

Preliminary Remarks

This book consists of a collection of occasional pieces, most written on commission from some magazine editor, book publisher, or college speakers bureau. Whether or not each piece rises to the occasion I leave for the reader to judge. All were written for money, in the higher, finer sense of that ambiguous term—I have a wife, an ex-wife, several children, a dog, a cat, a mortgaged house, and a 1973 Ford pickup truck to support—and all were written for fun. I would like to think that some of these compositions attain the dignity of the essay. If not, they qualify at least as “literary journalism” and are eligible thereby for reproduction in book form. Whatever the case, some background information should be useful to the reader in understanding their peculiar tone and tenor.

My favorite essay in this book, “Immigration and Liberal Taboos,” is also the one with the most colorful history. I wrote it on assignment from the editors of *The New York Times* Op-Ed page. Having agreed on topic and length, I scribbled the

thing down, typed it up, and mailed it off as requested, that is, "as soon as possible." In my case the job took about six hours. I waited for the response, the cheery letter of acceptance, the handsome check. Days passed. Weeks. Finally, two months after mailing in the essay, I received a letter from one Gideon Gill at the *Times* saying that the editors liked my contribution but would I please reduce it to one-half of the previously agreed-upon length. Annoyed but still eager to see my views printed in the august editorial section of the *Times*, I retyped the piece, deleting (in effect) every other sentence, a few adjectives, and two jokes. Promptly, ASAP, I mailed it back and waited. And waited. Another month passed. I wrote a letter of inquiry. At last came a note from a different editor—I believe his name was Mayer or Meyer—stating that my essay would not be printed because of "lack of space." No further explanation was offered. Nor did the letter enclose a check covering the customary kill fee. I sent the editors a bill for my time, trouble, and expenses, and asked for the return of my essay. This letter was not answered and my original copy never returned. Four years later *The New York Times* still owes me five hundred dollars plus eighty-eight cents in postage expenses.

Rejected by the *Times*, I mailed my immigration piece to other periodicals. In quick succession it was turned down by *Harper's*, *The Atlantic*, *The New Republic*, *Rolling Stone*, *Newsweek's* "My Turn" and—automatically—by *Mother Jones*. I should have known. Giving up on the national press, I persuaded Mike Lacey, editor of *New Times*, a Phoenix weekly, to publish my loathsome little essay in his magazine. Bravely, he agreed to do it, though covering himself by giving equal space for reply to a local Chicano politico. I did my part for interracial goodwill by donating my two-hundred-dollar fee to a Mexican-American arts center in Phoenix. The politico did his by calling me a racist. The only letters objecting to my piece

came from middle-class whites, or "Anglos" as they are known in the American Southwest.

"Them there liberals," says my neighbor Dewey Foster, "they can't say the word *shit* even when their mouths is full of it." True fact, Dewey.

"Free Speech: The Cowboy and His Cow" began as notes for a speech written on an airplane flight between Tucson, Arizona, and Missoula, Montana, delivered next day under alcoholic conditions at the University of Montana before a rowdy crowd of five to six hundred students, ranchers, and instant red-necks (transplanted Easterners); it was reprinted verbatim, bawdy stories and all, in the Montana magazine *Northern Lights*. From there, much abridged but only slightly revised, this "speech" or "lecture" found its next home six months later in the pages of *Harper's* magazine. Unless I find something better to do, the piece may well conclude its career as the nucleus of a book-length essay in mythology and meat. The subject is a popular and hearty one. My treatment of it was rewarded by the usual blizzard of abuse, some seventy-five letters from outraged cattlepersons, including one Gretel Ehrlich of Shell, Wyoming (another instant redneck), who called me "arrogant, incoherent, flippant, nonsensical, nasty, and unconstructive . . ." A typical reaction: our cowgirls and beef ranchers are such *sensitive* people—touchier than lesbians, thin-skinned and high-strung as prima ballerinas.

("Nasty and unconstructive"—I love that.)

"A Writer's Credo" and "Emerson" were written as lectures, the first delivered at Harvard in May 1985 and again, somewhat expanded, at the 1986 conference of the Western Literature Association; the second as an introduction to a course in the American essay at the University of Arizona. These associations account for the pedantic tone; I was trying hard, on the three occasions, to appear sober, rational, respectable. I failed. But I tried.

"The Future of Sex" began as a routine book review for the *Bloomsbury Review* but escaped its ball and chain and took off for the territory ahead.

I am invited from time to time, as most writers are, to perform introductions to books by others: "Mr Krutch" appeared as a preface to a reissue of Krutch's *The Great Chain of Life*; "Blood Sport" as an introduction to Vance Bourjaily's charming work on bird-hunting, *The Unnatural Enemy*; "Eco-Defense" as a "forward!" to David Foreman's unique and essential book of the same title; "Wild Horses" as an introduction to the book *Wild Horses and Sacred Cows* by Richard Symanski.

What else? I wrote the long essay called "A San Francisco Journal" while employed for two weeks in the fall of 1986 as official writer-in-residence by the *San Francisco Examiner*, now one of the three or four best newspapers in the United States (the others being the *L.A. Times*, the *Chicago Sun-Times*, and of course the good gray magisterial *Moab Times-Independent* of Moab, Utah). Also, the *Examiner* pays its bills. "Theory of Anarchy" was written for *Earth First!: The Radical Environmental Journal* as a reply to criticism of anarchist folly by the historian Andrew Bard Schmookler. "Out There in the Rocks" I did as the script of a documentary for the NBC television show *Almanac*.

The remainder of the essays in this book are simple, straightforward travel pieces, no explanations necessary, written for and published in *The New York Times Magazine* ("Lake Powell by Houseboat"), *National Geographic* ("River of No Return," "Round River Rendezvous: The Rio Grande," "Forty Years as a Canyoneer," and "Big Bend"), a new periodical entitled *American Country* ("River Solitaire"), and *Architectural Digest* ("The Remington Studio").

"Arizona: How Big is Big Enough?" was a guest editorial for the *Arizona Daily Star*, Tucson.

My preliminary remarks leave one essay unaccounted for—"Sportsmen." This number, I confess, is a plagiarized paraphrase of what French critics (or Susan Sontag, who still hopes to grow up to be a Frenchman) might call *un enfant trouvé*—a lost objet d'art now found and restored in all the purity of its anonymous creation to the world of world literature, nature writing division. "Sportsmen," in this book or any to come, is my sole and final contribution to that venerable and ever-popular tradition.

Very well. If there's anyone still present whom I've failed to insult, I apologize.

Cheers!

—E. A.

Oracle, Arizona

May Day 1987