

Come Home, America

Confessions of a Place-ist

by Bill Kauffman



H. Ward Street

Greetings from New York, where a new hate crime is taking shape: It is called “place-ism,” and it will be defined in the criminal code as the belief that a particular place, be it a neighborhood, village, city, or state, is superior to any other place, and that the residents of this place have a history, customs, accent, or concerns that are different from those of other places. (Dr. Alvin Pouissant will soon recommend that place-ists be incarcerated in nuthouses; though thanks to the labors of the valorous Tipper Gore, at least our copay will be very low.)

An outbreak of virulent place-ism has greeted the senatorial campaign of Hillary Rodham Clinton, despite the conciliatory editorials of the Gannett papers and despite Mrs. Clinton’s assertion that “where I’m from is not as important as what I’m for.”

If Hillary does indeed run, she probably will lose, a victim of place-ism, martyr to atavistic home-philia. Recall that the only reason the carpetbagger Bobby Kennedy defeated New York Sen. Ken Keating in 1964 is that Angie Dickinson’s floorboard had been killed a year earlier. Mrs. Clinton, note well.

The unwelcome wagon that has been rolled out for Hillary in the real New York is not much more hostile than what George W. Bush met when he ran for Congress in West Texas in 1978. A Yale preppie who could not even pronounce the name of his district’s largest city, a necrophiliac Skull and Bonesman among Aggies, George W. said, through tears, at the press conference after his defeat, that there was a word to explain why he lost: “provincialism.”

God save provincialism — God save place-ism — God save the village green: the love of home, of neighbors, of the eccentric and the Rotarian, the eccentric Rotarian too, because provincials are all that stand between us and the people in grey: George W. Bush and Hillary Clinton, Tony Blair and Bill Gates. The provincials are the party of peace and liberty and friendship: of those qualities never found in the *Federal Register* or a Heritage Foundation backgrounder.

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Unlike the alleged cokehead who seeks to be the next miserable president from Texas, I feel a twinge when I wax too hypocritical. In my own young and irresponsible youth, I cashed a government paycheck for a couple of years as a legislative assistant to a liberal U.S. senator before taking to heart the advice of Henry Thoreau: “If the tax-gatherer, or any other public officer, asks me, as one has done, ‘but what shall I do?’ my answer is, ‘if you really wish to do anything, resign your office.’ When the subject has refused allegiance, and the officer has resigned his office, then the revolution is accomplished.”

I know, I know: Tell it to Janet Reno.

In any event, I am in the position of Drew Barrymore advising teenage girls to save themselves for marriage. I will not engage in cheap Washington-bashing, having been so admonished by David Broder and Bill Bennett—or, should I say, by the mediocre but very underpaid factotum who actually writes the words attributed to the Republican Party’s leading intellectual. I do not detest what is in fact a beautiful city: Washington, the Washington of Jefferson and Benton, of La Follette and Taft, of Henry Adams and John Hay, of Clark Clifford and Gary Bauer. Gary Bauer: If this is the face of family values, give me William S. Burroughs any day. One of my favorite Bauer lines was when he advised a conference of budding conservative movement hangers-on: “As for life inside the Beltway, don’t come here. The values are warped. If I could find a way to make a living, I’d be back in the heartland in a minute.”

I once wrote a novel, *Every Man a King*, whose tenth anniversary came and went this past May with nary a *festschrift*. The book was about a young smart-aleck who works for a senator in D.C.; he sins, at least as sin is defined in the Potomac catechism, and is cast out, homeward, to live among the people he has celebrated with a mawkish insincerity seldom seen this side of the Nashville Network.

Not to spoil the ending for the handful of folks who have never devoured this classic—and you call yourselves well-read?—but the revenant returns for good. Because I, too, had taken the downbound train to D.C. and back, folks seemed to think the novel was autobiographical. It was not, but I did learn a valu-

able lesson: Never make your protagonist sexually maladroit. You will get nothing but pitying stares from friends and tears of mortification from your mother.

Like my doughtily dysfunctional hero, I did go home, for good. And for better. I have written about this at length in *Chronicles* and elsewhere, so to nip your “there-he-goes-again” in the bud, I will say only that healthy, life-giving parochialism exists in even the most dispirited and quotidian places, that we—or at least I—can only ever really love the familiar, and that rage and anger require the anchorage of love lest they become exhausting and pointless hatred.

Toiling for a maverick liberal drove me not to drink but to libertarianism, yet the motive force of ideology has long since faded for me, the more deeply embedded I become in my native place. I would rather write a booklet on Batavia’s greatest architect and excavate the life of a lady painter, my great-grandmother’s dear friend, and write our county’s bicentennial play or just drive around picking up donated ratty furniture for the historical society’s yard sale than rail against the state. I would rather practice an anarchy based on love than preach a sterile liberty. All right—that’s enough of *that*, Miss Barrymore.

I think the disjunction between Washington conservatives and real American places is summed up in the first 15 seconds of the Rush Limbaugh show. Those who endure Rush know his theme song, which is always cut short before it gets interesting, as with Rush’s show itself. The music is from the Pretenders’ song “Back to Ohio,” in which Chrissie Hynde describes a return to her hometown of Akron, Ohio, where “all my favorite places” have been urban-renewalized into memory. “I went back to Ohio / but my city was gone / There was no train station / there was no downtown . . .” —a bitter and sardonic observation on how the destruction of landmarks erodes a sense of place, of loyalty. But this is not something that the happy-talk right of the Fortune 500 wishes to hear.

Well, Chrissie did not move back to Ohio. Like Gary Bauer, she probably would not have made nearly as much money sitting around in the Firestone parking lot, in the words of a sister Akronite. She might not have been *famous*, and that is what really counts, isn’t it?

It is too easy for an annoying note of self-satisfaction to creep into the narratives of those who do return home. On the other hand, we as observers are sometimes made uncomfortable by what seems a suicidal adherence to principle.

Elmer Kelton, the dean of Western writers, wrote a terrific novel some years back called *The Time It Never Rained*, about a West Texas rancher named Charlie Flagg who stands alone in his county in refusing government aid during a seemingly endless drought. He is wiped out by his stubbornness, but he retains his soul, at least.

Flagg’s example is a constant reproach to his neighbors, self-styled rugged individualists who, in taking Washington’s dollar, have essentially turned over the management of their ranches to the federal government. So he is resented in the way that men oftentimes garrote saints. Or the way the Progress Gang spews venom at Wendell Berry: His critics would like nothing better than to see Berry chained to a Barcalounger and force-fed microwave burritos and Starbucks coffee while he watches Adam Sandler movies and his grandkids frolic about the den in Hard Rock Cafe T-shirts playing Pokémon. In his integration of work, family, home, and local patriotism, Berry is the old American dream made flesh, and his example is a rebuke to every

typewriter agrarian, high-rise localist, and Georgetown bar-hopping secessionist. Or as the Jack Nicholson character says to Wyatt and Billy in *Easy Rider*, “They gonna talk to you and talk to you about individual freedom, but they see a free individual, it’s gonna scare ’em.”

Like Wendell Berry scares ’em. Or Carolyn Chute. Edward Abbey. Gore Vidal. Pat Buchanan. Or the homeschooling family that refuses to raise its children to be querulous consumers or good Microsoft employees.

In *The Time It Never Rained*, an exasperated Charlie Flagg explains, “I’m not sayin’ any man is wrong because he doesn’t pattern himself after me; what anybody else wants to do is *his* business, not mine. I just want to live by my own lights and be left the hell alone.”

If only it were possible. But Charlie Flagg is not left alone, any more than Edward Abbey’s brave cowboy was left alone; a splinter sect of the Seventh-Day Adventist church down in Flagg’s Texas was not even left alone. So do we have any choice but to march on Washington, to write our congressmen, to concede that, like it or not, Washington matters? Place-ists do.

There is a wall out there, located somewhere between Ronald Reagan airport and the FDR Memorial, on which is inscribed the names of 50,000-plus farmboys and working-class whites and Southern and city blacks who were not left the hell alone; who were offered up as a sacrifice by the “greatest generation,” as Tom Brokaw’s ghostwriter termed what in fact was, politically, the most conformist generation in American history, the generation that destroyed the Old Republic, the generation of urban renewal and IBM and the suburban high school and bringing the Great Society to Southeast Asia and electing Franklin D. Roosevelt four times and regarding long hair and rock music and pot-smoking as sinful but sending your boys halfway around the globe to die for Robert McNamara as a supreme act of patriotism. (I should say that I exempt my family and friends and the family and friends of all readers from these strictures.)

My dad has a book put out by the Gold Star Mothers of Genesee County containing pictures and brief biographies of the Genesee boys who died in World War II. I look at their faces and think of them dying alone halfway around the globe, their guts spilled into some foreign soil or depressingly vast ocean, and I wonder about the lives they would have lived had the American side of the great debate of 1940-41 prevailed. Nunzio working at Doehler-Jarvis, Judd taking his father’s place at the bar. Would we have been spared the bad habits and destructive patterns of behavior picked up in our subsequent years of empire? In my hometown, the greatest generation—the one we had, not the one we might have had—came home and in 1946 knocked down all the trees to widen Main Street, then knocked down Main Street itself because “experts” with college degrees told them to, then they sent their children out to beg, sit, and roll over to earn those same degrees, whereupon they took jobs far away from dad, so distant that in millions of sad cases the job of “grandparent” has been stripped of any function beyond shipping videogames to the little brats come Christmas. (Or winter holidays, should I say?) But at least the grandkids attend good schools with lots of computers and high average SATs. Hit ’em high, hit ’em low, go-ooo, Columbine!

This whole notion of moving somewhere to take a job is one of the sharpest and cleanest of class dividers. Virtually everyone who lives and works in Washington or on Wall Street has migrated for money or power, “the vain low strife that makes men

mad." It is almost beyond their ken, past the outermost limits of their understanding, why someone would *not* move when "opportunity" rears its meretricious head.

Consider, for instance, the favorite recent movie of the conservative culture-vulture set, *October Sky*. This is a moving, poignant, funny, wonderfully acted story of a Coalwood, West Virginia, boy whose dream, which we are encouraged to share—in fact, which we are assumed to share, in the same way that it is assumed that if a character has some horrible disease we want her to get better—is to leave this "bunch of hillbillies" and become a federal employee. Truculent old daddy, hacking away with the coal cough, says, "Boy, you'd better take an interest in your own damn town" instead of Werner von Braun, but in the end cranky dad loves his son Homer—an inappropriate name—and is duly proud when the boy rides his rockets out of Coalwood and to a career with NASA.

This is a sweet movie with a poisonous core. I can imagine George W. Bush and Steven Spielberg and Sumner Redstone dabbing their eyes, blinking back the tears as they watch it, because the men who run the major institutions in this country—the government, the Fortune 500, Hollywood—have, almost to a man, abandoned the Coalwoods of their childhood to float their lives away among a placeless elite, purged of such debilitatingly prole-ish and provincial biases as place-ism.

They are welcome to their world. The problem is, they will not let the rest of us be. For almost 60 years, the placeless have waged war on the rooted, stealing their children, devastating their neighborhoods, wiping out every local peculiarity and idiosyncrasy they could find. This has been done through the never-ending wars, hot and cold, that the American Empire wages against any villain or stumblebum or ebon renegade unlucky enough to amble into its crosshairs. The onslaught has included busing, consolidation of schools, the Interstate Highway System, the subsidizing of colleges and universities, public housing construction that displaces the urban poor and shatters working-class neighborhoods . . . in other words, 60 years of vital center domestic and foreign policy.

What we have is class war—though this war has never been acknowledged because the casualties are places and attachments and sentiments; nothings, really; everything, in fact—waged by the mobile against the immobile, by the cosmopolitan against the rooted, and the winners are the professionals, people so depraved that they would actually *move* to a different place for mere money. How bizarre.

The sanest, most congenial response to this war would be that of the antebellum Connecticut poet James Gates Percival:

I leave the world of noise and show;
to wander by my native brook
I ask, in life's unruffled flow,
no treasure but my friend and book.

Alas, as an occasional arrestee once put it, they just won't let you be. And yet we ought to be cautious before signing on to one of the Washington teams in this war, because both sides are pushing toward the same end zone.

For instance: Richard Cohen (Ellen Goodman with a little less testosterone) recently wrote, "Community, at least our traditional sense of it, is being shattered." What he meant by this was: "Once, American families sat before a single TV set and watched the same program. Now everyone goes to his or her

own room and watches what he or she pleases. Once America spent its mornings talking about the TV shows from the night before. We were one audience. Not anymore."

That is Richard Cohen's idea of old-fashioned community: sitting around a TV set watching Efrem Zimbalist, Jr., impersonate a human being.

And so official Washington is riven by the great debate of the age: On one side, the dynamos of globalism—the WTO and Bill Clinton and the progressive Republicans who want a computer at every school desk—the party of the 21st century. And on the other side, playing Calhoun to their Webster, the traditionalists: Richard Cohen, Hillary Clinton, Senator Lieberman—the party of V-chips and an FBI-monitored Internet and the whole family sitting around the TV watching Rosie O'Donnell. This is the reactionary side in Washington, and their grand idea now has a name: "civil society," a virtual key to the 501(c)3 bank, whereby rootless professors who could not name three neighbors if their lives depended on it sit around and pontificate about "intermediate institutions" and, if they are really unlucky, listen to monologues by communitarian guru Amitai Etzioni, who might benefit from that intermediate institution known as the English-as-a-second-language class.

In a choice as agonizing as that facing the hungry traveler who must choose between a Whopper and a Quarter-Pounder, the civil-society Democrats are splitting between Albert Gore and Bill Bradley. Al Gore, son of Armand Hammer's errand boy, a lad whose boyhood home in the Fairfax Hotel was paid for by Hammer, a Soviet agent—a stunner even to an anti-Cold War peacenik like me. Gore's father's only legislative accomplishment was his sponsorship of the Interstate Highway System, which created the sprawl that so vexes his charismatic son's speechwriters.

And then Bill Bradley, who was described to me by the fellow who tutored him when he joined the Senate Finance Committee as "the dumbest Rhodes Scholar in history." Bradley's campaign chairman recently told the *New York Times* that his man could win Southern votes because "even in the South, you drive down the street and you see the same Blockbusters, the same McDonald's. Now, Wal-Marts are in the Northeast." The bane of my town is the hope of his campaign.

Bradley calls himself "a citizen of the world," which is to say he is a citizen of no place in particular. Among his sugar daddies is the CEO of Starbucks. Making us one world, one cup of sludge at a time. I suppose President Bradley's first act will be to send Lon Horiuchi and the FBI to Portland, Maine, where some loathsome vandals keep breaking the windows of the Portland Starbucks. The old sabby cat that the Wobblies serenaded is alive and well: French farmers are smashing the windows of their McDonald's, evidently unpropitiated by the appearance of french fries on the menu. You deserve a brick today . . .

One of the expressions I hate most is "get a life." This is generally used by people whose lives are defined for them by the corporate media. They sneer "get a life" to those whose passions—stamp collecting, squash growing, writing poetry about baseball—fall outside the bounds of the world as demarcated by Rupert Murdoch. For those Gap-wearers ever ready to advise those incorrigible losers who have never seen *Dawson's Creek* to "get a life," this past summer was, to borrow the lapidary phrase one minicon applied to the Bush administration, a hell of a ride. The summer of '99: We all cried when John-John died. Our prince stolen from us, all too soon. We are left to wonder what *George* magazine might have become.

But our so-called lives knew joy as well. Who can ever forget the U.S. women's soccer team? Brianna and Brandi and Mia: When that winning goal was scored, we cried, too, at least those of us who were awake.

The soccer ball: that leathery symbol of British imperialism, taken up by collaborators in every country that had the misfortune to find itself under the British bootheel. The Shah of Iran used it to Westernize his subjects; Nike is spending \$50 million on Project 2010, its pestilential campaign to infect American children with this foreign virus. Among my heroes are the Zulus who, in the 19th century, rioted and ripped soccer balls to shreds after watching British sailors play the infernal game. (The recent ballyhooed "A Call to Civil Society," signed by such usual suspects as Francis Fukuyama, Cornel West, James Q. Wilson, and the unavoidable Senator Lieberman, gushes that "youth soccer has acquired a profound public significance." As Jim Garrison said, it's all starting to come together.)

Before World War II, when book-length poems were actually published without NEA subvention and bought by people who intended to read them and often did, Josephine Young Case, the daughter of electro-mogul Owen D. Young of General Electric, wrote *At Midnight on the 31st of March*, a fantasy in which a small Upstate New York town awakes to find that it has been cut off from the rest of the world—if, indeed, the rest of the world even exists anymore. After an initial period of bewilderment, Mrs. Case's townfolk of Saugersville survive by dint of cooperative effort, native ingenuity, and the use of those resources indigenous to the area. The older ones begin to remember:

When Saugersville set fashions for itself,
I mean to say we had our own ways here
That weren't the ways of Centerfield or Steck,
Much less the ways of any city place
Where most of us had never been at all.

After a year of isolation, "they knew each other as they never had"; they come to realize:

The life is harder than it used to be,
But troubles are more real. We're thankful that
What's bad, or good, is right beneath your hand,
You know just where you're at, and what to do.
We're all of us more real, and more alive,
And Saugersville is real, more like a town,
And not just a gas-pump on a concrete road.

All of us more real: *They* have gotten a life.

Imagine waking up in a world with no Michael Eisner, no Rupert Murdoch, no Bill and Hillary Clinton, no George W. Bush, no Robin Williams, no Microsoft or Gannett or Wal-Mart . . . you may say that I'm a dreamer, but I'm not the only one.

"Locality gives art," said Robert Frost, and any step, any act we take to bring back locality, to resuscitate the parochial, to invigorate the provincialism that thwarted the cocaine dreams of young George Bush, is thus an act of hope and love and beauty. Thomas Craven wrote in the 1930's that "the only outlet, the sole means of escape, for the American painter, lies in the discovery of the local essence," by which he did not mean a PBS hootenanny but anything from Grant Wood to Zora Neale

Hurston to Donald Davidson to the Coen brothers' *Fargo*, one of the only movies I have ever seen that admits, even celebrates, the fact that people who live outside television anchor sets often speak in peculiar dialects.

One painting of the Tonawanda Creek is better than five million pieces of computerized mail trying to steal the widow's mite. The earringed community college teacher whose labors have gotten the children's stories of our native son John Gardner into fourth-grade classrooms across the county is doing what a thousand Falls Church minarchists burrowed in the Department of Education can never do. The elderly spinster who writes a history of her Triangle Club is satisfied in a way that Elizabeth Dole never can be, no matter how many pills her husband pops. The father who might drink a bit too much beer and curse a blue streak but who walks his son through town, pointing out where the Tracys lived, where they used to play football in the autumn twilight, where Jack the Indian used to hunker down for the night to sleep it off, is living "family values" in a way that Gary Bauer cannot even dream of, even if he says "gee-whillikers" and drinks grape Nehi.

Several years ago, I had the displeasure of evaluating, for a university press, a book of essays by professors and staff at St. Lawrence University about the North Country of New York, the American arctic, Frederick Exley land. One professor's wife, a lady from downstate who had obviously moved for money, complained that her efforts to make conversation with the local women always came to naught, for they insisted on talking about the weather, remarking on hot spells and cold stretches, and never about "the front page of the *New York Times*." Indeed, she harbored dark suspicions that these women were wholly unfamiliar with the prose stylings of A.M. Rosenthal.

Like George W. Bush, she probably uses "provincial" as an epithet. To her, Washington matters. But hers is the America of *Time* magazine; there also exists a time-less America, an America willing to fight for its precious insularity against the citizens of the world who believe they own our country.

"America, turn in and find yourself," urged the Iowa poet Paul Engle in those mid-century years when such advice was deemed treasonous. Iowa existed not for its own sake but as a colony which would send corn and boys to the empire. And if one of those boys had the pluck to ask "why?" as Bill Williams of Atlantic, Iowa, did, he was anathematized by Cold War liberals and ridiculed by Washington/New York conservatives, the same pallid creatures who made fun of George McGovern's beautiful campaign slogan, "Come home, America." But then, whatever homes they once had had long since been abandoned.

It is not that Washington and New York City and Hollywood are out of touch or unresponsive—rather, they are our enemies. Resistance is futile, or so they would have us believe. And besides, you have a choice: Coke or Pepsi. Bush or Gore. Disney or Dreamworks. Wal-Mart or K-Mart. CBS or CNN. Gannett or Knight-Ridder. George Stephanopolous or Bill Kristol. C'mon, stop complaining. Get a life.

When the subject has refused allegiance, and the officer has resigned his office, then the revolution is accomplished. Buy from your neighbor. Grow your own. Turn off the TV. Vote for Pat—or Harry or Joe or the Greens or the lady next door. Read your ancestors. Put flowers by their graves. Paint your block. Avenge what is lost; laugh.

Commit place-ism. With joy and impunity.

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AMERIKA
(Beograd, 1999)
by Matija Beckovic

Some boys my age in Kolashin
Back in 1950-something
Set off on horses
to escape to America.

The posse caught them at the edge of town
In back of the first privies and pigsties
But if they had reached the bend in the road and the
thickets
They could have easily made it,
Fallen plump onto the bosom of America.
Only the vigilant forces of law and order
Prevented that catastrophe.

They got up with the birds
and set off at the crack of dawn
To make it to America in time
But the sun was hardly up
When they were marched through town,
Along with the stolen horses,
Dressed in trousers of many colors and checkered shirts
with a sign hung round the neck:
"I wanted to escape to America."

It was high noon when the decree was read
Expelling them from all the schools in the country
Short shrift that very day
At first dusk, when they had hoped
To be spread out at ease
Like a drop of water on America's palm,
They were hauled off in irons
cuffed tight to the Islands of Hell.

Escape across the border
Was the only way of going abroad
And if it were not for the watch-dog on the wire
Running up and down the length of the state
The whole nation would have long ago escaped.

Those who had got out from under the knife
Retreated across the border
They were already in America
Together with our King
Eagerly waiting for us to keep them company.

But if they did not let us go to America
They could not forbid America
To come to us
If not by the St. Elijah's Feast in August
Then by Christmas
If not by Christmas
Certainly by Easter
In prison darkness the light is kindled from outside.

And when at last the Berlin Wall came down
And all the prisons made of that same stone
My boyhood friends they called the Yanks came out into
the sunshine
And like the ant that grows wings in old age
With hats off beside the transistor radio
They listened to the Voice of America
Expecting them to report the name of that nation
The greatest little nation in the world
Or so they thought
The Hero of the word that is given and kept
Felled for liberty and America
Which liberty gave birth to
And treason killed
All of which America knew best
And wrote down in the book of truth
Which is kept safe in the sacred ark
In the heart of America
Which it will open now and start to read . . .

But the Voice of America was reporting from another
world
Constantly repeating its new slogan
WE ARE NOT INTERESTED IN THE PAST
And threatening to toast the Serbs
No later than Christmas
Which meant certainly by Easter
And as they from time to time repeated
WE ARE NOT INTERESTED IN THE PAST
Speaking the words
As if they were falling leaf for leaf
And becoming themselves part of the past
And with them America receded into the past
Knocked down with the Berlin Wall
Vanished with Communism.