

12. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), pp. 412–53.

13. Given Radin's assertion about the pervasiveness and persistence of the trickster in world mythology, we should not be surprised to find him even here in New York City. For more about the trickster, see Paul Radin, *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology* (New York: Schocken Books, 1972).

14. Little wonder then that Peter Farb and George Armelagos write that "more words from the lexicon of eating than from any other human activity have been used to describe sexual relations and organs." See their *Consuming Passions: The Anthropology of Eating* (New York: Washington Square Books, 1983).

15. See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

16. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

18. James Boon, "Folly, Bali and Anthropology, or Satire across Cultures," in *Text, Play, and Story: The Construction and Reconstruction of Self and Society*, ed. Edward Bruner (Prospect Heights, Ill.: Waveland Press, 1988), pp. 170–71.

19. Peter Sallibrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), p. 179.

20. James Fernandez, *Persuasions and Performances: The Play of Tropes in Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), pp. 289–90.

YIVO Annual 19 (1990)

## A Brief Account of a Long Way Home

Steve Stern

I have this nightmare that when I die, in order to get through the gates of heaven, I'll first have to face a jury of the more kosher-style Jewish American writers. Isaac Singer, say, and Cynthia Ozick, Chaim Potok et al.—provided they get there before me—will examine my work, deliberate a melancholy moment, then perhaps decide that I should eat every page I've ever written. Once, in a not particularly auspicious encounter with Chaim Potok himself—I was one of a number of tenacious hangers-on that he was trying to detach himself from—I practically asked his permission to write about Jews. After all, I knew my place: I was this rustic from the Southern provinces who'd eaten more barbecued pork than Paschal Lamb, who'd listened to more yodels and Delta blues than davening over a portion of Torah. "Write what you want," said Mr. Potok, like you'd dismiss a headstrong adolescent who was determined to persist in his folly anyway. And so I have. But I'm still insecure, and in having been invited to appear in such company, I seem to be asking

The author delivered this address in accepting the 1987 Edward Lewis Wallant Award for Jewish Fiction.

your indulgence as much as expressing my gratitude. I mean, where does this super-secular, mongrelized amateur Jew get off appropriating such Old Testament staples, tricking out such consecrated themes in the borrowed shmattes of traditional Jewish culture? "Write what you know" is a frequent mantra in the university classes I presume to teach. So what do I know from a heritage of which I heard only vague echoes while I was growing up? A heritage I've gleaned mostly from fragmented translations, Borscht Belt shtick, or the works of authors sometimes as generationally removed from their subjects as myself.

Here's where I have to resist the temptation to shrug sheepishly and say, "Not much." But by citing my efforts, you oblige me to account for them; you're entitled to some kind of an explanation. All right then, here it comes. It begins on a day in my thirty-fifth year when I stumbled into the past as if down a rabbit hole. At the time I was living in my native Memphis, where I'd more or less washed up after prodigal years in England and the Arkansas Ozarks. For almost a decade I'd been trying to make a "career" for myself as a writer of fiction. I'd exhausted my small fund of fortitude, not to mention more material resources, and hamstrung my self-esteem in the process. As a consequence, I'd thrown myself on the mercy of my old hometown, which, as I liked to say, was the best place I knew for wishing you were somewhere else in. And since wishes were as good as horses when it came to the business of contriving stories, I supposed that Memphis would do until someplace else came along.

I'd been teaching English composition part-time, a shadowy and marginal activity that barely paid the bill for an ongoing addiction to make-believe. Meanwhile I'd completed a novel and a volume of stories that an agent was trying to market in New York. Then came the banner day when I received a phone call from the college where I'd been teaching. They were sorry to have to tell me that enrollment was down and my services would not be required that term. I swear that not three minutes later, as such occasions are so often diabolically orchestrated,

the phone rang again. This time it was my agent informing me that the manuscripts had come back yet again with the same lukewarm response. And frankly, she confessed, her own enthusiasm wasn't what it ought to be.

With a gift for making the most of bad news, I decided that my life had bottomed out. My return to Memphis had completed a vicious circle. A confirmed failure in the jerkwater city from which I'd started, I might have saved myself the trouble of leaving in the first place. Wasn't this where I'd come in: the disenfranchised son of a Southern Jewish family attached to the Reform congregation, which in my day meant assimilation to the point of invisibility? Any lingering traces of the exotic Old World had been purged to the extent that our synagogue had an almost ecclesiastical atmosphere. (There was confirmation instead of bar mitzvah, an organ with enormous brass pipes, a choir loft thronged with singers in deep purple gowns.) For all that, Jewishness still must have exerted a kind of holdover gravitational pull, because throughout my childhood I was disinterested proof against any homegrown peckerwood traditions that might try to stake a claim. Nigger-baiting and blood sports held no special allure. Moreover, we lived in your typically bowdlerized suburban compound, safe from the intrusive nastiness of history. It was an anchorless environment that left a kid with, if anything, a disposition toward longing. Myself, I longed for the usual—some nameless other country of infinite possibilities, like the Paris of the Three Musketeers plopped on top of Tarzan's escarpment. And in my own birthplace I developed a kind of exile's sensibility, or what I might now beg leave to call diaspora.

Just as soon as I'd come of age, I took off, as they say, without a backward glance. I never even stopped to define what lost horizons I thought I might be chasing after; it was enough just to be wandering, kicking the hometown dust off my heels. For a time I lived the life of my generation, knocking about in a lotus-eating stupor on foreign shores, practicing orthodox aquarian savagery on a dirt farm in the Ozark Mountains, dwelling

generally at an even further remove from history than the desert subdivision I'd been born into. But in the end my old habit of longing overtook me and called my bluff. I had to admit that I was better suited to interior travels, the kind that avoided the complications of maps and timetables and depended on no known ports of call. From where I sat—cross-legged on the earthen floor of an uninsulated wigwam in the wind-ravaged scrub-piney woods—the habitat of the imagination looked pretty fetching, all hearth-lit and book-appointed like a Baker Street digs.

I had cut and sometimes broken my teeth on the modern European masters, who liked to speak of everything in terms of mutually exclusive camps: art and life, God and man, language and experience, and so on. Between these camps, if I understood the masters correctly, the lines were down, the terms of reconciliation not negotiable. One of my heroes, the pixilated W. B. Yeats, framed the dilemma this way: "The intellect of man is forced to choose/Perfection of the life, or of the work." Which was all I needed to hear. Goodbye and good luck, I said to the world at large; we've had some laughs. And so in my mid-twenties I retired from experience to write stories, an occupation I understood to be a sort of applied longing.

For the next ten years I tried to make up for lost time. I became a literary anchorite, interrupting a perfect seclusion only to humor a landlord or complain to noisy neighbors. (There was actually a period when I lived in a London basement, traveled back and forth to the British Museum by subway, and never saw the sun for a year.) In the meantime, amid drifts of false starts and abandoned pages, I was writing stories, stories so finally rarefied and pure in their conception that they supported no recognizable human life. You might say that in my work I had duplicated, albeit unintentionally, the arid landscape of my formative years. But what I couldn't help noticing in the books of the writers I admired most, modern European masters notwithstanding, was this: How-

ever universal they might be in their particulars, they always made certain that specific geography figured largely. No matter how alienated their posture, they paid careful attention to the varieties of identifiable culture that gave to geography its human face. In fact, if I weren't mistaken, didn't they hold this truth in common: that enduring literature inescapably embraced a symbiosis of make-believe with a beautiful, terrible, let us not forget dangerous, great real world?

There was the Russian Jew Isaac Babel, for instance, whom I admired this side of resentment. It was the descriptions of his Odessa childhood, a bedlam of cutthroats and scholars, that really got my goat; as if all that abundance were deliberately intended to make my own homogenized origins look the more impoverished by comparison. And too, I detected a difference, beyond the obvious, between Babel's Odessa and, say, Dickens's London or Joyce's Dublin or even William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County seat. It was a difference you would have had to measure by the maverick activity of my heart or the galvanic prickling of my scalp. At first I couldn't quite put my finger on the distinction; then it struck me—how it struck me! plain as the schnoz on my face—that, had I been born a couple of generations earlier, Babel's childhood might have been mine.

So the first indication I had that my Jewish birthright mattered at all to me was an intense pang of jealousy. Born too late, I'd been cheated out of what I had coming: oppression and persecution you say, wretched poverty and nightmares amok in broad daylight I grant you, but also a vitality beyond anything I'd known. Then mysteriously, like random pieces of a missing puzzle, bits of an unrealized heritage began to turn up in my stories. Dybbuks and dreidels, the odd wonder rabbi, here a golem, there an everlasting light, now decoratively cluttered what was previously a neutral milieu. When asked where they came from by suspicious readers, I pleaded ignorance, or else I explained them the way you explain long lost relations who have arrived unan-

finding  
a fictional  
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nounced to stay indefinitely. The simple truth was of course that I had become the thief of an experience that did not belong to me. You might say I was like those intrepid men who helped refugees escape the wrath of the czar—or so I tried feebly to dignify my furtive endeavors. I was smuggling personalities out of the ghettos only to confine them, museum-like, to artificial contexts, even more claustrophobic than their original. I put caftans on the backs and pidgin Yiddish in the mouths of characters who inhabited an otherwise nameless no-man's-land.

Not that anybody was fooled. Wasn't it just that absence of authenticity, the lack of any credible (not to say saleable) voice of authority, that the editors in New York City were sniffing at? Be that as it may, on that day of the dual phone calls, I concluded that I no longer cared. My work had been issued a final verdict of illegitimacy. A literary momzer, I was to be banished accordingly from the long-standing shut-in routine that had given me shelter. There was only one honorable recourse in such circumstances: You rended your garments then crawled off like a poor man's Nebuchadnezzar to live on locusts and fast-food remains in the outer dark. Anything less was a half-hearted compromise. What I hadn't counted on, however, was the way that your hometown will meddle, interfering in your plans for self-destruction where someplace else would have left you alone. Old friends were forever showing up uninvited to spoil your fun, insisting that you be rescued from the romance of wallowing despair. Like Judy Peiser, who literally took me to task, putting me to work at her Center for Southern Folklore.

Now I was no folklore buff, the stuff having always seemed too uncooked for my tastes. But as folklore was at least a poor relation to literature, I had to grudgingly admit some token affinity. And the job itself, which kept me tethered to a typewriter all day transcribing archive tapes, had enough of a fitting penance about it to satisfy my sense of remorse. Then things took an unexpected turn. Lo and behold, I

discovered to my unspeakable embarrassment that I was beginning to have a good time. The voices on the tapes—oral history interviews with salty old musicians, promoters, legendary figures from the heyday of fabled Beale Street—turned out to be regular siren songs. Starved as I'd been for some first-hand news of the world (though I was naturally the last to know it), I was a captive audience, a *bazer* for their cockamamy tales. What they were broadcasting, that liars' bench of irrepressible survivors, were the events along a parade route of about three-quarters of a century in length; and I followed it from first to last, until Mr. Crump's disallowances and civic so-called progress brought the whole show to a paradoxical halt. Then goodbye to the fleshpots and barrel-houses, the root doctors, razor toters, diamond-toothed high rollers and sweet men, the copper-skinned dancers of the dark rapture; the excursion boat and medicine show bluesmen and ladies turned street-sweepers and fortune-tellers, turned peddlers of dreambooks and pomades. So long the river, back before the TVA levees, when it used to flood every spring. Then the bayous would back up and the basin of Beale Street itself would be transformed into a lagoon, across which its citizens would ferry themselves in lantern-hung wooden skiffs.

It was a landscape beautiful and terrible, dangerous enough to rival any I knew from books. And wouldn't you know it, there were Jews in it too. Among the black voices were the fruity accents of immigrant pawnbrokers and piece-work tailors, strange bedfellows maybe, but participating heart and soul in the life of the street. What was wrong with them all, I wondered, that they never heard of the irreconcilable differences between life and work? Never mind God and man, language and experience, and so on. Where did they get off with their humor no less, their exasperating dignity? I felt like Ebenezer Scrooge kept awake all night until I'd learned my lesson. I couldn't get enough of learning my lesson. At first I tried to keep it discreet; after all, I was still

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folk admits  
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dichotomies

folklore  
revised

in mourning for an aborted career. But the secret had outgrown my considerable capacity for feeling sorry for myself. It was clear to me that my presence at the Folklore Center was at the special behest of fate, an idea I embraced with such feverish conviction that I even convinced my boss. "All right," she said, bemused as a fairy godmother, "you're local, you're Jewish, you work cheap. How would you like to be director of the Ethnic Heritage Project?"

That's when I was given the quixotic task of resurrecting the old ghetto community of the Pinch from its current desolation along North Main Street. Relentlessly pushy, with a licentiousness vested in me by virtue of my high-toned new title, I hounded the now-aged children of the immigrants for their memories. I pooh-poohed their principled reluctance, pronounced the words "primary source" like you might recite the Sh'ma. In the end, despite their caveats, they became my accomplices in a wholesale salvaging effort. Then they sighed somewhat skeptically at my bug-eyed astonishment when it happened; when the whole riotous neighborhood rose up from the past like a lost continent out of the sea, with its population still intact. Thus I made the acquaintance of the furious ritual slaughterer, the toilet-mouthed teacher of Hebrew, the circuit-rider rabbi, the mama-and-papa bootleggers and their flame-bearded colleague Lazar—who was famous for having presented himself at his own arraignment, a hostage to piety, trussed up in the leather thongs of his tefillin. I met Mook Taubenblatt the ward heeler and secret philanthropist, No Legs Charlie Rosenbloom the hot-headed amputee gambler, Eddie Kid Katz the contender, and his mouthpiece Nutty Pinsker, the *zaftig* Widow Wolf, who taught the green-horns how to black bottom, the Galitzianer cabalists in their *shtibl* above a feed store, who from all reports prayed in mid-air. I met the delinquent Talmud Torah scholars who threw catfish in the *mikvah*, who sawed Rosie Dubrovner in half on Idle Hour Amateur Night, who climbed the chestnut tree in Market Square Park. Under the tree, on hot summer evenings

when their tenements became too infernal, the entire neighborhood would lie sleeping, while the boys hopped about in the branches above them as if they were leaping from dream to dream.

So this was it, I was safe in assuming, the other country I'd been longing for, and it came as no small surprise that its name was the past. "Strike up your klezmer orchestra, I've come home!" I declared. "Don't everybody slaughter a fatted calf at once." Because my informants, who were not so impressed with my conspicuously born-again noises (What was I, born again yesterday?), reminded me that I was a good fifty years too late. What did I think, that the Pinch was Brigadoon? OK OK, I conceded that I might have spoken out of turn. So I was confined for better or worse to this treacherous present, which was beginning to look a lot like the latter days. So nu? I wasn't the first to have been denied entry, on a slight technicality, into a promised land. But while it might be too late for me, what about my offspring, so to speak, meaning the fruits of my interrupted labors, that is, my stories? Surely they—and here I thought I'd found a loophole; never mind that the logic doesn't quite follow, that offspring go forward not backward in time and the whole stupid conceit falls apart, never mind. Surely, I insisted, my stories could occur wherever they wished. . . .

This is the part where I'm supposed to say: And that's how I finally found happiness in my own backyard, and began to write fiction that set the world on its ear. Well, not exactly. It's been more like receiving the inheritance of an estate that you'd never known you were entitled to. Your delight in the windfall is somewhat diminished by the punishing exorbitance of the taxes you're in store for; then there's the godawful cost of maintenance. Maybe you'd have been better off without the headache. (Or maybe it's the price you pay, as if in violation of an injunction the opposite of Lot's, for all those years of having failed to turn around; all those years of having refused to perceive that your suburban sleepwalker's child-

hood was perched on top of the past as precariously as if on the lid of a Pandora's Box.) Anyway, it hasn't been all schnapps and spongecake, this business of footing the upkeep for a vanished community in my stories, this stimulating its collapsed economy with only figurative resources, this believing in ghosts. It's a hands-on sort of affair, in the course of which I've been compelled toward a versatility beyond my means. I've had to wear many hats. The solitary custodian of a ghost town, I've had personally to assume a number of North Main Street's outmoded professions, such as matchmaker (*shadchan*) to the marriage of present and past. Not to mention the nuptials of life and work, & etc. And strictly as a sideline, understand, though I'd like someday to work it into a regular act, I've attempted to play the jester (*badchan*) at their weddings.

Lord knows I've tried to be conscientious, but I still reserve the right to feel guilty. Always looking to be vindicated for what continue to seem like such willfully provincial pursuits, I comb the work of recent writers. I find this in Bernard Malamud's Pictures of Fidelman, an epigraph from the poet Yeats that goes: "The intellect of man is forced to choose/ Perfection of the this, or of the that." There follows an alleged quote from Fidelman, the book's protagonist and a miserable failure who finally makes peace with himself. This is how he responds to Yeats's ultimatum: "Both." And in a not-so-recent work I find this tired old warhorse of a Hasidic parable, which has nevertheless come to serve as something of a benediction to me. With your permission, after which I'll shut up with the excuses.

When the great Chasid, Baal Shem Tov, the Master of the Good Name, had a problem, it was his custom to go to a certain part of the forest. There he would light a fire and say a certain prayer, and find wisdom. A generation later, a son of one of his disciples was in the same position. He went to that same place in the forest and lit the fire, but he could not remember the prayer.

But he asked for wisdom and it was sufficient. He found what he needed. A generation after that, his son had a problem like the others. He also went to the forest, but he could not even light the fire. "Lord of the Universe," he prayed, "I could not remember the prayer and I cannot get the fire started. But I am in the forest. That will have to be sufficient." And it was.

Now, Ol' Steve Ben Sol sits in his study in far-off God-knowswhere with his head in his hand. "Lord of the Universe," he prays, "look at us now. We have forgotten the prayer. The fire is out. We can't find our way back to the place in the forest. We can only remember that there was a fire, a prayer, a place in the forest. So Lord, maybe this will be sufficient?"