

***BURNER OF EDEN***  
**A Last Letter to the War**  
**By Michael Ventura**  
**March 15, 1991**

***Santa Barbara***

Since we defend the Constitution every time we speak freely, let me be honest: I am sick of yellow ribbons. Sick of billboards with big yellow bows on Highway 101. Sick of every shop, restaurant and home that needed a war to show the flag. Sick of decals. Isn't there something perverse about displaying support for the war on the very vehicles that have, indirectly, caused the war? (We support our troops, but we're willing to let them die for our right to fill a gas tank inexpensively.) I curdle inside every time George Bush asks me to pray. If he had the grace, as Lincoln did, to pray for *everyone* in the war, if he was enough of a Christian to do as Jesus had taught and pray for his enemies – I'd admire him and join his prayer. Instead he makes a conscript of God. I find this so profoundly blasphemous I don't know what to say, but I know there is a price to be paid for everything, and I wonder what will be the price of this.

The pacific glints on the drive to Santa Barbara. I visit my kid there. We play Risk, a game of global war. As it happens, our strategies center on the Middle East. My forces take it. Then his. Mine counterattack. He wins. We share the irony of our little game, but we don't joke about the war. Later I read that war games are selling like crazy all across the country, and I have the image of all these people sitting around all these boards with the intense concentration of play, moving their armies this way and that toward victory and defeat, bloodless, brainless, little nodes of madness. And they look amazingly like the charts that General Schwarzkopf and his briefers use to teach us about their war. We who have played such games know that the Generals are having fun.

Patton had the depth to admit that he loved war. Schwarzkopf pretends to hate it, but no one becomes so skilled at, or devotes such a long and passionate life to, something he hates. I don't know how many other lies Schwarzkopf is telling us, and it's conceivable that he's not telling many – but we know he's telling one, and it saps any trust I might otherwise have in the man. Clearly he relishes what he's doing, his entire

life has been directed toward these weeks. We are watching a man in the process of fulfilling his deepest wish: to command a great army in an important war. The sense of profound fulfillment is the source of the presence he exudes – for no one who has seen him in these weeks will forget him, or, no matter how much one disagrees, will fail to be impressed. And yet there is this one evasion, this one fundamental corruption, which makes him more politician than warrior: he cannot, will not, now or ever, admit how thankful he is for this war, how profound and total is his fun.

Driving back to L.A., there seem to be even more flags and ribbons. Would a people who really believed in the rightness of their cause need such shrill display? I wonder if the very act of tying the ribbon and raising the flag is a way to silence the gnawing private doubt in ourselves, and the doubt we fear in others. Norman Schwarzkopf will be president one day, I say to myself. He projects less doubt than any man who has ever been on television.

### ***The Mojave Desert***

We near the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, Eden is the memory of a memory. We remember a passage by the writers of the Old Testament, who in turn remembered an already-old tale that they doctored to sell their new religion. Yet can't you almost see, and don't you half believe, the image of a garden beyond description that was once your birthright?

Driving through the Mojave on Interstate 10, there is so little to impede one's imagination that it's easy to see Eden. Some contend that Eden was in Africa, others that it was a lush expanse of Iraq, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. The theory or fancy that Eden was in the Persian Gulf casts an odd meaning on the region's oil. If oil is composed of ancient life, if it's a coagulation of lush vegetation and extinct animals, then all that Arab oil may be the residue of Eden.

So in my '69 Chevy, with all its body work finally done, its paint shining, its buffed wax so strangely skinlike to the touch, it's V-8 hardly audible – when I hit the gas I'm a burner of Eden, a true-blue fool of an American. In my Chevy I know that I'm a sinner, but I love my sin, love hitting the road in this car, and to the extent that I won't

give up my love for some more-ecological vehicle, I, too, am *for* the Gulf War – no matter what I say or do. My thoughts don't want their oil, but my behavior does.

Kierkegaard once said that thought without paradox is as foolish as love without passion. And so I'm propelled forward by the burning of Eden. This war makes me sick at heart, but I have no nostalgia for the Garden to which both the left and the right want to return. Let Iraq be spared, but let the Garden burn, and with it the image of perfection in our hearts – our naïve desire to love without contradiction, refusing to see how every day opposites evoke each other before our eyes, demanding purity like that petulant god Yahweh who drove our mythological ancestors out of the Garden in guilt. Would that Adam had turned around and torched the place, ridding us of the thought that anything can be all one way or another.

### ***Kingman, Arizona***

During the Second World War a woman I know was, as an infant, given over by her mother to be used in satanic-like rituals out in the desert not far from this town. I mention it only to say that things were never *not* strange, here or anywhere, ever.

### ***The Arizona-New Mexico State Line***

It's been dark for hours. I've been playing this song over and over, thinking not about America and Iraq but about love.

Tears of rage, tears of grief,

Why do I always feel like a thief?

And suddenly, a quick white thing runs into my lights and I feel it break beneath the wheels. Its bones make a clanging sound when struck by my oil pan. It's shocking how strong a small animal really is; this is a 3,000-pound car, but I feel the shudder all the way through.

Far away in another desert, near where God is said to live, there are bodies wracked with the same appalled surprise of sudden death, but we will never see them.

## *Gallup, New Mexico*

A motel room in the wee hours. CNN. Will we have a land war today? Has it already begun? Will Gorbachev's initiative save something or someone?

The TV screen is so clean it should come wrapped with a sanitary band like the toilet. All these clean images, hardy generals, erudite experts, charts, graphs, soldiers waving, pretty flashes of cannon-fire from a distance. But war looks like the creature I crushed 20 miles back. Why aren't they letting us see it?

They say that in this age of instant communication the enemy will get information from our broadcasts. In the same breath they say the enemy can't even get information from himself: his communications are ruined. Baghdad can't see the battlefield, commanders can't call each other. It takes Iraq's ambassador to the U.N. two days to get an ungarbled message. Anyway, our generals tell us that no Iraqi ground forces can make a move without getting plastered by our planes; the allies have little to fear from the Iraqis. So if there were to be a decent waiting period for the airing of news – say three days, roughly as long as it took footage from Vietnam to be shot, edited and cleared for anything classified – what possible military justification could there be for censoring our press? Nobody in Baghdad or the trenches can watch their televisions anymore anyway.

The people that the military are really afraid of are you and me, here at home. For us the war is all yellow ribbons and flags and charts, and they want it to stay that way; we got a little sick the one day we saw the real war, the twisted bodies from the Baghdad shelter. But it isn't only the White House and the Pentagon that want this censorship – polls show that the American people think the press isn't censored enough. The government doesn't want the people to see the real war *and the people are demanding not to know*.

This is the death of the republic. When the people clamor to be shielded from reality, when they praise their government for keeping things from them, when they choose to conduct their lives within the limits of whatever fantasy the government supplies, then they are no longer consenting to be governed, they are begging to be ruled.

The elements of totalitarianism are in place. Totalitarianism is not something imposed from above. It takes the "totality" to implement totalitarianism: a collaboration

between citizens who no longer want to exercise choice and rulers who don't want to let them choose. A dictatorship (such as Saddam Hussein's) is the rule of one man or party imposed by force; in totalitarianism whole segments of society – the bureaucracy of the Soviet Union or the middle class of Nazi Germany – collude with the military for the sake of order. Order, clarity and efficiency, whether illusory or not, become the prevailing ideals. Liberty, individual conscience and complexity become contemptible. What we are seeing in the United States now is the exhilaration, shared by the masses and the elite, that comes when a totalitarian system is in the first stages of jelling.

That doesn't mean it's inevitable, or that it will take on predictable forms. The United States is more vast than Germany, and its trade and culture require a more fluid technology and social system than the Soviet Union or China. But if it comes, it will be an extension of this war: an exuberance for might and order, an impatience with liberty that will turn mean and a fiercely insisted-upon distinction between the included and the excluded.

When you see masses of Americans with raised fists yelling "U!S!A!U!S!A!" you are looking at something new in American imagery: a shameless lust for individual strength through state power. Odd how, in country after country, the totalitarian impulse always takes the form of a raised arm menacing the air.

### ***Gallup – The Next Morning***

Waking up to the Iraqi acceptance of the Soviet peace proposal. The U.S. isn't having any. In the next booth at the McDonald's, a middle-age Navajo couple, intelligent faces, are reading the paper. Almost everyone in the place – almost everyone in this part of the state – is Native American, mostly Navajo and Hopi.

I drive slowly through Gallup on its main drag, the road that was once Route 66. Pawnshops, cafes, bars, Indian crafts. Something's off and I can't put my finger on it. Then I realize: from one end of town to the other I haven't seen one flag, yellow ribbon or Desert Storm decal. No, there's a car antenna with a yellow ribbon and that's it. I guess there's no reason that one more victory for WASP technology should generate any enthusiasm among the Navajo and the Hopi.

Several hours to the northwest are the great mesas where the Hopi have lived for more than a thousand years. On what the maps call First Mesa is the oldest continuously inhabited town in the Western Hemisphere. When you stand at that place, you cannot distinguish between heaven and earth. In certain lights, the far-off mesas seem like clouds, the clouds like stones, the earth itself like light, while the sky has the sheen of something that might be walked on. The seen blends with the unseen. There is nowhere to go, nothing to do, no way to be, but to stand between the seen and the unseen and live one's life.

Somewhere in the distance, a country is changing. It calls itself America but no longer knows its real name. If you are a citizen of that place, you are not a citizen of a country but of change. There will be nothing easy about what comes next.

### *New Mexico*

On a drive of more than 3,200 miles, from West Hollywood to the New England village of Thompson in northeastern Connecticut, getting off at the interstate to cruise the towns and look around, I see only one blatant statement against our government's policy: "STOP THE BOMBING," printed on cardboard and hung in the window of a bookstore in Albuquerque.

Years ago, the Club Café in Santa Rose was the most famous diner on Route 66. It's a dead certainty that John Steinbeck, Woody Guthrie and Cisco Houston ate here in the 30's and 40's. Buddy Holly and Roy Orbison, driving from Odessa and Lubbock to gigs in Albuquerque and Santa Fe, would have stopped here in the late 50's. Anybody with a reason to cruise these roads regularly, then or now, ends up at the Club Café sooner or later. It's right up the main street (which, as in Gallup and Albuquerque, used to be Route 66) from the bridge over the Pecos River.

A large hand-lettered sign on the door reads: "We Support our Troops." Underneath are 31 names from the town and the county, all of them in the military, most of them in the Gulf. An enormous number of people for a place so small. Most of the names are Hispanic. In this part of the country that doesn't mean Mexican or Puerto Rican; most Hispanics here descend from the first Spaniards who colonized this area 400

years ago. So, descendants of the people who first took this land from the Indians, then had it taken from them by the Anglos, are off exerting American power in somebody else's land.

You can see from the talk among the waitresses and the pleasant old woman behind the counter that the only ideology that crosses their minds is whatever they've seen on television mixed with a deep sense of purpose: the whole world has been swept up in an event in which the waitress, the cook and the sweet old woman are participating through those 31 men. What do you say about a place that is so enthusiastic about the prospect of losing so many of its male youth? They seem nice enough, they are nice enough, lovely people in a place I've always liked. The question isn't whether they're right or wrong, nice or not, the question is: What's missing here? What hole in their spirit could possibly be big enough that they offer 31 of their young to fill it?

### *Amarillo, Texas*

On I-40 as you enter Amarillo a sign warns you that this is a route for "hazardous cargo." Nuclear weapons are assembled in Amarillo. Trucks come and go with plutonium. Just after this sign is the Cadillac Ranch – that line of old Caddies half-buried in a field by the highway. This time they're painted a bright sky-blue. I've seen them pink, yellow and green. So the plutonium passes the Cadillacs amid American and Texas flags that fly everywhere you look on the west end of town.

Seventeen years ago, only an hour's drive from here, some friends and I built an amphitheater. I'm told that recently a conquistador's sword was found a quarter mile from where we were, on the banks of the Salt Fork of the Red River, on the same route north as the cattle drives of the old West Texas cowboys. And all those signs for scenic Palo Duro Canyon? That's where the cavalry killed off the last of the free Cheyenne. And I ask the gods of the highways, what do I do, what does any American do, with this crazy-quilt heritage? From the conquistadors to the Gulf War this heritage has never been about freedom, it's been about excess. Whether it's religious movements like the Puritans and the tent-preachers, or the youth movements of sex-drugs-and-rock-and-roll, whether it was how much TV people watch or how big a bomb can be built, something

about America craves excess. It's the theme that joins all America's contradictions. Can a place of such excess ever gentle itself?

### ***Clarendon, Texas***

I stay the night with George and Dixie, two of the builders of that amphitheater. We watch CNN. Will the ground war start tomorrow? Is Saddam still in control, or alive? Why does Gorbachev want a cease-fire? Why doesn't Bush want to stop the killing? What is the matter with Caspar Weinberger's eyes?

He is on *Larry King Live*, and after he finishes a sentence or so he will pause and fix his eyes straight at the camera in the queerest way. I've seen that look once before, from a man in a Brooklyn mental hospital who was asking about his mother. He wanted her phone number, he wanted her address. When he asked, "Have you seen her?" his eyes were like those of Ronald Reagan's secretary of defense. I don't know what it means, but I promise you it's the same look.

The wind is blowing strong like it always does at night in West Texas, and Bush has set his cowboy deadline: "World Awaits High Noon," the *Amarillo Daily News* will headline in the morning. As I drive out at dawn I see a billboard on I-40.

STOP Helping Communism

Here, There and

Everywhere

And I think of a friend south of here in Lubbock. Her 9-year-old was sent home from the public elementary school with a list of Satanic signs and symbols that children are forbidden to wear or write on their notebooks. Among those symbols: the yin-yang sign and the peace sign.

### ***The Arkansas State Line***

They play fair in Arkansas. They let you know the score as soon as you cross over:

Speed laws Strictly Enforced

No Tolerance



### *Palestine, Arkansas*

“Where you from out in California?”

“L.A.”

“L.A.?! That’s where it’s *all happenin’*.”

Is he putting me on? No. He’s getting a kick out of meeting someone from L.A. The more you get out into America, the more you find it’s a country where most people think it’s “all happenin’” somewhere else. Sometimes I think this is the most dangerous feeling in America. To say it’s all happening somewhere else is to say that nothing is happening where you are. You are not a citizen, you are barely even a resident. You are something by the side of the road. If a TV crew comes into town you know all the right words to say about how important family and flag and church are in your community, but what you *really* think is that everything important happens somewhere else.

So in Santa Rosa you will send 31 of your young men to some place that must be more important than Santa Rosa, and then fill the emptiness of your unimportance by emoting about those sacrificial men, sacrificed on the altar of your need to be important. And in Palestine, Arkansas, you’ll humble yourself before a stranger. How much have you had to humble yourself every day to cheerfully and spontaneously shame your home?

### *Tennessee*

Across the great Mississippi and into Tennessee, the Big Sky country is behind me. There’s a rolling road through corridors of tall trees from here to Maine. I pass the exit for Shiloh, where 130 years ago many Americans died. Down the road a little more is the exit for Nathan Bedford Forrest State Park. During the Civil War, Bedford Forrest was a war criminal who massacred 300 black Union soldiers after they surrendered; later he became the first Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan. General Schwarzkopf has just finished saying that the Iraqis who committed atrocities in Kuwait city are not human like we are.

I’ve driven 800 miles since dawn and I can’t seem to stop. The ground war has started. The speaker system in this Nashville restaurant is tuned to the Associated Press

radio special; you can even hear it in the bathroom. There's a call-in guy from Vermont. He's furious. Why aren't we trying to kill Saddam personally? "Five, ten years from now this guy'll be dropping bombs on New York City." If I had the time or mental energy I'd try to differentiate between all the different kinds of ignorance needed to make that statement. But it seems all I can do is drive, burning Eden with a vengeance, until finally, another 220 miles down the road, I start seeing the Little People.

It's always good to see the Little People. They must have come with all the Scots and the Irish to these Appalachians. I think it was from the Little People that the old Irish proverb comes: "The most beautiful music is the music of what happens."

That's easy for them to say. To them, human history is a vast silent movie and they can step in and out of the screen as they please. Wisdom, I'm told, is to learn their dance and see the ways to step on and off the temporal screen. I'm working on it, but the music of what happens is breaking my heart. "A broken heart is the best musical instrument of all, of all!"

That was one of the Little People. I give thanks to him, and cry some, in the motel of a town whose name I never knew.

### ***Near the Tennessee-Virginia State Line***

The American Flag is flying beside the McDonald's flag. It should go without saying that this is considered not sacrilege or satire but patriotism. Which may be a good place to add that McDonald's has the cleanest bathrooms on the road.

### ***On I-81 on the Tennessee Side of the Virginia Line***

At the mini-mart, a framed flag with the legend "These Colors Don't Run." And above the cash register:

Do Not  
Except Foodstamps  
"owner"  
Ed Short

A poor speller myself, I haven't the right to feel superior to Mr. Short's use of "except" when he means "accept," nor to the odd grammar that makes the sign seem a command to the customers instead of a policy of the store. It's sad, though, that the flag-bragging and the stinginess are so close together. It contradicts the sign below the cash register, "Proudly American."

### ***I-81 in Virginia***

George Orwell once said to Arthur Koestler: "This is the end of history." He meant that from this time on all the records of historical events would be controlled by the state, and that after a certain point it will be impossible for anyone (including the state) to know what really happened. In this era of mass media, this will be the least-recorded war. There will be fewer actual accounts of the war than of any major conflict of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. So a hole in the lives of the American people (who don't want to know) creates a hole in history spreading out from the Persian Gulf. Into that hole could drop the Bill of Rights and any law that does not serve power. How do you fight a hole? You insist on meaning. I don't mean that you insist dogmatically on what you believe; rather, you insist that things *mean*. You listen for the resonances. You speak and dance with your dying breath, if it comes to that.

### ***Into Maryland and Pennsylvania***

In West Virginia there's the exit to Harper's Ferry. John Brown's body lies a-moldering in the grave. Over the Potomac into Maryland, the first sign is "Antietam Battlefield," and on into Pennsylvania it's "Gettysburg 1 Mile." Stopping at a motel, I'm struck by the cards of the Three Mile Island nuclear reactors. "It's just up the road here." The young woman says.

"They sell any bottled water in this town?"

"I know what you mean. The fish are still floatin' in the streams, let me tell ya."

"What's happening with the war?" I ask.

“From what they say we’re kickin’ butt over there, but you never know.” She’s wearing a big yellow ribbon, but living in the shadow of Three Mile Island she doesn’t need to be told that governments lie.

Harper’s Ferry, Antietam, Gettysburg, Three Mile Island – American names from different eras share one thing: their memories are faded, their meanings all but lost.

I am suddenly in the world of Tom Wolfe and Theodore Dreiser. The city of Wilkes-Barre is straight out of their era: no new buildings, massive old factories on the edges of town, church spires here and there rising above the blocks of wood-frame one family houses with peaked roofs. Yet the writers who recorded such places with such love and concern already feared America was lost.

Remembering speeches we seek the great and forgotten language, the lost lane-end into heaven, a stone, a leaf, an unfound door. Where? When? O lost, and by the wind grieved, ghost, come back again.

Thomas Wolfe was calling for the ghost to come and guide him, and I am calling for Thomas Wolfe to come and guide me, to help me remember that we *never* knew, we were always searching, there was never any such thing as America. For the Founders the country was an experiment that they hoped would one day be America; for those who came later, it was a dream – bequeathed by strangers – that they were trying to remember, understand and live. And for those who came after . . . a confusion of ambitions, dreams and memories that have left too many holes, great stretches of emptiness not in the landscape but in our living rooms, kitchens, beds, holes in which the best of what we wanted goes adrift and is lost.

### ***U.S. 44 in Connecticut***

A two-lane is twisting its way through hilly New England, huge trees on all sides, frozen ponds, and the houses white and large and old. No 7-Elevens. No mini-malls. Dignified signs as you come upon a cluster of homes: “Incorporated 1708.” “1713,” “1718.” The kind of town Wilkes-Barre once represented, the blustery industrial town of the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, was already a long way from and a deep betrayal of what the people who

incorporated these villages in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century dreamed, just as these villages were the beginning of the invasion of that ancient Hopi town at the top of First Mesa.

But my friend James in the hamlet of Thompson, whose water comes from his own well and who eats the eggs of his own chickens, takes me on a walk through the local graveyard. He wants to show me the new thing in headstones. We walk past stones three centuries old, past the plot he has purchased for himself, to a row of new graves. Carved on one headstone is an RV, complete with TV Antenna. Carved on another, a bingo card, and above it the word: “Bingo.”

### ***Bingo***

The war, or at any rate the fighting, is over for now. That is what they announce tonight. My friend and I watch the announcement. We are each wearing layers of clothes, as one does where there’s a real winter, for the houses are never warm. The snow falls. General Norman Schwarzkopf is playing with his charts.

He’s so happy that he forgets himself and makes what he might call a mistake and what I call the truth. On the night of February 27, 1991, this is what he says: “Once the air campaign started we knew that he [the enemy] would be incapable of moving out to counter [our] move, *even if he knew we made it.*”

The emphasis is Schwarzkopf’s. He said it with great satisfaction. In other words, the press censorship was unnecessary from a military perspective. The enemy couldn’t act on the information “even if he knew.” The censorship had nothing to do with the enemy: its goal was twofold – to keep the American people ignorant of the realities of war, and to keep the entire record of the war in the possession of the America military, so that no one (possibly even the American government) could ever know this war’s true history.

In some places this would be called a coup d’etat.

### *Still River, Massachusetts*

General Schwartzkopf's show-and-tell exhausted the official version of the Gulf War both as history and as entertainment. Nothing can happen now but the obvious: a big power and its allies will dictate a consensus to various smaller powers. There will be all the trappings of political theater: men getting on and off planes, going in and going out of doors making statements, modifying those statements, and modifying *those*; commentators commentating on each other's comments; and a quick return of just enough troops to make for a few good parades – seas of yellow ribbons and Stars and Stripes with the new American image of the raised fist.

And when all the men have gotten on and off the planes, it will be said that solutions have been reached in the Middle East. The future will be presented like the opening of a new mall, everybody can get everything they want, there's plenty of time to pay, plenty of parking, big sale on "peace." It will be considered un-American to remember Thomas Pynchon's warning: "If they can get you asking the wrong questions, they don't have to worry about the answers."

For this has all happened before. The problems Bush & Co. will pretend to solve were caused by exactly the same process of large powers dictating a consensus to smaller powers. The very creation of Jordan, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Iraq and Kuwait as nations were the brainstormings of the big powers. The real "problem" is that the region has a resource that the West wants to control, and the only way to control it is to keep the region fundamentally volatile so that it stays dependent on a constant transfusion of money and arms. This will be called a "balance of power," which really means keeping several factions poised for war. Whatever "solution" the west imposes will develop gradually into another war, which will require another imposition of so-called solutions. The details do not matter – not even for the peoples of the Middle East. While the specific objects of their anxieties shift, the underlying causes of their unrest will not change. Skip CNN, *Nightline* and all the newspapers for the next two, five, maybe ten years, then tune in on the next Mideast brouhaha a-brewing – you won't have missed a thing. Sooner or later a fundamental transformation *will* occur in the Middle East as it did in Eastern Europe, but it will not be imposed; the people will rise and create something

genuinely different (maybe for the better, maybe not). Then, in the long-term history of the region, the Gulf War will be seen as just a high-tech version of the same old shit.

But in the history of the United States, the Gulf War is pivotal. Finally the elements of an American totalitarianism are both structurally in place and openly welcomed: the military, the media, the federal government and a hefty majority of the people have decisively rejected the values of the Bill of Rights. Americans are celebrating not victory but surrender – their utter and perhaps final surrender to the ideals of might and order. They are not wildly happy about beating someone else’s army. They are joyously surrendering to their *own* army; and admitting at last that the responsibilities of liberty have been too much to bear. Like anyone in the final act of giving up on their integrity, they feel a giddiness of relief and release; like any sellout, they resent anyone who reminds them of what they’ve betrayed.

Meanwhile, in Still River, Massachusetts, the sons of Roben and David are baking apple pie. I wish you could have seen them, as they bickered over who made a better crust and who had a defter hand at apple-peeling, these three boys – the oldest in his teens, the youngest maybe 8, marvelously unaware of how much they love each other. It is a family ritual, the boys baking pie (very good pie, too). The last time I saw Roben, her eldest was an infant. Today we walked the muddy roads around Still River, the landscape all grays and browns, the clouds low and slow, patches of snow in the forest, thin ice on the lake, gunshots far off. We talked our troubles and our dreams as we used to. Then dinner, then the pie, then I did her tarot. I left at midnight, driving northeast. I have no idyllic vision of this family or any other, but I think I know the difference between an empty and a fulfilling ritual when I’m in its presence. Only a fool could be saved by an apple pie, but there are such pies and I am such a fool.

## ***Maine***

In Portland my high-school friend Carl invites me to go to an A.A. meeting with him. I’ve never been. Here is a war I respect, the struggle with one’s own heart: all these meetings, all over the country, almost any time of the day or night, around this issue and others, with their potent mix of self-examination and camaraderie. But where is this

energy in the politics of the country? How can the two things be happening at once and on such a large scale? When in an A.A. meeting you can hear people of very different levels of education speak with more intelligence than any elected official in decades, you feel a kind of vertigo, the public life of the nation veering one way while the inner life of its people goes another. Yet the entities of “the nation” and “the people” overlap in so many places. These are the same people. It’s maddening. Should there be, as James Hillman implies, 12-step programs to heal our dysfunctional ways of being citizens? Is that a tactic to get this energy one sees in an A.A. meeting out into our politics and history?

I go further north, to Waterville to see my high school friend Mark. I haven’t seen him in 21 years, but as soon as I step out of the car I see it *is* Mark still. He says the same of me, how little it seems we’ve changed. And as we talk and drink and tell each other our lives over the next days, kept housebound by an ice storm, I think that this too is stronger than history: how something in us is impervious to the trends of collective thought, culture and politics – something which perhaps can be broken but can never be taken. In *1984*, George Orwell says this isn’t so, says a totalitarian state can steal your very psyche no matter how hard you struggle; yet Orwell has an odd way of proving it. In his novel it takes the entire power of the state to break one man’s spirit. How strong, then, must the spirit really be? This thing within that is strong enough to keep us who we are through all the changes – that is the inner strength on which rests the ideal of liberty. In today’s society many individuals have this strength; yet the collective, composed of those individuals, does not. The question of our era becomes: Is there a way to heal that split?

The next day the motor that runs my windshield wipers shorts out. You can’t drive in snow and rain without wipers, so where am I going to get a part for my 22-year old Chevy in Waterville? The Chevy dealer says he can have it for me in a week. But Mark’s friend Rick thinks differently. He’s a seasonal farm worker who lives with his wife and four children in a narrow trailer off a dirt road. He drives me all over central Maine, it seems, to find the part and install it while it’s snowing, while not taking a dime for his trouble because I am a friend of his friend.



Rick's thinking about going to Kuwait. He hears they're paying about \$9,000 a month for carpenters – plus room and board, so you can send your paycheck home. "I got the number of the Kuwaiti embassy. I'm gonna do the paperwork and see what happens."

### ***Boston***

In 1959 Johnny Ertha came into my life. I was a street kid at a summer camp, and he was my first real-life hero, the first man I ever wanted to emulate and live up to. It was Johnny who read us Orwell's *Animal Farm* and it was from Johnny's mouth I first heard the words of Eugene V. Debs: "Where there is a soul in prison I am not free." We haven't seen each other since 1972. Sixty-odd years old now, he's heavier but he's still Johnny, still fiery, still coming out with things like "You must let others be right, to console them for not being anything else."

At 9 o'clock that evening we watch George Bush address Congress about his victory in the Gulf. We are preparing, according to Bush, for "the next American century... Americans are a caring people. We are a good people. A generous people." Johnny, an African-American from Maine, lives in Dorchester, where many of Boston's people of color live. He teaches in the public schools. Across the street there is such a school. There's money for the war but none for these kids. They pass crack in the yard openly. Around the corner not long ago, somebody sprayed a few people with gunfire. In fact, as George Will reported in *Newsweek*, "During the 43 days of Desert Storm, violence in America killed many times more Americans than war did." It is safer to be a soldier fighting Saddam Hussein than to be a child on the streets of an American city. George Bush is able to ignore this, while smiling, gloating about a victory over an army that didn't fight back. According to him, this makes us great again.

The next day I go with my sister Joan to Lexington and Concord, where our revolution began – a fair fight, which we won against the most powerful military of that time. Across the bridge and up the hill stood 400 New England farmers; where I'm standing, a detachment of the English army. Ralph Waldo Emerson grew up in that house over there; it was he who would call this "the shot heard round the world." Thoreau

would visit Emerson in that house; in a protest against our invasion of Mexico, Thoreau would coin the phrase “civil disobedience.”

My sister and I drive back to Boston, to King’s Chapel, and visit the grave of Samuel Adams. Adams was a tireless organizer and instigator, an inciter of riots and an uncompromising lover of liberty. These days he would probably be labeled a terrorist. After the revolution he was the third governor of Massachusetts. When the Founders wanted to give us a constitution that did not specify our liberties, Sam and his old rioters were among those who balked. He felt the Founders were betraying the Revolution and said so; then he maneuvered for Massachusetts – in those days the most influential state – to demand a Bill of Rights. He hadn’t fought for a nation so much as for a vision of liberty, and the canny old conspirator saw to it that this vision was passed on. They will tell you that liberty is defended with guns. Sometimes that’s true and sometimes not. What’s always true is that liberty is best defended by the exercise of liberty.

My sister and I stand quietly at Samuel Adams’ grave. I say a prayer in thanks for all he and his kind bequeathed, and think of something Johnny Ertha said the night before: “Just as important as what we do or what we don’t do, is how we behave when we don’t know what to do.”

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