches, be thankful it's not your knee. Things could be worse."

Richmond like a chant on the breath of every young Okie who'd half starved through the Depression to get a job at the shipyards, and Granddad no different. You? Well, perhaps you thought it best to grit your teeth and bear what life gave you, lucky to be getting at all.

When I was twenty-one I had called my father and with the phone in my neck I held my breath until, sputtering, I told him I'd been molested by our neighbor when I was little. The silence on the other end was my father's way of screaming. He could not think of anything worse to make me feel better. When finally he did speak, whispered, it was of you. "Did I ever tell you about your grandmother? About what happened to her?"

I did not let him tell me. Instead I began reading your cards and letters and unthreading all the bad things that happened in all the stories I'd ever been told.

On good days after that phone call, I went to the ocean. I felt little again, as if we were camping out at Half Moon Bay, not far from where I grew up, not far from Richmond. I tried to imagine the Arkansas hills there in the blue waves, stretching out until the horizon line separates water from sky. I thought you must have hated the ocean, its wide expanse too much for a woman used to land in all directions, the ocean an unknown force gone out of control like a sprung well back home. What had happened to you? Why did you die so young? Had it been something more than the leukemia?

Was it the ocean, its threat of swallowing the family whole like Jonah in the belly of the whale, the family and future generations huddled together on its giant tongue, an image that was altogether foreign to you, and one too scary to counter with something worse? The ocean too near the little house you erected in San Pablo, after Richmond banned tents on any properties so that Granddad Roy had to sell and build instead in the smaller nearby town. Did you fear floods, disaster in awesome proportions, water that at any moment might typhoon or tsunami? Or perhaps it was the fog shrouding the water in mystery each day like a blanket of hope—if only it could have lifted to reveal the rolling hills of Arkansas with Petit Jean Mountain in the distance, standing solid, watching over the San Pablo house.

In the postcards of Richmond Granddad sent you before you came out with the children, they show a town on fire with growth. Buses whose signs read simply SHIPYARDS, and beds rented by the shift for workers at hotels whose ads graced the sides of brick buildings downtown. Richmond like a chant on the breath of every young Okie who'd half starved through the Depression to get a job at the shipyards, and Granddad no different. You? Well, perhaps you thought it best to grit your teeth and bear what life gave you, lucky to be getting at all. Maybe you thought things would be better in Richmond—too bad the surroundings made you feel as if you'd landed on the other side of the moon with not a soul you knew nor a plant you could name by sight. That

See **PEARLS** *page 10*

EDITOR'S NOTE

Turning 10: RCR makes magazine middle age

Stephen Kessler

This issue, our forty-first, marks the tenth anniversary of *The Redwood Coast Review*. Ten years in print, at a time when what's left of a reading culture goes increasingly digital, is no small accomplishment, and we're pleased and proud to have come out like clockwork the second week of every January, April, July and October since this time in 1999.

Thanks to the confidence and support of our publishers, Friends of Coast Community Library and the *Independent Coast Observer*; our advertisers up and down the Mendocino coast; the regional artists who've illustrated our stories; and especially the writers from across the United States, starting with our hardcore Northern California contributors, whose essays, reviews, fictions and poems have given our pages their unique flavor—thanks to all these businesses and individuals, we continue to offer what we hope is a consistently interesting, high-quality reading experience.

For the historical record, this publication was conceived in the summer of 1998 at a meeting of the Board of Directors of Coast Community Library in Point Arena. The library newsletter, such as it was, was in desperate need of a makeover, and Fionna Perkins—library co-founder, indomitable poet and the person who'd recruited me to serve on the board—suggested that I had the qualifications to take on the task of revamping our little newsletter. (Thanks a lot, Fionna.) While it was true, for better or worse, that I'd spent a good part of my adult life editing various newspapers and literary journals, adding a library newsletter to my résumé was not among my ambitions. But when the other boardmembers turned to me with that why-not-do-something-useful look in their eyes, I asked for a little time to think it over and said I'd report back at our next meeting.

It occurred to me that by partnering with the ICO, whose publisher, Steve McLaughlin, was keen on the idea, the library could put out the kind of literary supplement I had admired in the Sunday newspapers I'd read in my travels in Spain and Latin America, where some of the world's best writers would publish essays on books, culture, art and ideas. Such a publication, included quarterly as a section of the ICO, would not only combine my own lifelong engagements with literature and journalism and therefore be a kick for me to edit, but also serve the library as a public-relations vehicle by including news and information about what was going on in this grassroots community institution. It might even help us raise the money to move our operation into a much-needed more-spacious facility.

It did, and we have, and a decade later both the RCR and the library are thriving. The ICO, not incidentally, has enhanced its reputation and extended its range by printing 1500 additional copies of a stand-alone *Redwood Coast Review*, above and beyond its regular press run, for distribution up and down California and to subscribers scattered all over the country. For the Friends of the Library, the newspaper and its advertisers, and for our writers and readers, this ongoing partnership has proved a win-win-win proposition.

As with almost any newspaper or magazine, our goal from the start has been to build and cultivate a community of readers and contributors. At first I imagined we could do this using mostly local or regional talent, but the population base of the Mendocino coast is just not large enough to supply a steady stream of the kind of first-rate writing I was looking for—though every writer I've known around here can testify to my persistent solicitations. So we began to cast a wider net, and over time we've developed a steadily expanding and geographically diverse assortment of contributors. Our heart remains in Northern California, from Big Sur to Ukiah and beyond, and our roots are firmly planted in the Redwood Coast. But like everyone else who lives anywhere, we're also citizens of a globalized world, and our pages reflect that regional-cosmopolitan dialectic.

At a time when printed newspapers appear to be headed for the tar pits of technological obsolescence, and the ones that still exist have been slashing their cultural coverage and book review sections, and even the so-called alternative press has grown increasingly boring and formulaic, and the creative-writing-industrial complex has been cranking out thousands of careerist Masters of Fine Arts to glut their interchangeable literary journals with their mostly indistinguishable writings, and the blogosphere is a cacophony of attention-deficit-disordered clicks and links and electronic twitchings—amid all this the RCR attempts to serve as an oasis of thoughtfulness, an island of contemplative calm, connected with the world (we can be found online at www.stephenkessler.com/rcr.html) yet at the same time unplugged from its maddening distractions.

KARL VIDSTRAND

The literary form we find most congenial for these purposes is the personal essay. Flexible enough to encompass autobiographical confession and critical thinking, intimate reflection and public pronouncement, the storytelling of fiction and the lyricism of poetry, the abstraction of ideas and the concreteness of experience, the essay is an unpredictably shape-shifting genre grounded in the particular voice and style of each of its writers.

That unique voice, that singular angle of vision, that way of distinctively articulating thought and shaping engaging sentences is what we look for in the writings we publish. We value seriousness and wit, earthiness and elegance, common sense and high spirits, skepticism and idealism—ideally all combined—and we like to be inspired, but in a realistic, tough-minded way, free of cheap sentiment and puffy uplift. We like writing that helps us think more clearly, see and read and feel more deeply, that shows us something new or newly illumined, that opens our minds and questions our assumptions.

If this sounds mildly messianic, I can assure you that we have no illusions about the power of a skinny little paper like ours to have any corrective effect on what feels like the downward spiral of literacy, and of civilization in general. But for those who still find pleasure in reading, who value the printed word and relish intelligence, we hope to provide, if only for a few hours a year, that spark of delight, that surge of psychic nourishment that makes the days a little less dull, and the world's gloom and confusion a little less oppressive.

We also strive to seduce the reader's eye. One of the pleasures of newsprint is its power, by means of the simplest black-and-white elements, to engage, at an almost unconscious level, the reader's esthetic sensibility. A clean, well-laid-out page affords a far more satisfying experience than an indifferently designed one. We love beauty, even in such a disposable or recyclable form as this, and hope to add just a touch of it to our readers' fields of vision.

With the inauguration of a new president, one who reads books and is himself a fine writer [see review, page 1], we're hopeful not only for the political future of our badly damaged Republic—criminally abused by its proudly ignorant and illiterate leadership of the last eight years—but for a cultural renewal in which intelligent discourse and creative thought are honored for their vital contribution to democracy. People who read and think, and listen to others and engage in rational argument, are essential to honest politics and all-around human decency. In our small way we hope to contribute to this freshly optimistic atmosphere.

The Redwood Coast
REVIEW

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We welcome your submissions. Please send essays, reviews, fiction, poetry and letters to the Editor, The Redwood Coast Review, c/o ICO, PO Box 1200, Gualala, CA 95445. Manuscripts should be typed, double-spaced, with the author's name, address, phone and email at the top of the first page. Postal mail only. A self-addressed, stamped envelope is required for our reply.

On the Web: stephenkessler.com/rcr.html

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READERS' LETTERS

Guess what, Editor: Woody Allen is a satirist

Unlike yourself (Editor's Note, Fall 2008), I thoroughly enjoyed *Vicky Christina Barcelona* and *Elegy* for what they are worth —lots. Your opinions, expressed within the framework of some standard critical method of comparison and contrast, seem triggered by, yet not generative of, a fair appreciation of two different films with different intentions; VCB is especially victimized by your attack.

VCB is meta-satire: no less than Woody Allen's large-scale sendup of the entire phenomenon of his own longstanding *auteur*-audience cinematic affair. If VCB is just a fantasy crowd-pleaser pandering to an "audience . . . lap[ping] it up with belief-suspended pleasure"; if Allen is not making fun of our infatuation with Latin lovers, with flaky American girls and flimsy American expatriates; if costumes and settings and cameras are not angled in just such a way as to mimic the seductive yet transparent deceptions of advertising—then I'm in deep trouble because it all seems pretty comedic to me!

While you seem to miss VCB's big picture, you do intimate its essentially parodic premise, identifying the indulgence of the "*auteur's* fantasies," the "pantomimes of seduction" and the squeezing of "cliché," even pointing out how Allen "toys with . . . creations as two-dimensional embodiments of stock ideas." Indeed he does and the voice-over narration, which you tag as a writing problem, is instead a clever narrative device designed to tip the viewer off about just how seriously to size up this melodrama, i.e., not very.

With broad strokes and a fine air brush, painting a series of tableaus in a dystopian fiction, Allen illustrates the human capacity to fool oneself. The compulsivities controlling these characters' lives vitiate their boldest efforts to act on their avowed and unavowed dreams; they do act out their fantasies—as somewhat embarrassing and humiliating failures. Despite the effervescent surfaces of this movie's mise-en scène, we are being exposed to the sophisticated and integrated vision of a kindly cynic. Allen shows people who don't change the way they think they can or will or should; they only stand more revealed. The end of one Spanish summer's fugue brings Vicky, Christina, Juan, Consuela—and presumably all the super-smart folks back at the eternal cocktail party—to their starting places.

VCB may have enjoyed such popular and critical success just because it does so successfully satirize us in our time, coupling —in a thoroughly contemporary fashion— one *auteur's* adroit exhibitionism with many an audience's well-ingrained if only more or less unconscious penchant for voyeurism.

Peter Boffey
Walnut Creek

A happy subscriber

I subscribe to *The Redwood Coast Review*. I truly enjoy your publication. I really like the feature articles: on Langston Hughes [Spring 2007], Tillie Olsen [Summer 2008] and this last one on Jack London [Fall 2008]. I thought the piece on Elliott Carter [Fall 2008] was fantastic! It's articles like that one that make your paper special. Your articles are unique and well written! Keep up the good work.

I thought I would donate a copy of my book and CD to your library. This is my latest work and I hope you find a piece or two you enjoy. Please use the $20 to help your library! Keep sending me *The Redwood Coast Review.*

All my best!

Kim Burns
Nashville, Tennessee

ON WRITING

Good in Bed

Literature, illness & spirituality

Marguerite Guzmán Bouvard

Art and spirituality have always been intimately connected: many writers are explorers of visions and of new ways of plumbing the mysteries of our reality. Having struggled with two debilitating chronic conditions for many years, I have found myself inspired to give voice to my visions and inner growth in books of poetry, articles and a nondenominational book of prayers, *Prayers for Comfort in Difficult Times*. I found myself voicing not only the trials of illness but also unexpected discoveries.

As I could no longer pursue a busy schedule or spend much time in social situations, my newfound solitude left me room for reflection, providing an opportunity to appreciate the beauty and mystery of creation as well as the blessings in my life, almost as if I had been granted second sight. I found myself open to experiences that in my former healthy life I would have passed by as I rushed from one task to another. Although our society both fears and misunderstands illness, it can be viewed as an opportunity for growth. I discovered that who I would become and what I would do with my life would have to be spiritually meaningful. I found myself radically changing my values, seeking wisdom rather than trying to measure up to social standards of success, recognizing the enormity of kind gestures and especially feeling how deeply I am connected to every living thing. I also discovered how our great writers have explored the terrain of illness, enriching our understanding in so many ways.

Since poetry is the ultimate space for uncensored thoughts and feelings, there is a long tradition of writing about the tragedies that afflict us. Most interesting are the meditations on these that clergy of diverse religions have expressed in their poetry, Gerard Manley Hopkins in particular. A precursor of modern poetry and a Jesuit priest, his poems are known for their sensuality and his inventive language. Despite the strictures of the Catholic Church that regard despair as a sin, Hopkins wrote most movingly of his own in an untitled poem:

No worst, there is none. Pitched past pitch of grief,
More pangs will, schooled at forepangs, wilder wring.
Comforter, where, where is your comforting?
Mary, mother of us, where is your relief?
My cries heave, herds-long; huddle in a main, a chief
woe, world-sorrow; on an age-old anvil wince and
sing—
. . .

O the mind, mind has mountains: cliffs of fall
Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed. Hold them cheap
May who ne'er hung there. . . .


Gerard Manley Hopkins

Eastern cultures are much older than our own and more accepting of the human condition. Jelaluddin Mohammad Balki, whom we know as Rumi, was born in Balkh, Afghanistan, then part of the Persian Empire, and emigrated to Konya, Turkey, with his family to escape from invading Mongol armies between 1215 and 1220. A religious scholar, a sheikh in the dervish learning community in Konya, he became transformed into a mystical poet through his friendship with another wandering dervish, Shams of Tabriz. His exquisite poetry thrives in our Western culture where his meditations on our troubled lives continue to move us.

In his poem "Enough Words," Rumi acknowledges our trials eloquently: "What hurts you, blesses you. / Darkness is your candle." He believes that by breaking open our vulnerability we receive grace. In his poem "Cry Out in Your Weakness," he exhorts us, "Cry out! Don't be stolid and silent / with your pain. Lament! And let the milk / of loving flow into you. / The hard rain and wind / are ways the cloud has / to take care of us." In a culture that denigrates vulnerability, his poetry not only brings suffering back into the community, but also opens us up to new spiritual understanding as well as healing.

Virginia Woolf reveals this type of awakening in her essay *On Being Ill.* The essay's form and content reflect a reality most people rarely perceive. The essay itself is meandering and shapeless (or shape-changing), reflecting the fact that illness robs us of a schedule that the healthy take for granted and thrusts us back upon our inner selves in a private field of reflection. In that field, our lives move in their own unpredictable trajectory. She writes:

"Considering how common illness is, how tremendous the spiritual change that it brings, how astonishing when the lights of health go down, the undiscovered countries that are then disclosed, what wastes and deserts of the soul a slight


Lucille Clifton

attack of influenza brings, what lawns sprinkled with bright flowers a little rise of temperature reveals."

In the essay, Woolf laments that writers don't record what she refers to as "the daily dramas of the body"; that when they write about the body all they focus on is greed and desire. (To these I would add violence). Again, she writes:

"Those great wars which the body wages with the mind a slave to it in the solitude of the bedroom . . . are neglected. Nor is the reason far to seek. To look these things squarely in the face would need the courage of a lion tamer. This monster, the body, this miracle, its pain, will soon make us taper into mysticism, or rise, with rapid beats of the wings, into the raptures of transcendentalism."

"The language that brought us Hamlet and King Lear," Woolf writes," has no words for the miseries of illness. The person who suffers has no words to guide them." That search for a new language is what led me to keep writing not only about my physical distress but to express it as the blood wedding to suffering humanity. I have found that words flow from that leap of recognition and compassion.

When writing of the absence of sympathy and understanding from others, Woolf reflects that "we do not know our own souls, let alone the souls of others . . . .There is a virgin forest in each; a snowfield where even the print of birds' feet is unknown."

Woolf points out that while the drama of nature—the ever-changing shapes of clouds, the immensity of the sky—is unfolding, we are unaware of it, rushing to and fro, absorbed in mundane chores. Illness often steers us toward wonder and astonishment at what we used to barely notice. The (typically) British Woolf goes into rapture about a rose. I myself am particularly inspired by the glossy pelt of moss growing on a dying tree, or the ochre stain of lichen on an ordinary stone, turning it into splashes of a sunset.

Woolf also touches on a yearning for Heaven (I would now refer to this as the afterlife or eternity), and how poorly it is represented by religion and religious practices. I have often noticed how spirituality flourishes outside of the structures of organized religion, awakening me as if for the first time to all that surrounds us and to the sacredness of the ordinary and the everyday. In so doing I lose the boundaries of time, place and our sense of separateness, but not my identity.

An example of this can be found in Vera Brittain's book *Testament of Friendship,* a record of the spiritual growth of her close friend—author Winifred Holtby—during the last year of her life. Faced with her impending death from Bright's disease, Holtby returns to her country retreat in Yorkshire on a bitter cold February day. Brittain recounts how her friend found herself standing by a trough outside the farmyard. "The water in it was frozen and a number of young lambs were struggling beside it vainly trying to drink. She broke the ice for them with her stick, and as she did so she heard a voice within her say: 'Having nothing, yet possessing all things.' It was so distinct that she looked round, startled, but she was alone with the lambs on the top of the hill. Suddenly in a flash, the grief, the bitterness, the sense of frustration disappeared. She walked down the hill with the exhilaration that springs from the sense of having lost everything. It is a feeling like no other, a curious form of spiritual intoxication." Similarly, I have had phrases come into my mind while meditating. "You have everything you need in your heart." "No one who loves Me is worthless."

I found myself radically changing my values, seeking wisdom rather than trying to measure up to social standards of success, recognizing the enormity of kind gestures and especially feeling how deeply I am connected to every living thing.

In his book *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*, Jean-Dominque Bauby writes about locked-in syndrome, a rare neurological disorder in which individuals are mentally alert but completely paralyzed. They are unable to speak; communication is possible only through blinking eye movements.

Bauby dictated his manuscript by blinking his left eye according to an alphabet he devised with his physical therapist. In the book, Bauby describes how the disorder affected his hearing: his right ear was completely blocked, while his left ear amplified every sound more than ten feet away. He recounts the dreadful racket of the hospital: steps on the corridor; carts crashing into each other; healthcare workers talking across the hall at the top of their lungs; the shouts of patients.

"Far from such din, I can listen to the butterflies that flutter inside my head. To hear them, one must be calm and pay close attention, for their wing beats are barely audible. Loud breathing is enough to drown them out. This is astonishing. My hearing does not improve, yet I hear them better and better. I must have butterfly hearing."

The noted poet, novelist and prize-winning nonfiction writer Floyd Skloot wrote about living with a brain injury caused by a virus in a Chronic Fatigue Immune Disorder newsletter (www.cfid.org). "Since I could not presume that I would remember anything, I must live fully in the present. Since I could not presume that I would understand anything, I must feel and experience my life in the moment and not always press to formulate ideas about it. Since I could not escape my body and the limits it had imposed on me, I must learn to be at home in it. Since I could do so little, it was good to live in a place where there is so little to do. And since I could not presume that I would master anything I did, I must relinquish mastery as a goal and seek harmony instead." In this touching statement, Skloot embodies the Native American spiritual concept of balance and harmony as well as the Buddhist concept of mindfulness.

"I used to move through my world like a halfback, cutting sharply, zigging and zagging, always trying for that extra yard, very difficult to bring down. Now, I realized, I conserved, I loitered, I moved as in a dream. . . . But of this necessity had come a whole new way of being in my life. . . . Something rich with possibility, if I only looked at it clearly enough." Skloot's inner strength led him to discover new paths for himself that belie social images of the ill as marginal and of no consequence. Most of all he continues to write despite the enormous obstacles his illness has imposed on him. His latest book of poems, *Selected Poems: 1970-2005,* is a triumph.

In her book *Blessing the Boats*, Lucille Clifton expresses the contradictions of illness:

Dialysis

In my dream
a house is burning
something crawls out of the fire
cleansed and purified
in my dream I call it light
after the cancer I was so grateful
to be alive.
I am alive and furious
blessed be even this?

My own spiritual experiences came out of a life shattered, transformed and continually reshaped, a process not dissimilar to that of the creative process, with the difference that living on the edge, being stripped of what formerly seemed normal, catapulted me even more deeply into an exploration of what I call soul. Like so many ill writers, I found a connection between giving myself up to landscapes without maps, to periods without meaning, and the ability to create.

Marguerite Guzmán Bouvard lives in Wellesley, Massachusetts, and is the author of many books of nonfiction and poetry.

BOOKS

Red Bard

Jonah Raskin

The Poems of Mao Zedong
Translations, Introduction and Notes
by Willis Barnstone
California (2008), 168 pages

BETTMAN/CORBIS/RCR

"Exterminate the brutes!" Mr. Kurtz exclaims in *Heart of Darkness,* Joseph Conrad's hair-raising novella about "ethnic cleansing" in the Belgian Congo that inspired Francis Ford Coppola to make *Apocalypse Now*, his Technicolor extravaganza about the killing fields in Vietnam. The fictional Mr. Kurtz was ahead of the tidal wave of genocide that swept around the world; the 20th century's real warlords, dictators and megalomaniacs in Vietnam, Cambodia, Bosnia, China and beyond followed in his bloody footsteps and piled up the corpses of their enemies. Like him, the agents of mass murder often started out as cultured Europeans.

Take, for example, the Bosnian Radovan Karadzic. Recently captured after years as a fugitive and in hiding, and soon to be a defendant in The Hague for crimes against humanity, Karadzic is a published poet and the author of a charming book for children. He also worked as a humanistic therapist. The contradictions are mind-boggling, and they are even more so in the case of Mao Zedong, the chairman and once absolute dictator of the People's Republic of China. A man of prodigious contradictions—his most influential essay is entitled "On Contradiction"—Mao knew volumes about the subject. If he wanted to see his own he could not have found a better place to look than in his poetry, perhaps the one place in the world that would not allow him to lie about himself.

What are we to think of Chairman Mao—a fellow who makes Mr. Kurtz seem almost tame—and his poems, which have been new newly translated by Willis Barnstone? At the Poetry Foundation they were asking much the same question about Mao the poet. On their Web site, Poetry-Foundation.org, you can read the views of Rachel Aviv. "His poetry can hardly be seen as a weapon for national liberation," Aviv writes, oddly unaware that Mao's poems were effective propaganda for the masses. In *The Washington Post* J. D. O'Hara called Mao's poems "political documents," but added, "it is as literature that they should be considered." Separating the political from the literary, however, isn't possible in Mao's work. "We woke a million workers and peasants," he wrote boastfully in the 1931 poem "First Siege," and though all his lines aren't as explicit about the power of the Chinese revolution, many of them are.

Born into a peasant family in 1893, Mao grew up loving the classics of Chinese literature and at times he could be enlightened about culture. "Questions of right and wrong in the arts and sciences should be settled through free discussion in artistic and scientific circles," he wrote. "They should not be settled in summary fashion." But he ruled tyrannically in cultural as in economic matters, and insisted that artists serve the class interests of peasants and proletarians, even as he promoted his own career and created a cult of his all-powerful personality. American writers and artists played a decisive role in aggrandizing that immense personality and making him look respectable. Edgar Snow, the Missouri-born reporter, gave Mao a big boost in his classic of revolution, *Red Star Over China* (1937), and in the 1960s Andy Warhol turned Mao into a global icon. Frederic Tuten wrote a brilliant Dadaesque novel, *The Adventures of Mao on the Long March,* published in 1971. John Updike reviewed it favorably in *The New Yorker* and Susan Sontag called it "a violently hilarious book."

Perhaps all of us who were alive then colluded in making the myth of Mao. "I wrote *The Adventures of Mao* at a most political time," Tuten would explain. "China was near, its revolution still fresh and seemingly uncorrupted." Tuten's contemporaries saw the Chinese revolution as *incorruptible* even as they browbeat one another with quotations from *The Little Red Book*. I never went that far, though I caught the Mao bug and joined the cultural revolution that spread from Beijing to Paris and beyond. Finally, the Beatles interjected a necessary note of sanity. "If you go carrying pictures of Chairman Mao / you ain't going to make it with anyone anyhow," they sang in "Revolution." Oddly enough, Mao made it big with President Richard M. Nixon, the arch anticommunist who visited China in 1972 and made a big production of reciting Mao's poetry to Mao himself. Then, he and Zhou Enlai discussed the meaning of the poems—as though they were two diligent students and Mao their master.

A man of prodigious contradictions, Mao knew volumes about the subject. If he wanted to see his own he could not have found a better place to look than in his poetry, perhaps the one place in the world that would not allow him to lie about himself.

When Mao died at 83, the world began a thoroughgoing reappraisal of his life. In book after book—in both compelling memoirs and comprehensive histories—the mighty Mao was redefined as an egomaniac. *Mao: The Untold Story* (2005), co-authored by Jon Halliday and Jung Chang—a former Red Guard who won international acclaim for *The Wild Swans*—provides a shocking account of his cultural and political crimes. "Mao cornered the book market by forcing the entire population to buy his own works, while preventing the vast majority of writers from being published," the authors write.

In his introduction to *The Poems of Mao Zedong* Willis Barnstone says nothing about the millions Mao made from his books, and nothing about his crimes, sticking mostly to literary matters. "He was a major poet, an original master," Barnstone says. Mao had a more modest view —perhaps falsely modest—of his poetry, which he dismissed as "scribbles." Nevertheless, he allowed them to be printed when he was 65. I wish that Barnstone had said more about Mao the dictator than what he does say—that he created a "new dynasty." When I interviewed him he was refreshingly candid. "I have never ceased thinking what a bastard Mao was!" Barnstone said. "Almost everything he did was a failure and millions of people died of starvation because of him. He was a horror for China. I have thought that perhaps some of the same energy that went into his horrendous politics went into his beautiful poetry."

Barnstone is the most fitting American to bring Mao's work to Americans now, as China emerges as a world power. A lifelong teacher, writer, poet, scholar of Borges and Sappho, and gifted translator, he has written insightfully about translating in *The Poetics of Translation*. Barnstone has a keen poetic imagination, and, as Stephen Kessler observes in "What Does it Take to Translate Poetry?," collected in his book of essays *Moving Targets*, "it is through imagination (or faithful re-imagining) that the greatest translations are created." In "Forgery & Possession" Kessler also observes that for a good translation, "Familiarity with the culture and the history of the original is also vitally useful." Barnstone is an old China hand. He lived in China during the Cultural Revolution—Zhou Enlai invited him—and in the 1980s he taught literature in Beijing. He's old enough (80) and wise enough (he's lived through the horrors of the 20th century) to know that if we only read poets who were perfect human beings and didn't endorse one brutal system or another, we'd read precious few poets.

Thirty-six poems are here, some as brief as three lines, others much longer. About half the poems were written *after* Mao and the Communists came to power. All are in Chinese and English, and on facing pages. Barnstone includes examples of Mao's calligraphy, footnotes to each poem, and a note on translation. "Chinese poetry depends very much on images and images translate more readily and with less loss than other poetic devices," he writes. In a note on versification, he adds that Mao took his models mainly from the Tang (618-907) and Song (960-1127) poets, which shows how far back the poetic tradition goes in China, where writing poetry was expected of emperors.

A young reader coming upon this work for the first time might not connect Mao the poet to Mao the dictator. As Barnstone pointed out during our interview, some of Mao's best poems are intensely personal, as in "The Gods," which is for his wife and sister who were beheaded in 1930 by Mao's opponents—the Chinese Nationalists. The poem ends with a powerful image —"Tears fly down from a great upturned bowl of rice"—that exposes his vulnerability and the immensity of his loss. Many of the poems are overtly political, even propagandistic, and it would be hard to read them and not think of war and revolution. "The Long March" begins "The Red Army is not afraid of hardship," and seems to have been written to inspire the troops. "Militia Women" is directed at the "Daughters of China" and means to bring them into the fold of revolution. "Tingzhou to Changsha" is covertly political: "soldiers of heaven" tie up and defeat "the whale."

Mao enjoyed the beauty of nature all through the hardships of the Long March. War did not curtail his esthetic appreciation of flowers, snow, horses, geese, sky, rivers, and the moon. The mountains are almost always pleasing to his eye, as in "Snow," his most popular poem, in which he writes, "Mountains dance like silver snakes." In "To Guo Moruo," the last poem in the volume, Mao seems to reflect on the vanity of the human will to conquer: "On our small planet / a few houseflies bang on the walls. They buzz, moan, moon, and ants climb the locust tree / and brag about their vast dominion." Did he have a kind of epiphany and realize the futility of ruling absolutely? "To Guo Moruo" suggests that he did.

Unlike the poems of the Bosnian nationalist warlord Radovan Karadzic, Mao's poems do not reveal an obsession with violence, though he romanticizes weapons in the image of a "forest of rifles." Karadzic's poems are cultish and diabolical; "I am the deity of the dark cosmic space," he boasts. Mao's work reminds me of the poems that other Asian Communist leader, Ho Chi Minh, who wrote while imprisoned in 1942, and that were published under the title *Prison Diary*. Ho disguised his revolutionary views lest his jailers confiscate his work and pile additional punishment on him. "When the prison doors are open, the real dragon will fly out," he wrote in what is his best-known and most frequently quoted line.

If I had to compare Mao to an American, I'd say he was akin to Whitman, though I'd add that Whitman's lines are longer, that the rhythms feel different and the voices aren't the same. Mao is never as tender or as sexual or as democratic as Walt. Still, like Walt, Mao sings a song of himself. There's an all-powerful "I" as well as an all-seeing eye, and the "I" can be wistful and sad as in "I see the passing, the dying of the vague dream." In "Swimming" Mao writes, "I taste a Wuchang fish in the surf / and swim across the Yangzi River." He identifies himself with China itself in much the same way that Whitman identified himself with America, and that seems fitting. Twentieth-century China was like 19th-century America: a country developing economically at a furious pace, with huge social dislocation, and the unleashing of immense creative as well as destructive forces, all of which were embodied in Mao himself. I don't mean to excuse the violence in America during our Civil War and Industrial Revolution, or the violence in China during its Civil War and Cultural Revolution. By making the comparison I hope to illuminate the Chinese experience, and make it seem less exotic, foreign, and yes, even less Oriental. If Mao's poems express universal feelings, so, too, the Chinese have pushed ahead for all of humanity in their exuberant and misguided revolution. If they fail disastrously, we'll all fail.

In *Mao: The Unknown Story,* Halliday and Chang describe Mao as a megalomaniac aiming to destroy Chinese culture. Barnstone shows him as a poet who borrowed from and helped to preserve the old China, even as he aimed to overturn it and start anew. The Beatles rightly warned us against the hagiography of Mao, but I'd like to think that they'd want to read him now. They might even wave Barnstone's compact, handsome volume above their heads—it's that good.

Jonah Raskin's most recent book is The Radical Jack London: Writings on War and Revolution *(California). He teaches in the communications department at Sonoma State University and is an RCR contributing editor.*

TRAVELS

Echoes and Shadows

A walking tour through a haunted town in Austria

Mardith Louisell

As a resident of many camps, I can say that Guzen was the worst. This is not to say that the conditions at the other camps were not dreadful. Compared to Guzen, however, one might almost say that those camps were paradises.

— Rabbi Rav Yechezkel Harfenes,
Slingshot of Hell (BeKaf HaKela), 1988

When the bus arrived at the site of the Gusen concentration camp, instead of concrete walls and barbed wire, I saw a yellow church steeple on a hill and beige houses with geraniums in window boxes—this concentration camp was now a middle-class housing development dotted with parks, newly built houses and remodeled camp buildings on roads like Gartenstrasse where I would soon walk—as nondescript as the small town in the Midwest in which I grew up.

I had never wanted to go to Austria, but when my partner had to go to Linz for business I went, hoping I might understand more about how ethnic cleansings occur, and when I saw an audiotour of a concentration camp offered as part of the Linz Ars Electronica festival, I signed up.

Fifteen kilometers from Linz, the Gusen complex is the only extermination camp of significant size not memorialized as a site. Administratively the Gusen complex was categorized as a satellite of Mauthausen, but the three Gusen camps covered an area large enough to include four towns and in 1945 held 25,000 inmates, double the number of Mauthausen.

Audiowalk Gusen: The Invisible Camp is an art project by Christopher Mayer, who grew up in St. Georgen an der Gusen, which adjoined Gusen II; Mayer's grandfather had joined the National Socialist Party and his parents still live in St. Georgen. Mayer hadn't known about Gusen until he was fourteen years old when a neighbor asked him if he knew the town had been a labor extermination camp. In not knowing, Mayer wasn't unusual—Austrians didn't speak of Gusen for decades. The interwoven voices on the audio belong to Gusen camp survivors, past and current residents, former air force soldiers and SS camp guards, all of whom Mayer interviewed.

Mayer sets me up with my iPod. Two blocks separate each audiotourist so I walk alone. I press the iPod button and hear a narrator provide directions.

Walk in time to the footsteps on the tape. Turn left at the end of the road. Keep walking.

Beside a stone wall that lines the main business road of the village, I see terrain that seems innocent, orderly, even boring, but walking alone into a strange town with earphones, I can be singled out and I remembered the ugly yellow stars of the Reich. How quickly I absorb what I imagine is the prevailing norm. I feel I'm braving peer pressure—a nice person doesn't investigate the detritus of other people's neighborhoods. I try not to make a wrong turn on the spotless road, try not to annoy anyone.

Turn left here. Continue. . . . Stop, here at the iron gate.

Two surveillance cameras. No Trespassing signs. A clean gray garbage bin on wheels, except for color exactly like one in San Francisco.

This was the gate to the camp. Prisoners were deposited and informed the only way out was through the chimney of the crematorium.

This was true. At first, the camp worked prisoners to death in stone quarries; later inmates excavated cliffs to build a factory to produce jet fighters. When inmates' bodies were spent, they were exterminated, usually within four months of arrival.

The iron gate rests between two stone columns, probably supports for the original camp gates. A two-story affluent house rises on a hill at the end of the long driveway.

Look up to the top. The basement of that stone house was the camp torture chamber.

Nothing suggests its past. Only now do I notice that the stonework seems slightly older in the lower left portion of the house. The current owner had wanted to tear down the basement but his engineer said. "Use it. It's a good foundation." Is it a breakfast nook now? A family room? Who walks down those steps and watches television there, perhaps with a cup of good Austrian coffee? On the tape two men argue about whether the walls remember. One thinks the walls do, another thinks not—it's just a building.

Continue walking down the road to the right. Stop here. Number 14. This was the whorehouse.

I imagine Austrian guards walking into a small cubbyhole to have sex. With German prostitutes? Camp prisoners? Jews?

I was done with my shift, time for someone else's. I walked up the four steps to the brothel.

A small gray plaque neatly outlined in white, 14 Untere Gartenstrasse. One window of the barracks-style house ajar in the casual way of early fall. White petunias. On the front porch table, a green-and-white checked cloth. Two chairs—the owners' hope for a last meal outside before winter. A man walks out the door and down the four steps. Mayer hadn't told us what to do were we to meet residents. I look at the man. He looks back. His face betrays nothing. Keeping my face also expressionless, I avert my eyes as though what I'm hearing has nothing to do with him, but it's his story on the tape.

After we moved in, we wanted a party room so we tore down the walls because the rooms were so small. Getting a reasonably priced house in Upper Austria was a lucky break. Now I would never live anywhere else.

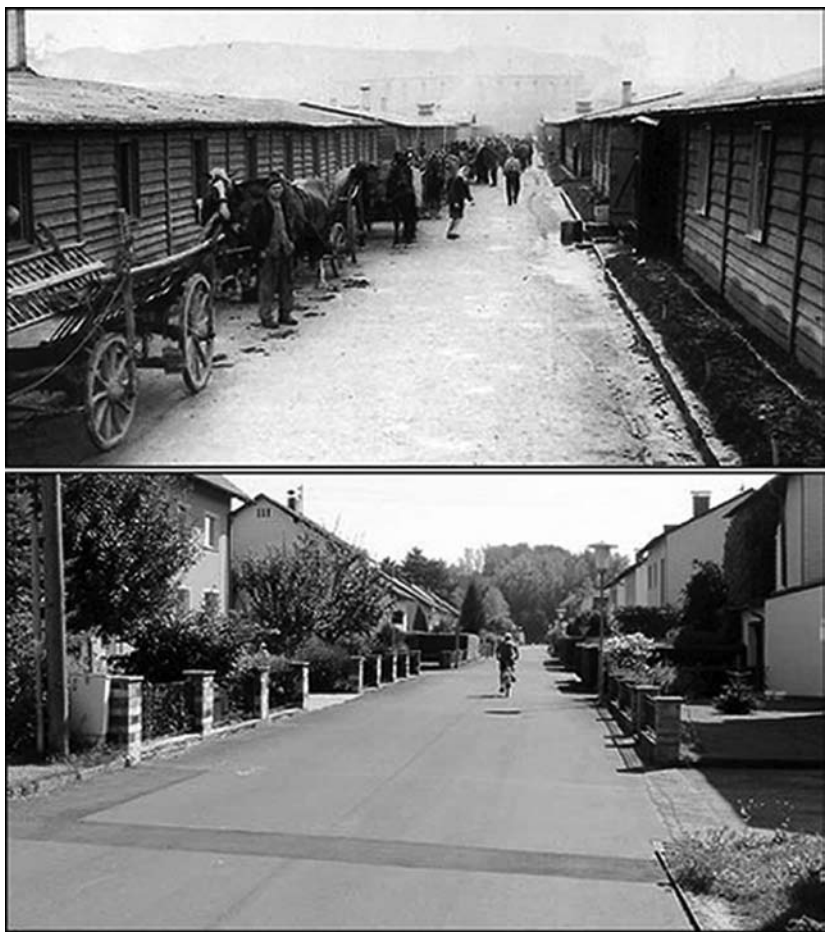
Silence on the tape. I try to understand how landing an extermination camp whorehouse in Upper Austria was such a good deal. Footsteps.

I got my first job at the camp. Back then, everyone had been poor. The working people, even factory workers, had so much more with the Party. They could take their families for picnics on boats down the Danube, something no one had even dreamed of before.

I would like to condemn the people who lived here in the 1940s, but I have to consider my own desire to fit in, the small events where I didn't speak up, the times I asked if it was really my responsibility to act.

They could also take weekend trips to Munich, train trips to Lake Garda and cruises to Madeira, all thanks to a Party-sponsored tourist agency that kept costs low.

In this village where people flirted, gardened and took boat trips down the Danube, where everyone wanted to fit in, inmates were gassed, drowned, beaten to death, bathed in cold showers until they died, and killed with experimental heart injections (420 Jewish children between the ages of four and seven in February 1945). In time, camp authorities devised mobile gas chambers. In the winter of 1944-45, more inmates arrived than the work consumed so new prisoners were left at the train station in locked railway cars. Left to freeze, they died in days.



Then and now: Untere Gartenstrasse in Gusen in May 1945 and today

Where could a villager intervene? Could one give food to prisoners? On the tape, an old man said that as a boy he tossed an apple core into the woods; when a prisoner grabbed it, the man was killed.

Walk down Gartenstrasse. To your right you see the cement walls of the quarry where prisoners dug stone for Munich and Linz buildings. Turn left and continue down the street.

My feet scurry to keep pace with the prodding of the tape's footsteps. I learn that locals remember dogs and SS on horses chasing men and children, forcing them to run from the camp to the work site.

Look at the house in front of you, number 4.

In 1985, I was twelve, I learned to play the piano there, in the former SS-kitchen barrack.

I turn the corner. Suddenly I see three women chatting on the front sidewalk. They look up and stop talking. I have to decide whether to greet or ignore them. I paste a pleasant look on my face, implying that I don't judge. Embarrassed, I continue moving, head bowed, preserving some tacit agreement I hope I have with them, although I'm not sure what it is or that they feel the same. Most of them were children during the war. For what exactly would I judge them?

I would like to condemn the people who lived here in the 1940s, but I have to consider my own desire to fit in, the small events where I didn't speak up for fear of sticking out, the times I asked if it was really my responsibility to act. I wonder how I would have stacked up in St. Georgen in 1943. It's easy to say people should have objected and fought. It's less clear when I'm the one who must act. Lynchings were normal in the United States until the 1930s and people went along to the extent that they didn't stop them.

I feel uncomfortably vulnerable when the women look at me, but as a villager in 1942 such vulnerability would have been not merely uncomfortable but terrifying. Some residents must have been horrified, but could they say so? To whom? By 1940, the Austrian handicapped had been gassed at Hartheim Castle just 40 kilometers west of Gusen. The gassings, camps and smells were already familiar as part of the daily lives of Austrians.

I took the tour hoping to gain insight about how this atrocity happened and the experience has thrown me deep into the mind of a run-of-the-mill Austrian in World War II. I can see how things creep forward, how you don't know when to say "Stop, enough!" and when you do, it's too late, you're in danger. Trying to understand his countrymen's actions, the German writer W. G. Sebald wrote that under the apparently inexorable power of the Nazi regime, "a basic stance of opposition and a lively intelligence . . . could easily turn into more or less deliberate attempts to conform."

Yet I also know Austria's history of antisemitism, that they might have been eager for a Reich that would eliminate Jews and that the economic wellbeing they so treasured came in part from looting the houses of Jews whom they knew would not return.

Look on the building on your right. In 1943 I went to get my teeth fixed. We used the camp dentist and when I walked by the front to get to the side entrance, I saw guards unload sacks from a truck and throw them against the wall. I heard screams. I found that guards were smashing Jewish children to kill them.

I look back at the three women. I'd like to stare, examine, interview them about their moral compasses. Instead I look down.

Pink chalk on the cement—kids' hopscotch. Laughing ten-year-olds whiz by on bikes. It almost seems that Mayer has orchestrated the scene, the contrast between the kids on bikes and the fact that sixty-two years ago Jewish kids were being murdered. I remember the black-and-white remoteness of war photos. I realize that this war, which I had imagined in grainy shadows, didn't happen that way at all but in color —yellow water hoses, red petunias, pink chalk, gray garbage cans.

As I avoid the bikes and traffic-abiding BMWs, I wonder if the camps inform a resident's every thought. Or are they as remote as slavery is for some Americans? Austrians I spoke with after the tour saw parallels in US history. "Look at what you did with Native Americans," one said. "You finished them off."

Mayer clearly intended the piece to be a confrontation with the townspeople, and at first they refused permission for the tour. He could have sued to gain access to the public streets, thereby generating substantial unfavorable publicity for the town; instead he requested a discussion with the town council. There the residents made the size of the tour groups the issue. Mayer countered that individuals would walk alone, no more than eight in a two hour period. The residents' real issue was their belief that this kind of

See **REMEMBER** *page 6*

REMEMBER *from page 5*

remembrance shouldn't occur, but since no one could say that publicly, the tour was allowed.

Continue. This gray concrete to your right was the camp crematorium.

I was a young boy in St. Georgen and I lived half a mile from the camp. I remember being in the house when they fired up the ovens. My grandmother paced restlessly. "The smell," she said to my mother. "I can't stand the smell. Why do they have to burn them?" "But what can we do?" my mother answered her. "They can't work anymore, we can't keep them." "Oh," my grandmother said, "I guess so. If they can't work, what can we do?"

Walk on. Follow the curve in the road.

A railroad track: trains deposited 10,000 prisoners daily at the underground factories where they manufactured the Messerschmitt Me262s, the first operational turbojet fighter. Sputnik generation American teenagers worshipped this jet, it was "cool," way ahead of its time. However, this glorious airplane was built in factories carved out of stone in thirteen months by prisoners worked to death. *Vernichtung durch Arbeit*: "Destruction through Work," used more during the Third Reich than ever before in history. Already the Reich had planned that slaves would produce 1250 jets a month through the year 1955. The raised rail bed, now a leg of the Danube's cycling path, curves through the countryside of Upper Austria, green and fresh from the past week's rain. Sixty years ago, the rain would have eased the stench of burned fat from the ovens.

I've lived here for sixty-five years. It's so peaceful here now, isn't it? Quiet. Hard to believe, almost like the past is no longer true.

In 1945, the Russians looted the Messerschmitt underground plant, then locals looted what was left, and in 1947 the Russians blew it up. In the 1950s, when the terrain was privatized, Austrian authorities planned to raze the crematoria too, but French,

"I've lived here for sixty-five years. It's so peaceful here now, isn't it? Quiet. Hard to believe, almost like the past is no longer true."

Italian and Belgian survivors purchased the ovens and built a small memorial to those less fortunate.

Mahnman is a word that means "memorial" and "warning" simultaneously. It doesn't appear in a dictionary until after the war. Austria, like Germany, has several memorials about World War II and controversy surrounds many of them. At the *Mahnman* Memorial against War and Fascism in Vienna, two white stone monoliths represent, on the one side, Jewish victims of the Nazis, on the other, all victims of war and fascism. The figures are generic and stand on a granite pedestal cut from the Mauthausen quarry. The monoliths are controversial—they don't mention perpetrators and imply that Austrians and Jews alike were victims.

Close to the base of the white stone monoliths, a minuscule black statue made of bronze and the size of a German shepherd, shows a man flattened on the cobblestones and scrubbing the pavement with a brush. This man is neither large nor generic but obviously and stereotypically Jewish, downtrodden, bearded, as clear as a Kathe Kollwitz print. The status memorializes an event that took place immediately after the Anschluss. Jews were forced to eat grass and remove anti-Nazi graffiti from the streets of Vienna with toothbrushes, and onlookers cheered; in fact, "they couldn't get enough of it." The small statue of a Jewish man scrubbing is demeaning and controversial, because who would want to be debased, then have that debasement memorialized in a statue in which you look like a dog? But the sculptor got it right. In Austria, even in a memorial, the worst job, the worst caricature, goes to the Jew. When the statue first appeared, people sat on the man's back, so the statue is now covered with barbed wire.

The one-third of all registered Gusen II victims who were Jewish, including children, lived about half as long and were given the worst jobs—residents saw naked children emptying the latrines with buckets and standing in excrement up to their waists. People knew.

Yes, my parents' generation built memorials, Mayer told me, and Austria now takes some responsibility for these crimes: "Annexation" is no longer an accurate translation of *Anschluss.* "Joined," Mayer said, "not annexed. And Gusen, formerly a 'labor camp,' was recently declared an 'extermination camp.'" But, he went on, no one has done much research on perpetrators, and conflicts still smolder about postwar history and what to do with leftover camp buildings. Why, he asked, even now, do so few people in Austria talk about Gusen?

Although Mauthausen is one of the forty-five concentration camp names chiseled in the base of Rachel Whiteread's mausoleum-like memorial in Vienna's Judenplatz, Gusen is not—it was *only* an auxiliary, although it killed at least 37,000 persons —one third of all victims who died in the forty-nine concentration camps in Austria.

The footsteps continue.

Yes, I was a guard. Hitler did a lot of good things. I don't feel so bad. You had to have been there. All in all we can say we fulfilled this difficult task of love for our people.

I stop, sit on a bench and look across the field, corn stalks turning beige in early autumn. Peaceful. I think about parallels in the United States, remember how during the Depression Americans benefited from FDR's policies. Some loved him like he was God, couldn't imagine not supporting him, no matter what. Would they have followed him had FDR gone the same direction as Hitler? Maybe not, but what would have been the difference?

Walk across the road to the end of the short road on your right.

Behind me the cornfield, before me the underground Messerschmidt factory hollowed out of sandstone cliffs to hide it from the Allied pilots. It's an abandoned air raid shelter now, a locked iron gate across the door.

On the iPod, a guard hesitatingly describes prisoners who picked up dead comrades, inmates left to die in the cold, torture. It's what I've been waiting for—an acknowledgement of the enormity of Gusen. He talks of guilt. I ask myself how he lives with this. The narrator wants to know as much as I do and presses him.

What else did you see?

But the guard won't be prodded.

You can't imagine. You had to have been there. I've taken you as far as I can.

The narrator and I crave absolution, for ourselves, for the guard, for humankind. Or maybe it's justice we want. A tilting of the scales a millimeter closer to balanced because the guard suffers. But the guard doesn't have these illusions.

There's nothing that can help me. It's as though I go through a door to an empty room where no one can join me. Then there's another door. That too, I must go through by myself. And another. And another.

The narrator asks again. *What do you think about now?*

You cannot know.

Mardith Louisell lives in San Francisco. More information about Gusen can be found at www.gusen.org.

BIBLIOTECA

News, Views, Notes, Reviews, Reports and Exhortations from Friends of Coast Community Library

PRESIDENT'S DESK

Founding Parents

Judy Hardy

The coast road was in the fog as I drove to the home of Fionna and Richard Perkins. However, the part where they live was full of afternoon sunshine, which is why we call that area of the coast the banana belt. That's exactly what attracted the Perkinses to this area in 1962 when they took the coast road home to Marin County from a weekend in Mendocino. Shortly thereafter they became owners of 10 acres with a couple of buildings near Anchor Bay.

After initially meeting at the USO in San Francisco in 1945 when Richard was a sailor, Fionna worked 13 years as a newspaperwoman in San Francisco. She was the first female copyboy on the paper, as well as the city-desk secretary and eventually a reporter. Richard worked for many years as an architect for several firms in San Francisco and finally for himself.

They moved to the North Coast in 1962. Fionna planned to write the Great American Novel and Richard hoped to become a successful painter. Fionna made many attempts, but never did write that novel. She had always dabbled at writing poetry and called it her "secret vice." In the 1980s she became serious about writing poetry and eventually became a well recognized poet, and is now poet laureate of Point Arena. And Richard realized that painting wouldn't pay the bills, so he returned to his earlier profession and has designed more than 150 houses on the coast.

For several years there had been talk of starting a library in Point Arena, and one woman even planned on working on the idea when she finished the boat she was building. In 1989 at the Point Arena Fourth of July parade, Fiona and Richard saw three people marching dressed up as books that said "Community Library." These marchers and the Perkins made up the group that started the first library housed in St. Paul's Methodist Church. They each put in seed money of about $10 each. That first library, which opened in November 1989, had two bookcases and a collection made up of donations from the community.

In 1990 the supporters began raising money for a larger library. There were auctions, book sales, bake sales and other fundraisers, and in 1991 the library moved to a small space on Main Street. With volunteer labor and materials, a "mess of a space" became a small, efficient library. It's central location brought in more users and supporters. The group bought a vacant lot with the idea of building a larger library, and Richard designed three different plans for that space. His mantra was "Just do it and the money will come." That proved to be very true, as the former Gilmore General Store became the new library, which Richard also designed. Our present library opened in 2004.

Local poetry has always been one of Fionna's interests. She has encouraged library involvement with local poetry projects, and the library co-sponsors with Gualala Arts the National Poetry Month guest poet program held in April each year. She is hoping to attract Kay Ryan, the new poet laureate of the United States, to our library, since she lives in Marin County and "adores libraries."

The Friends of Coast Community Library are fortunate to have this dedicated, intelligent, charming couple as founders and stalwart supporters.

Many thanks, Fionna and Richard.

Write to us. The RCR welcomes your letters. Send email to skrcr@stephenkessler.com. Please include your city of residence. Letters only, no attachments or submissions.

Lisa Margonelli

Before It's Too Late

Barbara L. Baer

Oil on the Brain
by Lisa Margonelli
Nan A. Talese/Doubleday (2007), 324 pages

Wrestling with the Angel of Democracy: On Being an American Citizen
by Susan Griffin
Trumpeter Books (2008), 286 pages

One can despise the screamers on Fox News, and barely tolerate the majority of TV infotainment and print for dumbing us down, but the best journalists stay at their keyboards and keep our minds from turning to mush. Superior articles and books written about the Bush catastrophes became bestsellers because they fed a hunger for truth; the best writing about the threatened environment lights fires under us. I wonder, when there's no Bush to kick around and we begin to settle into the Obama years, whether journalists and writers can keep up the intensity, whether they'll continue to connect with audiences. Personally, I'd hate to lose books like Susan Griffin's *Wrestling with the Angel of Democracy* and Lisa Margonelli's *Oil on the Brain*, which came out in the midst of dark political times.

Griffin and Margonelli talked about their writing on a panel at the 9th Annual Sonoma County Book Festival in September in Santa Rosa. Griffin isn't usually considered a journalist because her books are long and layered, more literary discussions of history, her own experience and philosophy. But *Wrestling* completes a trilogy begun with *A Chorus of Stones*, a Pulitzer Prize finalist, that investigates such public themes as our nuclear policies; sickness and health; American citizens with and without a voice. I think of her writing as among the best of journalism that expands the form.

Margonelli says that we refuse to put cause and effect together every time gas prices go up. We fail to recognize that high gas prices are the industry's way of driving us crazy and making us give up our principles. Big oil, she writes, has "figured out how to harness public anger for their own ends."

Margonelli also immersed herself deeply in petroleum politics and the environment. *Oil on the Brain* took five years to write and many trips across America, to Africa and Asia. During their hourlong discussion at the festival, I felt sparks of insight fly between the two women. They spoke with urgency about finding a cooperative ecological purpose, a "shared space" of truth in our public life that is in danger of disappearing, and about the importance of taking citizenship as seriously as if each one of us were a reporter. Despite the bad news, they said they believed in the power of truth to illumine, and were convinced Obama would win at a time when he was running behind.

Oil on the Brain begins where 99.99 percent of us make our only contact with oil, at the gas station as we tank up on fuel, pay, maybe buy a snack in the mini-mart, before driving off to use up all that petrol. Twenty-five percent of world energy consumption happens at a US pump.

"The brute force of 194 million American pedals to the metal is changing the world day by day," Margonelli writes. Her purpose is to show us where gas really comes from and what its true costs are. To this end, she takes us with her inside drilling fields, to refineries and distributors, to the arcane oil futures markets in New York City and our Strategic Petroleum Reserve. From there, she travels the globe to the sources that Chevron, Exxon, BP and independents tap into and despoil, specifically the petrostates of Venezuela, Chad and Nigeria. She spends time on an Iranian oil rig in the Persian Gulf during a particularly tense standoff with US warships. Her final stop is the future mega-consumer and polluter, China. Each chapter adds to our awareness that "The U.S. strategy for oil has been to count on the distances between producers and consumers to keep the trouble and the burdens of oil production from being our business."

A Venezuelan oil planner explained to Margonelli the petrostate curse: countries without oil grow four times as much as petrostates that live off export of oil, and petrostates are also less democratic. "The irony of destiny is large," he told her. She adds: "What is good for the state is not good for the nation. Cheap gasoline encourages pollution, waste and smuggling. Citizens celebrate their petroleum by plundering their patrimony."

The world picture is bleak both for the environment and social justice, except for a glimmer of hope for alternative-fuel-based vehicles in China. "The first country that gets half a million fuel-cell vehicles will rule the world," a Detroit executive working in China told her. Now it seems that China is moving toward both fuel cell and electric vehicles at a rate that's going to shame and perhaps bankrupt the dinosaur American auto industry.

I'd never heard the expression "external locus of control" which Margonelli uses to describe a country, a region, an ethnic group, even a family that perceives itself as having lost control and responsibility for their present and future. Such an entity, however large or small, feels helpless, blames external demons, and is easily manipulated to hate.

Margonelli says that we refuse to put cause and effect together every time gas prices go up. Time and again we fail to recognize that high gas prices are the industry's way of driving us crazy and making us give up our principles. Big oil, she writes, has "figured out how to harness public anger for their own ends. They view anxiety over gas prices as an opportunity to change environmental laws. We have no idea what the stuff is really costing us."

It's scary to learn that people don't care how much they spend on gas when they're going someplace desirable, and that many of us love being alone in our cars. For some,

See **LATE** *page 8*

LIBRARY LINES

New Arrival

Laura Schatzberg

It is not often that a library can boast an actual new being on its staff, so we are proud to announce that our branch manager and previous and future writer of this column, Terra Black, has, with the assistance of her husband, Eddie, produced a fine baby boy, Jet. He arrived on All Hallows' Eve. A hefty lad, at 9 pounds, 9 ounces, and 20 inches long, he will be a force to contend with. They came home on a stormy Monday and have settled back into a homey routine which Jet rules by being a hungry sort who must eat every two hours. They are getting some sleep so are not too wiped out.

While they are getting to know each other at home, I have been filling in at the library. I have become aware of something new in the library online catalog—the wish list. Since my days working at Gualala Books I have been a serious maker of notes on small scraps of paper that have the titles of books, music and film that have been recommended to me either personally or through a review.

I am sure I am not alone in this. All readers have stashes of crumpled notes hidden in the dark recesses of desks and file cabinets, pockets and purses. I have a reading journal that I kept up for a while and in it I stuffed many of these notes and copies of a publication called *Book Sense*. It was issued monthly or bimonthly by the American Booksellers Association which was still fighting the good fight against the big box bookstores. Many independent bookstores have closed since then, the late 90s, including Gualala Books, having succumbed more to online ordering than to the big stores. The publication is still issued under the name *Indie Next List* and has an online presence at www.indiebound.org. Our current bookstore in Gualala, the Four- eyed Frog, has agreed to send us some of the paper copies. This version seems slight compared to the former one, but I think the recommendations are probably good since they still come from independent booksellers.

Those faded papers were gone through by me at intervals. I would try to recall titles (or hope that a title would jump out at me) as I browsed library shelves, bookstores, rummage or library sales. But mostly they were in the journal and forgotten. After my most recent move I uncovered this journal and thought about resurrecting its purpose if not itself.

Then, the library Web site introduced the wish list, which can be used like a virtual reading journal. Of course it can only remind you of books already in the library system, but that can keep me in reading material until way past my dying day. To the left of the box you would click if you wanted to request an item is the wish list box. If for some reason you do not want this item now, i.e., there are too many holds on it, your request list is too long, the stack of books on your night table is overflowing and threatening to tumble down and injure your cat etc., you click the wish list button and it will be held there for six months or until you decide you are ready to request it or remove it. Be sure you are logged on with your barcode number and PIN when you make your selections so it is credited to your account. A tally is kept on the upper right side of the screen next to the login/log-out tab.

To access the library Web site go to www.mendolibrary.org.There is a homepage for Coast, which you can check out for what is new and exciting including the current continuing education classes.

As of this writing, we also have our second catalog computer up and running. For some reason this machine has been plagued with one difficulty after another. For now, we cross our fingers that it will still be working when you read this.

LATE *from page 7*

it's the preferred habitat, it's *ourselves* in a way that home seems not to be.

Margonelli's chapter on the Strategic Petroleum Reserve, established in 1973 in reaction to the Middle East gas crisis, is an eye-opener. She reports on how our reserve of oil has become "taboo" to touch. She writes that the reserve actually reveals a "deep psychological insecurity" about being held hostage to foreign oil. "The SPR was cold war thinking translated to oil: To this day conservatives from the Heritage Foundation compare the deterrent power of the SPR to a nuclear weapons stockpile." Like the Pentagon, the SPR has a mystique because it's so shrouded in secrecy.

The long lines at the pump brought about by the 1973 oil embargo and the Iranian Revolution had unexpected benefits: we used one-third less energy during that time. However when prices went down, SUVs followed. Ads showed the American family as happy as pigs in their guzzlers. Not a care in the world. Everyone wanted to splurge.

Oil on the Brain was published before $4-a-gallon gas, but even as she wrote it we were reaching the tipping point when people decide to drive less. Margonelli wonders if Americans understood the benefits of forced cutbacks or whether we'll return to our wasteful ways. "Traffic jams are symptoms of prosperity. As long as energy has been cheap, we haven't had to come up with a new paradigm," she writes.

I like Margonelli's style—witty but not sarcastic, and cleanly descriptive. She describes the East Texas Basin, rich in oil: "Over time, rivers carried silt and limestone, shale—like sedimentary lasagna across the whole area."

In the epilogue she says, "The one lesson I've learned from writing this book is that there is no such thing as cheap gas. It's time for us to demand, and to make, real changes."

Susan Griffin starts out *Wrestling with the Angel of Democracy* with a close reading of the Declaration of Independence.

Griffin's premise is that democracy for everyone begins in the cradle of family. Her father gave her respect, which was her starting point as a thinker.

Her premise is that democracy for everyone begins in the cradle of family as it did in a young America. Her own father gave her respect, which was her starting point as a thinker. "If by his manner my father was giving me self-respect and the ability to think for myself in granting me the right of free inquiry, he was also teaching me a skill that democracy requires of its citizens."

Wrestling with the Angel is not at all like *Oil on the Brain*, a book that follows the drip of our petrol addiction, but is more like a Judy Chicago Dinner Party where American guests, champions of democracy —Thomas Jefferson, the Cherokee leader Major Ridge, Ralph Waldo Emerson, John Muir, Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, Margaret Fuller, the Grimke sisters, civil rights heroes and heroines, jazz great Jelly Roll Morton and others—sit around a table and talk about democracy.

"It is not a history I write, nor even an exposition of democracy," Griffin tells us. "I am aiming at neither a definition nor a catalog of qualities. It is the inner states that generate and are generated by democracy that interest me, and the purpose lies in the journey itself too."

This palimpsest of America includes a contemporary layer as Griffin responds to Iraq, Hurricane Katrina and other Bush policy failures. The book has more dark moments than light because our history is a troubled one.

I still have my old copy of Griffin's first narrative, *Woman and Nature: The Roaring*

Susan Griffin

Inside Her (1978), which influenced me to think of male and female polarities. On the one side there was domination, on the other passivity, corresponding to exploitation and nature, broadly to men and women. Over the years and a dozen books, Griffin has remained a feminist while including men as part of the solution. "It all seems connected. The psychology at least. *Dominion* is the word that comes to mind. The denial of our dependence on nature and the belief that we can use force to get whatever we want all over the world." Men and women, shouldering responsibility, take action together that can lead to progress for everyone.

"I realized then that even when things do not change immediately, taking action eases a pain that is scarcely ever spoken of, the sorrow we all bury when we live with and tolerate any form of injustice. A shift in consciousness acts like a powerful wind rushing through the social order. Ignoring familiar boundaries, it can travel freely from one nation to another." At its best, democracy is "a form of government that rests on reciprocity, and some degree of empathy."

Griffin's writing meanders in wider swaths than Margonelli's. She loses some focus when she indulges in a kind of virtual psychotherapy, speculating broadly on what went on inside the heads of people she does not know.

The novelist Robert Stone, writing in *The New York Times Book Review*, recently praised Dexter Filkins's *The Forever War* "for not speculating on what he does not see." *Wrestling with the Angel of Democracy* is weakest when Griffin tries to imagine or recreate the private motives of historical figures.

Even with the November election behind us and the best man possible in the White House, I keep hearing Pete Seeger's line, "When will they ever learn?" I want to think that our national decision in November means we might be learning to conserve and care for nature, to stop trying to dominate nature as Griffin describes it, but I tend to be more fatalistic than optimistic. I used to read a lot of science fiction, particularly apocalyptic scenarios that were more revelations about human nature than they were spaceship sagas. I realize now that I read to inoculate myself against the worst—nuclear war and environmental collapse. Since writers could name the worst, someone will stop it from happening. But end-of-the-world-as-we-know-it scenarios are less fiction all the time. With more nuclear waste building up, Four Corners will become own Empty Quarter, the uninhabited and dangerous wastes of Saudi Arabia, about as habitable as Ukraine's Chernobyl. With only moderate conservation and sacrifice, the polar ice will melt very fast and the bears will come drifting in on the ice, as Margonelli describes them. Entropy plus global warming is a witches' brew.

I feel akin to Margonelli when she writes that nothing's certain. Will we conserve, she asks, "or say to hell with it?" Let's hope we're so surprised by things turning around with Barack Obama that we'll take hope and translate it into action.

Barbara L. Baer writes essays and fiction, and is an RCR contributing editor. The books reviewed are available through Coast Community Library.

BOOK BOX

Some Recent Arrivals at Coast Community Library

Adult Books

Ackerley, J. *My dog Tulip*
Adamson, L. *A cat in a glass house : an Alice Nestleton mystery*
Amar. S. *Bedside dream dictionary*
Armstrong, K. *Islam : a short history*
Asimov, I. *The gods themselves*
Berdoll, L. *Darcy & Elizabeth : nights and days at Pemberley : Pride and prejudice continues*
Berg, E. *The handmaid and the carpenter*
Berry, S. *The Alexandria link*
Bradbury, R. *Quicker than the eye*
Breton, M. *Women pioneers for the environment*
Callery, E. *1001 ideas for color and paint*
Carrere, E. *I am alive and you are dead*
Chopin, K. *The awakening and selected stories*
Clarkson, J. *Reed's promise*
Connelly, M. *The black ice*
Cussler, C. *The chase*
Dean, P. *Christmas with Paula Dean*
Degas, E. *Degas by himself : drawings, prints, paintings, writings*
Dubus, A. *The garden of last days*
Fischlin, D. *Eduardo Galeano : through the looking glass*
Goodman, R. *French dirt : the story of a garden in the south of France*
Gourevitch, P. *We wish to inform you that tomorrow we will be killed with our families*
Green, J. *Second chance*
Kabatznick, R. *The zen of eating : ancient answers to modern weight problems*
Kehoe, L. *In this dark house : a memoir*
Kent, K. *The heretic's daughter*
Kohl, H. *Painting Chinese : a lifelong teacher gains the wisdom of youth*
Krakauer, J. *Eiger dreams : ventures among men and mountains*
Lagasse, E. *Emeril's TV dinners*
Lansbury, A. *Angela Lansbury's positive moves : my personal plan for fitness and well-being*
Lappe, F. *Hope's edge*
Le Guin, U. *Powers*
Mancy, S. *New smart approach to kitchen design*
Margolin, J. *Foundation Center's guide to winning proposals*
McEwan, I. *On chesil beach*
McKellar, D. *Math doesn't suck : how to survive middle school math without losing your mind*
Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York, N.Y.) *Metropolitan cats*
Neihardt, J. *The Sixth Grandfather : Black Elk's teachings given to John G. Neihardt*
Nin, A. *The Diary of Anais Nin 1934-1939*
Ondaatje, M. *Divisadero*
Owings, R. *GPS mapping : make your own maps*
Paglia, C. *Sexual personae. Art and decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson*
Patterson, K. *Crucial confrontation*
Perry, L. *Field guide to buying organic*
Preston, R. *The wild trees : a story of passion and daring*
Quindlen, A. *Object lessons ; One true thing; Black and blue*
Reilly, M. *The 6 sacred stones*
Sterba, J. *Frankie's place : a love story*
Stol, T. *Willow weaving*
Summerscale, K. *The suspicions of Mr. Whicher : a shocking murder and the undoing of a great Vic*
Tammet, D. *Born on a blue day : inside the extraordinary mind of an autistic savant*
Thomas, C. *My grandfather's son : a memoir*
Trujillo, M. *Why can't we talk? : what teens would share if parents would listen*
Vieira, M. *Sin in soft focus : pre-code Hollywood*
Wecker-Frisch, J. *A is adorably animal quilts*
Williamson, M. *Enchanted love : the mystical power of intimate relationships*
Woo, D. *Eclipse poems*
Wurm, T. *Mallets on the Mendocino coast*
Yenser, S. *Blue guide*

Juvenile Books

Arthur, A. *Shell*
Bertoletti, S. *The boy who dared*
Branzei, S. *Animal grossology*
Bridgeman, R. *Robot*
Burnie, D. *Plant*
Coiley, J. *Train*
Dahl, R. *Even more revolting recipes*
Dessen, S. *Lock and Key*
DuPrau, J. *People of sparks*
Haines, L. *The complete guide to prehistoric life*
Mayer, M. *The Pied Piper of Hamelin*
Holcomb. C. *Buggin with Ruud*
Kelly, I. *It's a butterfly's life*
Kronzek, A. *The sorcerer's companion*
Landau, E. *Raccoons: Scavengers of the night*
Levine, G. *Fairest*
Lockwood, S. *Cobras*
Martin, B. *Baby bear baby bear, what do you see?*
Marzollo, J. *I spy school days*
Marzollo, J. *I spy ultimate challenge*
Masoff, J. *Oh yuck!*
Masoff, J. *Oh, yikes!*
Meyer, S. *The host*
O'Connor, J. *Fancy Nancy*
O'Connor, J. *Fancy Nancy and the posh puppy*
O'Connor, J. *Fancy Nancy bonjour butterfly*
Packard, M. *The most extreme predators*
Pallotta, J. *Snakes:long, longer, longest*
Rockwell, L. *How to eat fried worms*
Rompella, N. *Don't squash that bug*
Ross, L. *I want my dinner*
Schwartz. *Where in the wild?*
Spangler, S. *Secret science*
Stewart, L. *Mysterious Benedict Society and the perilous journey*
Wells. *Graphic classics: the time machine, the invisible man*
Willems, M. *El conejito knuffle Monkey and the white bone demon Click*

LIBRARY HOURS

MONDAY	**12 noon - 6 pm**
TUESDAY	**10am - 6 pm**
WEDNESDAY	**10am - 8 pm**
THURSDAY	**12 noon - 8 pm**
FRIDAY	**12 noon - 6 pm**
SATURDAY	**12 noon - 3 pm**

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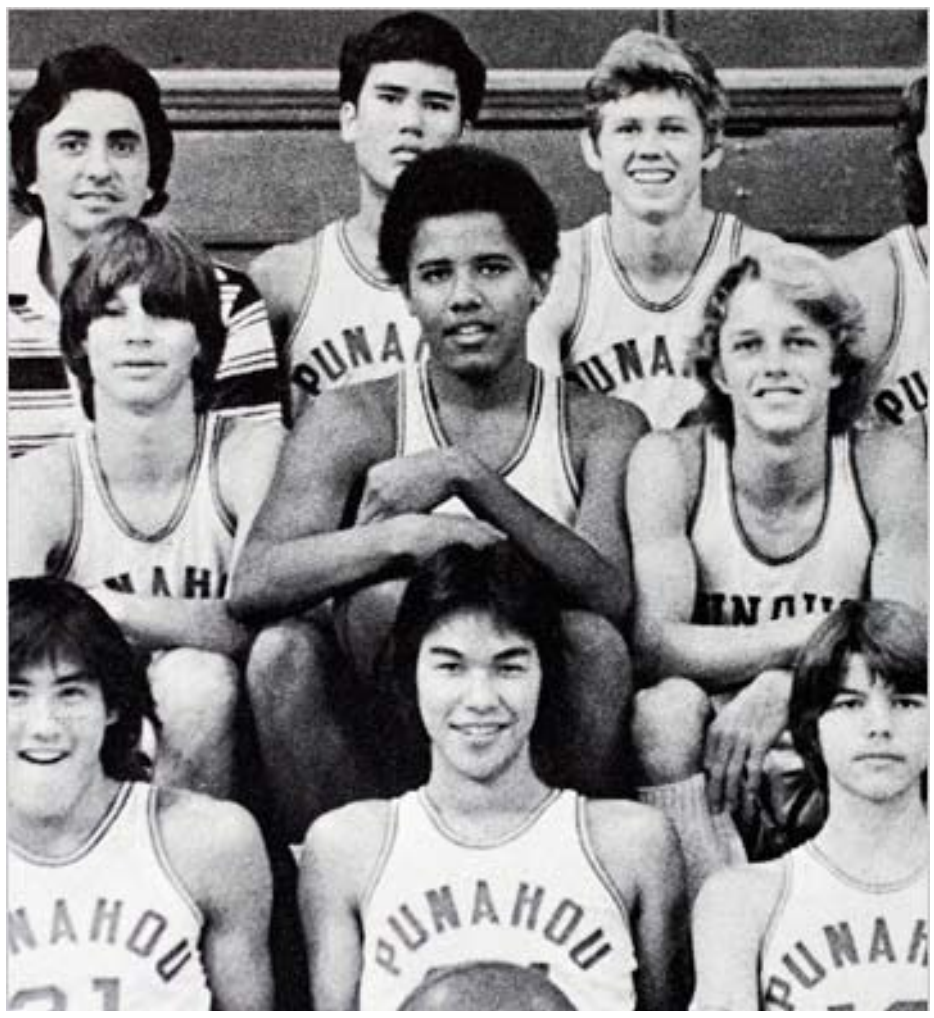
OBAMA *from page 1*

For Barack is a person for whom relationships—rather than, say, academic or career achievements—are the essence of what life is about. From his mother he learns an ability to love; from his grandparents, a view of tolerance; from Ray, an appreciation of himself as a black man; from his half-sister Auma, a sense of family. As Barack goes deeper and deeper into the core of himself, he strengthens his bonds with others. For most of the book, he has no idea he will become a public servant, but he is ultimately learning about other people's worlds. His relationship with his mother teaches him how to love and respect himself and others. His closeness with his grandparents enables him to learn that he is different from them but that differences can be the basis for mutual respect and caring. He learns from his Indonesian stepfather that a pragmatic approach to life can be consistent with caring. From Auma he comes to appreciate not only that one can feel warmed by family ties but that one can contribute to one's family's closeness through active participation. When, late in the book, Barack pays a weekslong visit to his relatives in Kenya, they are as glad to get to know him as he is to know them: his trip helps heal his family.

For *caring* is what young Barack's life is about. Caring for people, for oneself, for the world's details and colors. Obama's descriptions of his surroundings are superb in their vividness and detail. Through his eyes we see how poverty stricken and at the same time exciting a child's life in Indonesia can be. One sees the despair as well as hope inherent in life in Chicago ghettoes. One feels one is oneself visiting Kenya, with its vast plains and cleanly maintained huts. Obama's powers of description are those of a fine literary stylist. And, at key moments, they become positively poetic.

Which brings me to the book's style, its manner of capturing life. Unlike *The Audacity of Hope,* Barack Obama's other book, which is a dry, expository work on certain political ideas, *Dreams from My Father* is a work of literature. Take this sentence: "I can imagine [my grandfather] standing at the edge of the Pacific, his hair prematurely gray, his tall, lanky frame bulkier now, looking out at the horizon until he could see it curve and still smelling, deep in his nostrils, the oil rigs and corn husks and hard-bitten lives that he thought he had left far behind." This is not great prose. "Prematurely gray" and "tall, lanky frame" are clichés, to be found in many books one has read before. However, much in the sentence succeeds in giving us a physical sense of the kind of life Barack's grandfather was giving up in moving to Hawaii. The fiction that the grandfather could "see [the horizon] curve" is part of this success, as is the list of various, differing kinds of realities: "oil rigs and corn husks and hard-bitten lives." Or take this sentence, about Barack playing in a pickup basketball game: "And something else, too, something nobody talked about: a way of being together when the game was tight and the sweat broke and the best players stopped worrying about their points and the worst players got swept up in the moment and the score only mattered because that's how you sustained the trance." Here the writer piles up vivid details about an emotional experience that I've never seen described before in literature but have experienced myself: how, in playing basketball, one comes to feel close in body and spirit to the other players. As usual, the author is talking about relationships, and speaking with precision about them.



Barack Obama, high school hoopster, and teammates

The book is most eloquent when Obama writes of the loneliness which is the direct result of his heterogeneous background. Thus, in Chapter Four, having come face to face with racism, he ends by saying, "The earth shook under my feet, ready to crack open at any moment. I stopped, trying to steady myself, and knew for the first time that I was utterly alone." Aloneness: that is the ultimate nightmare for Barack. And yet, as a black man in a white country and an orphan in a world of families, aloneness is part of his existence. The key to overcoming loneliness is twofold. First, there is love, the kind that he feels for his mother and grandparents, for his stepfather, for his female and male friends, for his African relatives. But also, there is identity. Barack has a hard time identifying with others because his past is so unusual. And this is where the quest for his father comes in. He feels that the key to who he is lies in his connection to his father. So he seeks the father through comments his mother and grandparents make about him, through tales his African relations tell of him, through letters the father writes him and, most touchingly, through the month he and his father spend together when Barack is ten—the only contact the two have before the father is killed in a traffic accident several years later. In learning how strong in some ways his father is, he taps into his own strength, while he comes to realize how different he is from his father in his own greater compassion for others. In hearing how intelligent his father is, he taps into his own intelligence, while realizing how much more practical he is than his father. In absorbing how African his father is, he draws on his own Africanness, while realizing that he is, inevitably, American. His father is someone to identify with as well as someone to push off against. Isn't this the task of every man: to find his male identity by simultaneously absorbing and rejecting his father?

As Barack goes deeper into the core of himself, he strengthens his bonds with others. He has no idea he will become a public servant, but he is learning about others' worlds.

And so Obama's book is called *Dreams from My Father.* He dreams of a better life for himself and his people (Americans, blacks, men, Africans) by turning back and examining the past that is symbolized by his black, African father. By accommodating himself with his past, he comes to face the future with clear sight and a feeling of confidence. Through memory he draws together the many differing strands of his life's web so that finally they form a unitary and healthy identity. At the end of the book he gets married and finds himself ready for new ventures, which turn out, as all of us know, to be politics and statesmanship. The story of his political life is not told by this book, which ends before that life begins. But this memoir helps us see how the knowledgeable, self-confident, inspired man who is to be our next president came to be comfortable with himself. There was much turmoil in his unusual, remarkable life, but he turned it all into something useful.

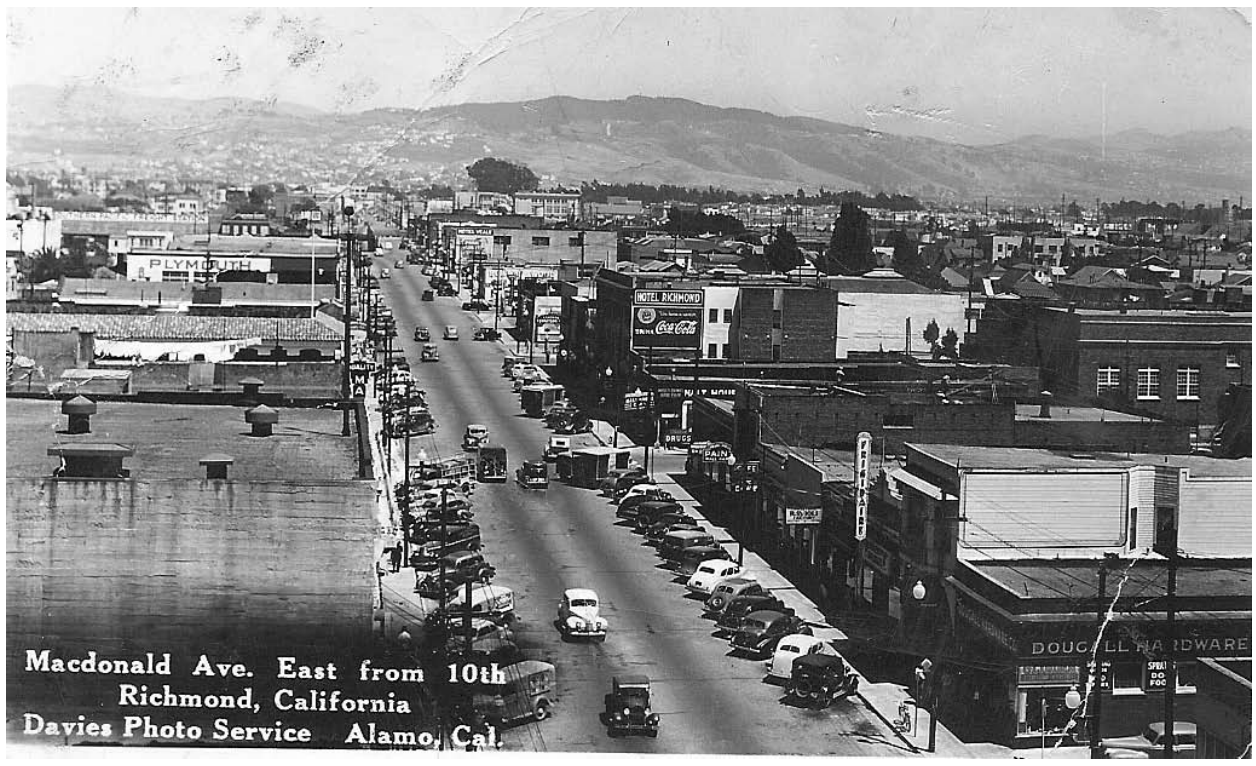
Marc Hofstadter is a poet living in Walnut Creek. His latest book is Luck *(Scarlet Tanager Books).* Dreams from My Father *is available through Coast Community Library.*

Feral Creature of the IRT

Half-unzipped
bag on the train floor
opened to pink, like the inside of an ear.
Toe shoes. A spell from prehistory
murmured into her neck,
a vow sprung from under the top
of a music box. Her back
straight, hair drawn smooth,
she closes her eyes, rides
a fluorescent key ring
through her fingers,
the astronomy book opens
on her thighs, her cosmos
crammed into that sack:
sweat, rosin, tights. Stained ribbons,
stitched to the instep, wrap the ankle,
cross once in front and tie
against the Achilles.
She drives all will onto one toe;
boxed, wound in lamb's wool
and Band-Aids, knots
her quadriceps and carves each step
into air, precise
as the press of teeth.
The rib-cage lifts above
the haunches. Her eyelids flicker, uneasy
across the pupil's black distances
and beyond:
the window, the tunnel, the track.

—Deborah S. Friedman

PEARLS *from page 1*



your children would call California their home was a thought beyond endurance.

The very land of California was unstable. In a blink, the earth could give and you'd find yourself poised on your own island, the house adrift in the Bay with the children standing on the edges waving at the firm shore floating past. Everyone called California the Promised Land and you knew Richmond was just the beginning. Maybe already then those pearls that would invade your neck and chest, slowing the rapid network of blood, gathered salt from the daily fog that enveloped the house and made you feel as if you were slowly suffocating.

Shortly after that day on the roof I asked my father to take me back to Arkansas. I would arrange for a video camera, I told him, mentally logging all the questions I'd ever had about Arkansas. There was only one story of Arkansas I could tell, which I memorized for the day my nephews would ask. My father is not a giving storyteller and the boys have yet to learn how to ask the right questions, how to nudge their grandfather to warm to the telling. It is about my father as a young boy with his brother. In the blackest of nights they hunted fireflies, catching them in jars and mashing them between their palms, smearing the paste the length of their arms and running through the hills aglow, like birds on fire. My father has not returned to Arkansas since then. The names I know, Petit Jean Mountain and Perry, the town he lived in. But these words have no images attached to them, except for those I make up.

My father has postponed the trip once already. At nearly sixty, I imagine him for the first time afraid of hearing names and seeing faces changed by time, and the inevitable mirror they will offer his own face—worn, happy, but still grieving.

This shift from the outside world changed your idea of who you were, an Arkansas woman, to who you would become, a migrant in California.

What has it been like to carry the past with him each day, to live in the exile his parents gave him, the migration for a better life? What will he see in the eyes of his playmates—Pigtail Marna Girl—her hair now gray, her voice like sand? What will he remember when he smells people, food, and trees he forgot all about? Which hiding places will he recall, which arguments and embraces, which ghosts? My father is afraid of being small again.

You died when he was nineteen in that hospital in San Francisco. It had only been twelve years since the nights he ran through the Perry hills with his brother beside him. I have never heard him talk of your death. I have rarely heard him speak of you at all. I imagine the fog had rolled in the day you passed away, covering the hospital in its path. I see my father drive quickly away, as if escaping the ocean's threat, afraid that it having already taken his mother—he, his brother, whole generations might be next. The fear and grief mixing in him like a tight knot then, a protector for the rest of his life. It is this knot I imagine him carrying in his heart back to Arkansas, scared of what might happen if it were to loosen, or even unravel there from memory pulling at both ends.

As I stood on the roof of my apartment building watching my mother stooped over the tomato plants and within the palpable silence of the hospital, I remembered what my father had said a year earlier. Did I ever tell you about your grandmother?

I wanted to protect myself from knowing, from pain, to keep memories in the past. I did not want to be like my father, staring at old buildings that had meant something to me in the deep past. I wanted to learn from his mistakes. I wanted to focus on the detail of every present gesture—my mother adjusting her glasses as she prodded the soil, a car's horn on the next street, my father finally turning to watch my mother pick at the dead stalks—I wanted the present to keep me safe.

I had tried that and it didn't work. I was like my father. I was haunted by the past.

I don't remember when exactly, but I did ask my father, finally, what happened to you.

It was during the day, he remembered. I imagined the fog had rolled in so that you were sure even God couldn't see to help you. Granddad working one of the long ten-hour shifts. It might have been the neighbor so fond of photography. He'd taken a picture of the family once, everyone dressed in Sunday best and all the kids with their shoes on. I knew that picture. It was taken just after the San Pablo house was completed and you look almost excited about your new life. Possibility hovers in your eyes, as if you think things might just work out. And perhaps that's how it was, change and possibility still friendly, until that day. Perhaps he'd come to buy one of the chickens you kept and sold on occasion to other migrants. He, too, was from Arkansas and I imagined there existed between you an understanding on the newness of this place.

"Chicken for a picture?" he might have said, lifting his camera in the air, approaching the small porch of the house where you would have stood, wiping your hands on your apron.

My father does not remember muffled cries or your voice yelling at the kids to stay outside. He does not remember blood, or its smell like a badly skinned knee. He does not remember your dress or a quilt on the floor or a torn curtain.

Had it been those minutes under a foggy sky and the heavy body of the neighbor, the cacophony of sound rising from the shipyards, that turned your eyes inward to concentrate on the flood and gasps of valves, on the machine within? And after that, a continued change of focus from the world outside to the soul between bone and skin, your only reprieve from a land so new, hostile, openly threatening, the only sense of who you were left inside the very bones. This shift from the rapid outside world of children, shipyards, and the neighbor changed your idea of who you were, an Arkansas woman, to who you would become, a migrant woman in California going through the motions of labor, children, home, husband.

Across the Bay and beyond the jut of land visible from Richmond, there is a hundred-year-old oyster farm. I went there after my father told me your story. I watched the old and young men draped in rubber aprons shucking oysters and hauling buckets of barnacled shells here and there. The ground crunched with a century of broken shells, whipped by the breezes off the ocean, the smell of salt thick in the crisp wind. I didn't buy anything, just looked around and held my hand to my forehead to dull the coastal sun. There was a teenaged boy, ripped jeans and rubber boots, who stopped to ask if I needed anything.

"What about the pearls?" I asked. "Where do they come from?"

He shrugged. Didn't know.

I thought of you then, of the shame you would feel at knowing your granddaughter—who'd been sacrificed to the Promised Land—didn't know a damn thing about it, couldn't name the plants, cook the food, or tell you any of its stories. I knew freeways and tract houses. I knew things my parents had told me about Arkansas, the migration, and growing up in the San Joaquin. Standing in the middle of the oyster farm with the sea foaming nearby, I saw in my mind all the places and people I'd ever dreamed or heard about. I imagined again those pearls collecting and growing inside you. I had all the answers now, I knew the truth, yet a chasm opened wide beneath me and there lay a vast estate of grief and sorrow, my inheritance. Feeling suddenly empty then, I turned my back to the salty wind, leaned into it, and stared homeward.

Melanie Jennings (www.mjennings.com) is a fiction writer living in Portland, Oregon.

OAKLEY HALL, 1920-2008

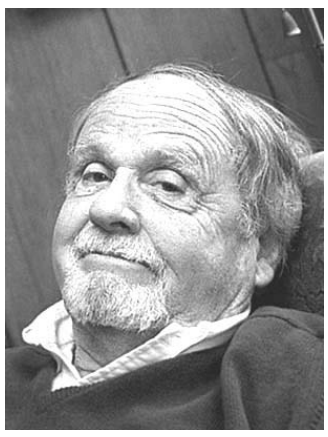
He Didn't Fade Away

Carl Brush

I have a list of people whom I want to emulate in my old age. Author/teacher Oakley Hall, who passed away in May at the age of 87, is near the top of that list. I would love to have emulated his writing career, but that's not the reason he's on the list. He's there because he refused to get what we think of as elderly.

I first met Oakley at the Squaw Valley Community of Writers a few years back. He was already past eighty then, and he'd had both knees replaced, yet took to the tennis court with much more than octogenarian ferocity. He was still active in the Squaw Valley Community of Writers, which he founded and nurtured. From one end of his life to the other he kept moving and kept creating.

During his last years he turned out a series of detective novels, all set in late-19th-century San Francisco, that are among my favorites. The inaugural volume is *Ambrose Bierce and the Ace of Spades,* and its plot involves a battle between the forces of good and the evil Southern Pacific Company. Ambrose Bierce as a columnist for the *San Francisco Examiner* and young Willie Hearst appear throughout the series, as does Bierce's protégé, young Tom Redmond, who is always struggling to find his feet in an uncertain world. And always there is a grand conspiracy to oppress behind whatever crime they attempt to solve. Someone once asked Oakley when he might publish his next in the series. "When I get pissed off enough about something," was his answer.


LIZ HAFALIA

Oakley Hall

Most people probably wouldn't put Hall on their top-ten list of 20th-century American literary figures, but you could make a pretty good argument that he belongs there somewhere. He turned out some damned good books. *Warlock* and *Downhill Racer* became hit movies. *Separations* is, to me, a seminal historical fiction work tracing the transition from the old to the new West. There's something to get pissed off about in that one, too, of course, if you care anything about what's happened to the Colorado River. His last work, *Love and War in California,* is set in a Southern California on the brink of World War II; here Oakley gives us the experience of a society tearing itself to pieces in the form of three high-school buddies whose Black, Japanese and Caucasian ancestries make it impossible for them keep their friendships intact. There's also an indictment of economic class differences and the moral corruption of show business, including a brief interlude involving Errol Flynn. I may be emphasizing the protest side of his work too much. Oakley was no Upton Sinclair. But if you want some trenchant lessons in the social and economic history of the West couched in first-class fiction, Oakley Hall's the guy to read.

In addition to his own artistic work, Oakley founded the MFA program at UC Irvine. I don't have much affection for the whole idea of MFAs, believe they have become a financial enterprise with a life of its own quite outside the world of good writing. I believe, in fact, that the industry has in some ways been harmful to good writing. However, when you look at the stellar list of authors to emerge from such a small program—Richard Ford, Michael Chabon, Alice Sebold, Glenn David Gould, et al.—Oakley deserves credit for a significant contribution to American letters on that score alone.

Finally, there is the Squaw Valley Community of Writers. It's among the most distinguished of the many summer workshops that have sprung up in recent decades. It's right up there with Breadloaf and Sewanee and distinguishes itself from the others by giving participants face time with several writers, agents and editors over the course of the week rather than with only one or two. Oakley's daughters have been running the nuts and bolts of the operation for quite a while now, but Oakley kept his hand in, participated every summer and throughout the year in all the work it takes to bankroll and arrange these conferences.

Now—truth in advertising here—when I say I "met" Oakley at Squaw Valley, I mean it in the most minimal sense. If he had recognized me on the street at all, it would have been as a face he vaguely recalled from somewhere, some time, and my name would have meant nothing to him. Yet, my peripheral contact with his energy, wit and good example enriched my life both in person and on the printed page. I'm sorry he's gone, but glad as hell he was here.

Carl Brush is a writer living in Oakland. Books by Oakley Hall can be found through Coast Community Library.