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These covers are two of the seventy-two plates which appear in a handsome new book, entitled Wings of Paradise: The Great Saturniid Moths of John Cody, published this month by University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill and London. ISBN 0-8078-2286-8. We are grateful to the publishers for permitting us to reproduce these plates, and encourage our readers to look for the book, which gives an incomparable look at a detail of the natural world of which we may be utterly unaware. Bill Wisner writes about the artist in his article beginning on p. 5 of this issue.

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In Luce Tua

Pride and Prejudice

I have just come from completing the Triple Crown in Jane Austen Movie Going, and I am still wondering what to make of it. *Emma* has joined *Persuasion* and *Sense and Sensibility* to comprise one of the most remarkable moments in film history, and we lovers of dusty old books do not know whether to be pleased or sorry. It's like finding that the perfect little inn you thought you had discovered hidden away from the beaten path has become, on your return visit, a popular convention resort. What are all these people doing tromping through the sacred precincts?

*Emma*, though it looked rather as though its bloodlines were by Bombay Company out of Victoria's Secret, had lots of charm, no question about that. And ruffles! did you ever see so many gorgeous clothes? *Sense and Sensibility* had Emma Thompson, which is all any movie needs to be considered 1.) English, and, 2.) a sure thing. *Persuasion*, which was more in the art house circuit than the others (not having Emma Thompson, Hugh Grant or ruffles galore) was widely regarded as being the most “faithful” to the book, though the criterion I heard cited most frequently to support this point was that the ladies’ hems actually dragged in the mud during their walks across the countryside. Then too, one should include the A&E Network’s *Pride and Prejudice*, which just about ditched all the competition for pert smiles and handsome if relatively inarticulate leading men.

One could, of course, go on all day about these movies, though I am dissuaded by the still-lingering voice of a critic of one of my undergraduate opinion columns, who wrote to the paper, “Who cares what you think?” causing me for some time to lose heart in the matter of opinion columns at all. What does seem to demand attention, though, is the question of why these films should have audiences at all, much less the large audiences and even Academy Awards nominations they have been getting. Looking around me in the dimness of the multiplex theater at my fellow *Emma*-viewers, I could see that the audience consisted, predictably, of several English teacher types, but there were plenty of others. What does Jane Austen have that we want?

I kept imagining her time-travelling into the theater, where she could observe the spectacle of these 20th century Hoosiers, munching popcorn and quite evidently enjoying the complications of love and friendship in late 18th century upper-middle class English country house society. Since her chosen metier was observing a scene she was not quite a part of, I suppose she would feel almost comfortable. Since she found so many things amusing, I would guess that this scene too would amuse her with its incongruity—particularly as the genteel musical score suffered some in competition with the soundtrack to *Blow Em Up and Stomp on the Pieces* which I assume to have been the title of whatever was showing in the next theater over.

Trying to name the elusive elements in Austen that could so appeal to contemporary audiences in America, I find that one surely must be the civility and propriety in behavior. The level of behavior that has to be tolerated in most public life today is so appallingly awful a good deal of the time that most of us long for a respite of some kind, however artificial. If it costs a movie ticket to exist for a happy hour or two in the presence of people who pronounce the language with care and enjoyment, don’t use obscenities, don’t confide to you their reproductive history and their gastrointestinal difficulties, don’t try on first acquaintance to convert you to their religious faith or sell you...
a new long-distance carrier—well, then, that sounds like a hour cheaply obtained and well worth twice the price. I am not sure that most people would actually want to live in an Austen novel, a world where the careful suppression of actual emotional response is a kind of Olympic event. But many of us would like to visit it now and again.

More importantly, though, it seems to me that the world of Austen helps us to rationalize and enjoy what we otherwise might find painful. We may be experiencing the real end of something that may only have been an illusion anyway, the end of egalitarianism. This ending is not acknowledged yet in our public speech. Our public and political rhetoric, the rhetoric of the world Lewis Lapham has recently called “the provisional government,” still refers to the idea of equality as if it were a living element among us. (Lapham calls this the “spiritual democracy that comes and goes on the trend of a political season and oversees the production of pageants.” Harper’s, August 1996) Yet in terms of our decisions about what to value as a citizenry, equality has nowhere near the importance of happiness and liberty. This truth takes many forms, but the general “shift in the terms of the discussion” about which we hear so much these days makes it pretty clear. You can call the end of a federally guaranteed system of financial support for poor women and their children “breaking the cycle of dependency” if you want, but it clearly means that we have decided that there is no general level of sufficiency that everyone must have. Our welfare system, decrepit and ineffectual as it was, took as its premise that if there was going to be poverty, then Americans would only get so poor, and they would do it on an level of equality. That’s a grim notion of equality, perhaps, but it seems better than the alternative we have now embraced, which is that some people are free to be a lot poorer than others.

Austen’s work, then, reflects a society clearly hierarchical, powerfully arranged by class and wealth, confidently elitist in outlook. Though one may, reading carefully, discern other currents in of the novels, such nuances do not ruffle the surface of the movie versions. There we have the flattened out silhouette of a world that seems to be working just fine. We can see that the characters seem normal in most respects. They do not live in a fantasy or Never-never Land. They have joys and sorrows, ups and downs. Yet they are unworried by poverty or increasing gaps between rich and poor. Diversity does not frighten them, because they manage to ignore it. They thus provide us, whether or not we are conscious of it, with some models we did not perhaps know we were searching for, but that we now find comforting. It is a world filled with grace and charm, and finally, the good end happily and the bad end unhappily (which is, according to Oscar Wilde’s Miss Prism, “what fiction means.”) Such endings reassure us, then, that the loss of egalitarianism as an ideal is not such a very bad thing after all, certainly nothing to be upset or guilty about. In fact, before tea we ought to have just enough time to pack up an attractive little basket of hot soup and calves’ foot jelly and get on with our rounds to the deserving poor.

I have always loved Jane Austen. But I am sad to see her work used this way. It’s a little like finding that the great convention site you learned to enjoy has become the town’s prime venue for ladies of easy virtue.

Peace,

GME
The ‘Audubon of Moths’
John Cody’s passionate depiction of the Great Saturniids
William H. Wisner

It was a dark and stormy night. A fine dust of February snow swirled around me. I lifted the heavy iron door-knocker of the great stone house slowly and knocked loudly three times, glancing around me uneasily. There had been reports by the owner of the house of a mysterious short woman dressed in a white Victorian dress and shawl—said to frequent this very porch in the waste hours of the night.

The door flew open suddenly, and I stepped back from the light. I beheld a tall man, mildly graying, dressed from head to toe in an outrageous, quilted Chinese robe of jet black satin. His brows contracted, but he smiled thinly. “Am I late? I’ve brought my paper,” I blurted.

“Come in, Bill. Let me turn down Rheingold: the Gods, end of the world and all that. I like it loud, as you know.”

“’lo, Bill!” Cody’s wife, Dorothy sing-songed from the kitchen, and I crossed the threshold gladly into warmth and friendship.

“What is Rheingold?” I asked John, eager to meet the surroundings.

John responded with another question, a not-unfamiliar technique of his. “Do you know much about Wagner, Bill?”

“Actually, all I know, I guess, is the ‘Ride of the Valkyries’ and the ‘Overture’ to Die Meistersinger,” I replied, ashamed that I did not know more.

“I tell you what—let’s put on Rheingold again—what I was just listening to. The conclusion is pretty awesome, if you’ve never heard it. And you’re just grandiose enough to love it all,” John observed, with another of his thin smiles.

John returned to the immense stereo and soon filled the room with the closing passages of Wagner’s great, early masterpiece. What I heard was the Entrance of the Gods into Valhalla—at a volume I’d never experienced before. John handed me the handsome Deutsche Grammophon box, its libretto featuring a fine portrait of Wagner on its expensive cover.

This is what I came to John for, without shame at interrupting his evening, without regard for the fact that my father would have to pick me up past eleven o’clock on a weekday, indifferent to everything except the passions John generated around him for art, for music, for literature. The great ideas resounded in my youthful brain—unblemished and fully-fleshed even at that age—a nameless yearning for the beauty not to end. For music, in its universal magnificence, not to end—ever. That same hunger drove me out of the arms of my peers and the strenuous social demands of adolescence and into John Cody’s living room, where I have remained, really, ever since.

The Entrance of Gods into Valhalla, over Donner’s Rainbow Bridge—that musical passage which I was hearing now for the first time—sent needles of a strange recognition down my spine, filling my heart with its utter grandiosity; the great, sad truth of art had quietly and completely kidnapped my life. The living room where we were sitting is as clear to me today in its details, at the age of forty, as it was twenty-five years ago when I was sixteen. It was a large room with high ceilings and walls three feet thick, made of locally quarried limestone. Two fabulous, angular chairs from Surinam dominated the far wall. The pine floorboards, dating from 1869, when the house was built, would be all but irreplaceable today; pine boards will never come that wide again.

The room had settled its identity around comfort, if not elegance—and contained three...
sofas. To one's left, as you entered, a narrow doorway opened into a small dining room. On the living room's adjoining west wall hung a large painting by John in transparent watercolor—his preferred medium—depicting four parakeets in the jungle. Next to this hung two oil portraits (not by John) of his parents. His father leaned forward aggressively. He had once poured a can of beer in exasperation over his oldest son's radio as John listened to a performance by Toscanini. John's mother (who at this writing is ninety-nine and still lives in New York with John's sister Genevieve) presided in her portrait with an almost queenly elegance and grace; alert and intelligent, she had encouraged John's interest in painting moths when he was a boy, despite her husband's disapproval of art as "impractical." Along the south wall as one entered the living room, hung a beautifully-colored study of William Blake's *God Creating Adam*—a copy by John, also in transparent watercolor. A bay window, glowing with a blue incandescent light anchored the east wall of the room; pink orchids grew there in the dead of winter.

It was the oldest house in our city—in Hays, Kansas. To say that this home was unlike any other I'd ever seen or heard of fails to convey the electric intellectual excitement that place generated in me every time I entered it for one of my discussions with Dr. Cody.

I was sixteen years old when I brought John my "paper" boldly comparing the psychological lives of Vincent Van Gogh and Emily Dickinson. A gifted psychiatrist as well as an artist, Cody was an expert on Dickinson; his ground-breaking book on her psychological life, *After Great Pain: the Inner Life of Emily Dickinson* had been published by the Belknap Press at Harvard in 1971. I had met John for the first time when I was fourteen, at a book-signing party held at the sleepy Hays Public Library shortly after the book's publication. My father, a Presbyterian minister in Hays, wanted me to meet this man. "He's brilliant, you'll see—right up your alley," my father said by way of explanation as we drove over to the library.

Though John swears today that he can recall nothing of the book-signing party, including meeting me, we did in fact hit it off. I began to go up to his home in the evenings to discuss what I have described as "great ideas." The fact that John had also written a book (my one lifelong dream) only made his friendship all the more compelling to me.

"Is that new?" I asked, pointing to a framed letter hanging near the east bay window.

"Yes," John replied, beaming. "It's a letter written and signed by Emily Dickinson. It came on the market unexpectedly. It's a thrill to have a letter by this genius, isn't it?"

Three other signed letters—by Richard Wagner, Hector Berlioz and Auguste Rodin—hung in places of honor on the opposite wall. John lay down again on the low, circular sofa in the corner and looked at me questioningly: "Now let's see this famous paper of yours!" he exclaimed. I handed him a manuscript some twenty-five pages in length. In my innocent enthusiasm I had dedicated the paper to John, not realizing this is never done except for books. John fell silent—his eyebrows contracted in concentration. I waited in hope and fear for his response.

Hays, situated in the center of Kansas, was a town of twenty thousand souls taking refuge from the sun and snow of the High Plains, clinging to the remnant of the original short-grass prairie that has all but vanished now beneath the offending plow. In the spring purple resinousskullcaps dotted the prairie like chips of dropped amethyst. Prairie coneflowers burned orange and red on their six-inch green stalks; the sidecoats grama grasses with their sickle-shaped inflorescences reared flower-stalks above the thick rug of buffalo grass. Overhead, Red-tailed or Rough-legged hawks wheeled silently on lifting thermals, and hung for hours in the superior sky. Closer to earth, elegant Marsh harriers would tip their slender gray wings in the breeze while silently hunting fieldmice in the regular hectares between the limestone fenceposts. On Saturday mornings I would take the family collie and walk past the college (now Fort Hays University) over the levee south of town and past Big Creek and head out into the prairies with my orange Aquabee sketchbook in hand. I had been propelled into a new-found passion for art by a local sculptor—Pete Felten—a few months before I met John.

Fourteen was a fertile year for another reason: my correspondence with the late
anthropologist and nature writer Loren C. Eiseley commenced in that same year. I would send sketches and letters to Loren at the University of Pennsylvania whenever I could. Eiseley—who really was famous at the time—wrote the kind of dramatic, autobiographical prose I have always favored.

Even the organist at our church, Dr. Bill Wilkins, contributed to my obsessions. One day I staggered home with a shelf-full of records from Dr. Wilkins' office at the college. My mother raised an eyebrow.

"The Bach organ works!" I announced proudly. "From Musical Heritage Society. By Marie Claire Alain."

"All of them?", my mother asked.

"Yes. Sixteen records," I replied. "Can I have a hundred dollars to tape them?"

"It's going to be a long summer again, isn't it?" my mother observed with ironic emphasis.

John Cody—whose magnificent book Wings of Paradise is out this month from the University of North Carolina Press—was born in Brooklyn on May 6, 1925. May sixth, Dr. Cody will remind you, is also Sigmund Freud's birthday. A lineal descendant of the famous gun-toting Buffalo Bill Cody, who lived for a time in Hays and may even have slept in John's own home once or twice, John came to Hays in 1965, following a three-year residency in psychiatry at the famous Menninger Clinic in Topeka and a brief stint at Larned State Hospital. Though he planned to stay only a couple of years, John has lived in Hays ever since—eventually becoming Director of the High Plains Comprehensive Community Mental Health Center. By the early 80s Dr. Cody was chiefly known as the psychiatrist who had strayed into literary criticism when his massive psychobiography of Emily Dickinson appeared in 1971.

After Great Pain has yet to be properly consolidated into the mainstream of academic literary criticism on Dickinson, but it is—to anyone who knows it—arguably the most important book ever written on the poet. Postulating a couple of complete psychotic breakdowns in the poet's troubled life—breaks with reality which also became the motor driving some of her best poetry—Cody succeeded in painting an exhaustively researched picture of Dickinson and her inner creative life which transcends mere criticism. Although recent literary critics like Camille Paglia have finally cited John's book as a breakthrough, as late as 1981 I asked critic Alfred Kazin—following a lecture on Dickinson at the University of Kansas—for his response to After Great Pain. He looked at me with bafflement. He had never heard of it. Cody's masterpiece, itself the product of seven years of single-minded effort—during which time his long-suffering children had to tread the floorboards of the house in stocking feet so as not to disturb him—is one of those rare books, not widely known in its own time, which will someday transform all of our assumptions about the formidable woman in white whom critics have condescendingly called "Emily."

Cody has also written four other books, although the most exciting of these—a psychobiography of the composer Richard Wagner—remains unpublished. Cody himself is now indifferent to the book and its eighteen hundred pages, and is reluctant to interrupt painting his moths long enough to subdue the manuscript's length in revision and see it published. If—as seems likely—this psychobiography proves to be the equal of After Great Pain, its eventual appearance may well shake the musical historical verdict on Wagner's life to its foundation.

Cody's other books, published before his retirement from psychiatry in 1986, at the age of sixty-one, include two books for medical students and illustrators, designed to help them visualize anatomy. For Visualizing Muscles: A New Ecorché to Surface Anatomy, Cody took a muscular, nude male model and painted his whole body with accurate, striated muscles which changed shape with each new position. In Atlas of Foreshortening he has completed five hundred plates showing men and women in strongly foreshortened poses, to help medical illustrators with poses derived from the operating table. With his great friend and teacher at Johns Hopkins, Ranice Crosby, Cody has also authored Max Brodel, The Man Who Put Art into Medicine, a biography of the great medical
illustrator whose artistic standard Cody has adopted to guide his own paintings of the Saturniids.

The moths! From a time before he entered grade school, depicting the Giant Silkmoths of the family Saturniidae—an insect family spanning 1500 to 1600 separate species, some of whose most beautiful members can be found here in North America—has been John Cody’s reigning passion. It is a passion based entirely on his personal response to visual beauty; it is an awesome, life-defining response which he himself does not understand and cannot entirely communicate, except in paintings. Freud insisted that psychoanalysis cannot explain why artists become artists nor why they create the works of art they do. John himself speaks in the Introduction to Wings of Paradise as having been “imprinted” to the Saturniids around his fifth birthday, back in Brooklyn, by his first sight of a Cecropia moth.

As John tells it, he happened on a Cecropia moth as a young child, spotting its impressive form on a tree near his home. Thinking it an unusually large butterfly, John approached to within two feet of the creature and then stopped, since the butterflies he knew all flew up at about that distance. The immense, downy-soft, brown creature with crimson spots and furred legs, however, did not fly up and, in fact, seemed unconcerned by his presence. Responding to an impulse that must be called fate, the five-year-old boy approached breathlessly to within a foot of the Cecropia moth. “I think it was at that point that the full beauty of the moth overwhelmed me,” John writes. “I did not, of course, have the words to describe what I saw and felt. I certainly would not have been able to explain it to anyone. Having the experience without the vocabulary, I saw ermine, velvet, brocade, and embroidery all intricately working together in a marvelous design. I marveled at how substantial the wings were, how un papery how soft and textured their surface.”

As it happens in such mythic stories, there is always an unlooked-for diversion and always a price to be paid for revelation. John’s parents called him away for some hours on an errand, during which time the foreground of the boy’s mind saw only the moth—its incredible colors and powders, its unused capacity for flight far, far out of Brooklyn and obscurity. When John returned to the tree—his heart racing—he found a group of older boys gathered around. “Fragments of wings were blown here and there on the sidewalk. They had beaten the creature to death with sticks... I was certain that the boys had destroyed the only creature of its kind in existence. I thought I would never see another one as long as I lived. I went to bed mourning.”

The story is one of the saddest I have ever heard, made all the more moving because out of the bits and pieces of those needlessly smashed and violated jeweled wings a painter emerged who had set himself but one certain goal: to do for moths what Audubon had done for birds. Cody would depict them in all their brief, ramifying beauty, all their substantial, gorgeous colors, following the moths through jungles and mountains and plains—in Borneo, Madagascar, the Himalayas, Trinidad—tracking them as they flew in the night out of their darkness and into our own brief lives. The only moth painter in history would, ironically, also be its greatest; a man of rare intelligence, immense compassion—the same he bestowed on me in my youthful loneliness—and a frightening and terrible intensity; a man, and here I stumble for suitable words: a man of genius, and perhaps the finest friend I have ever known.

From this early “imprinting,” Cody developed rapidly along artistic lines. He has written, “beginning at about age nine or so and into my twenties, I seem in retrospect to have been crossing a stream of the far side of which was my goal of becoming ‘the Audubon of moths.’ A whole series of loving people miraculously appeared just when I needed them, like rocks forming a way across the water.” Cody acknowledges the seminal importance of his parents—particularly his mother—in his growth. She essentially turned the dining room over to his obsession and he filled it with jars, leaves, pupae, caterpillars and paints. His uncle, Edward Hayes, obtained John’s first Cecropia cocoon for him by hurling a broom—from three stories up—at a sycamore branch which contained the cocoon. A friend from next door, Agnes Rand, painted and drew moths with him (a story John tells in greater detail in the May 1986 issue of Audubon magazine, which published eleven plates of his moth paintings). By the time Dr. Cody was attending James Madison High
School, he held his first formal exhibition at the school after a sympathetic art teacher—Florence Connolly—recognized the value of his drawings. Dr. Cody has called Florence Connolly a "quiet and somewhat forbidding woman," and today regrets that his artistic insecurity prevented him from thanking her properly for arranging the exhibit.

Cody continued to paint moths during his time at St. John's University, his understanding of insects significantly enhanced there by the only course in entomology he has ever had. The class was taught by a master teacher, Charles Lacailade, who advocated John and his artwork with great enthusiasm. "Incarnation," T.S. Eliot has written, "is a hint followed by a guess," and it was by such hints, guesses and intuitions that the young artist proceeded. The lack of money to support his moth paintings (that commonest refrain in artistic biographies) turned out to be one John could not solve. Despite establishing himself at twenty-two through sheer talent and Lacailade's intervention as a staff artist to the famous explorer William Beebe, Cody's options remained limited. Returning from Beebe's camp Simla, in Trinidad, six months later (his head reeling with paintings of jungle insects, grubs, moths and fish) Cody realized that he could not depend on his father's monetary support forever. In desperation, Cody wrote to the artist Georgia O'Keefe in Abiqui, because he had seen that her paintings included realistic depictions of bones and flowers. Miss O'Keefe responded with a note to John urging him to contact Dorothy Miller at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. But Cody never took her advice: "I knew that my art was not in any sense 'modern' or likely to interest anyone in that austere organization."

The busy Lacailade arranged for John to study medical illustration under Ranice Birch at the Department of Art as Applied to Medicine at Johns Hopkins. It gave Cody a marketable skill, and he insists to this day that he benefited greatly from the techniques he learned while at Johns Hopkins. After taking his degree, Cody traveled to the medical center in Little Rock, Arkansas, settling himself to do charts, diagrams and drawings in scratchboard and graphite. Impatient with such a limited profession, Cody eventually decided to study medicine and become a doctor. He became a psychiatrist, married his beloved wife Dorothy Castro in Little Rock and had three children. By the time Dr. Cody arrived in Hays in 1964 to become director of the Mental Health Center, his career as a moth painter—which showed such early promise—was at a standstill. Not until his formal retirement from the Center in 1986 (forty years after Beebe had accepted him as a staff artist on the Trinidad exhibition) could John Cody finally pursue painting moths fulltime. A lifetime later—like a giant Cecropia at last emerging from its chrysalis in full bloom—Cody linked up with the child who mourned the death of a moth on the streets of Brooklyn some fifty-six years before.

Readers of Wings of Paradise—which contains seventy-two plates (all but three of them painted since 1981)—will marvel at the passion fueling Cody's unsentimental brush. The plates are a quantum leap beyond anatomical correctness, scientific accuracy or the illustrator's slavish didacticism. Cody has effectively erased the line dividing "wildlife art" from "high art"—and indeed his finest paintings (like that of the Imperial Moth, 1982, the Hemileuca magnifica, 1992, and especially the painting of the Frosted African Emperor moth from three angles, 1992) have transcended even the moths they are meant to depict. In this last painting, especially, a composition has emerged which veers sharply towards the purest values of legitimate abstraction while yet retaining a complete devotion to representation. I know of no other painters—not Picasso, Matisse, Braque nor Gris—to have managed this synthesis more skillfully.

Cody admires the bird paintings of John James Audubon because of the strength of Audubon's composition and the telling placement of the birds on the page; Audubon's paintings, Cody points out, are pleasing from whatever distance you view them. They have an impact, John insists, which doesn't depend on detail. So strong are the contours and shapes of each bird that even from across the room—before one can identify the birds as birds—Audubon's paintings grab the viewer's attention and hold it. "A painting that looks good from every distance—that's what I try to do in my own work," Cody observes. Overall pattern, then, and shape and placement give Audubon's Birds of North America a compelling vitality beyond mere detail or scientific accuracy.
Despite subsequent bird painters as impressive as Fuertes or Landsdowne or Bateman, Audubon remains—for Cody—the finest bird painter of all time.

Perhaps the least successful painting in *Wings of Paradise* is an early painting of a Luna moth being pursued by a large, chocolate brown bat, dating from 1952. The *Luna Moth* of 1952 is a seminal work because it pushes a limit—unsuccessfully—reminding Cody of what the poet William Blake once observed: that we cannot know what enough is until we have had too much. The “too much” in this instance, is a conflict between realism and the decorative which John himself acknowledges as a continuing problem in his work.

Although Cody admires few painters indeed from the twentieth century, Matisse is one of them he does admire. Dr. Cody found, after many hours contemplating Matisse’s paintings, that, like Matisse, he himself loved decorative elements in paintings almost as much as he loved realism in depicting his moths. Decorativeness in art—made up, as it is, by pattern—is inherently two-dimensional, flattening a canvas wherever it predominates. In the 1952 *Luna*, a rich tapestry of hot, aggressive oranges and yellows form a background to the moth’s pursuit by the bat. Placing an advancing color—orange, in this case—behind a cool, retreating color (the pale greenish-white body of the Luna) sets up an unsolvable technical problem in this plate. Orange, decorative pattern overwhelms the three-dimensional element of the pale Luna—setting up a perversity Kirchner or Soutine would have loved. A weirdly advancing middle-ground has come right up to a foreground with a strong three-dimensional rendering of the moth. Cody insists he learned from this painting a favored aesthetic: a shallow middle-ground, set against a very up-close, highly detailed foreground, the moth with its accompanying vegetation. There is now no remote background in John’s paintings. His work thus becomes a delicate balancing act between a decorative middle-ground and a highly lapidary, three-dimensional foreground. Unquestionably, the energy and visual intensity of a Cody moth painting results from a carefully reasoned decision to push everything forward. The decorative elements of Audubon and Matisse coexist uneasily with a moth subject rendered with almost microscopic accuracy. This tension can become dizzying and obsessive, and at times disorienting and almost nightmarish.

The Luna moth—that large, pale-green, whitish North American insect with the trailing plumes which every boy at summer camp dreams of seeing—is represented in no fewer than four plates in *Wings of Paradise*: a definite sign that this moth carries particular interest for Cody. It’s a childhood thing. As a boy Cody searched everywhere to see a real Luna, but never actually handled one until adulthood: “One windless night when I was thirty I was driving with Dot near Benton, Arkansas. A piece of paper seemed to be blowing peculiarly around a light at a gas station. I all but wrecked the car when I realized what it was.”

Luna moths presented Cody with yet another technical challenge, partly predicated on John’s lifelong preference for painting in transparent watercolor. The pale, whitish elements of the Luna are simply the white Arches paper showing through the pale washes of light green that make up the wing. How do you make such a shy, retreating block of color stay in the up-close foreground Cody favors? The *Luna Moth* of 1952, described above, was a disaster with its lava-hot orange background. But the *Luna* of 1959 set two moths against dark, cool grays, greens and sienas. This painting succeeds better by far than the 1952 attempt, but the two pale Lunas still just barely hold their own against the background. The problem—as Cody is the first to acknowledge—is that transparent watercolor (which, with its mat surface and capacity for detail, is the only medium John will work with) is a dark-over-light medium: every wash or brushstroke, no matter how pale, darkens the white paper. Light-over-dark paints exist, of course (oils, acrylics, gouaches), but all are opaque and dry shiny, and none, in John’s judgment, give the flat, matt look he insists upon.

The two remaining Luna paintings in *Wings of Paradise* offer better solutions than either of the early works. The *Luna Moth* of 1981 simply omits any real coloration in the middle-ground—a pale blue-gray wash is all the backdrop color John has used; so, naturally, even the two pale green Luna moths move forward visually. The finest solution to the perplexing “Luna” quandary of an inherently retreating pale green coloration—to my mind—is the *Luna Moth* of 1987. Here John has
set a single Luna against a fairly intense, though cool ultramarine blue. An astonishingly well-rendered apple branch bathed in strong sunlight (one of the most virtuosic passages of painting in the book) arches across the top half of the paper. Here's the trick: the Luna's wings pick up a reflected green off the apple leaves, thus darkening the moth's lime-colored wings, making them more assertive while still remaining naturalistically faithful.

People who love painting—people who will pore over *Wings of Paradise* with the rapt attention it deserves—rarely understand how such technical problems continually collide with an artist's inner, psychological directives; and how these, in turn, come up against the unending problem of making an intractable solution of gum arabic, water and pulverized pigment into a painting. One touch of indecision, one failure of nerve, one technical mistake and all is lost—as surely as one stumble will cost an Olympic gymnast the medal. And transparent watercolor, unlike opaque media like oils or acrylics, allows for not a single error, since it cannot be painted over if a mistake is made.

Art in any form is thus an unforgiving, sometimes agonizing, always harrowing exercise in enforced humility; Eliot insisted that even his best poems were, each one, "a different kind of failure." And even Michelangelo, in his eighties and at death's door, petulantly smashed one arm off the *Rondanini Pieta* because of the marble's appalling disobedience. The last aesthetic act of the Western canon's greatest artistic personality was one of humiliating destruction, not fruitful creation. So much for the viewer's bland supposition that a successful artist works amidst a neatly unfolding psycho-drama of idealism, peace and joy.

John Cody's reigning passion for moths is, as he will tell you, predicated entirely on his enthralling response to their physical beauty. "I want people to see that moths are beautiful," John told me last month. "I want them to care about moths because they are beautiful in reality and so people will preserve the rainforests. But, really, beauty is the only thing I try to get across. No ideas."

John's theory of beauty takes a step beyond nineteenth century aesthetics because of his understanding of the Darwinian process which caused the moths to evolve. "The world is not chaotic," he continued, "because chaos is self-eliminating. Beauty is organization, unity—anything of many parts working as a unity, like the wing of a moth, reveals organization. What we're seeing in nature is the external face of internal organization, surface anatomy—anatomy that becomes balanced and organized because it wouldn't function otherwise.

"I think evolution produces beautiful things because it produces things that survive, that work, and that are integrated in all their parts. To the external eye this is beauty. . .if we didn't find the world beautiful there wouldn't be anything to spark our interest or joy—joy that allows us to survive in the world, in nature, which is so resilient and so indifferent to all its species."

My mother and I walked down to the empty lot adjoining the First Methodist Church half a block away from our house on Walnut Street. I was nineteen years old that summer. Together we picked the rank ailanthus leaves leaf by leaf, so that the voracious green caterpillar John had given me would have something to eat. I picked the leaves distractedly, without enthusiasm or expression, my mother eyeing my indifference with wonder. Years later I learned that she and my father wept every night in their bedroom, while I lay in my room next door, struggling to sleep.

My first year at college had just ended disastrously. I had dropped out of pre-med in my second semester, nursing a psychosis of such proportions that I had been immediately hospitalized, in a locked ward back home in Hays, a ward whose director was. . .John Cody. That summer I was so disoriented that shame—which was to dominate my interior life for the next twenty-one years—had not even kicked in. John surveyed my charts in disbelief, conferred with Dr. Tiffany (a great, loving bear of a man) and consulted with his staff. "He'll be out in a week. He's just tired," John at first insisted to my bewildered parents. But John was wrong, you see. Weeks
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Dr. Tiffany, who became my immediate therapist, insisted on the diagnosis: “Schizophrenia. Residual type. Highly delusional. Suicidal.” Later John confessed to my parents that I had fooled even him—and that he’d had no idea an event of this proportion lay anywhere in my future.

“Had he been doing any drugs at the University that you know of?” John asked them.

My mother replied, “Yes.” She was still aghast at the key jangling in the locked wooden door which had to be opened to admit them to the fourth floor of Hadley Regional Medical Center. “He told me he was doing ‘some’ marijuana, not a lot, but some. We had no idea, of course.”

“This is bad,” John allowed. “There is some evidence that in certain brain chemistries predisposed genetically to schizophrenia that marijuana can be as destructive as LSD. I think this may have been a factor.”

“Was it his situation with his brothers that could have done it?” my father asked—his Christian faith undergoing its first severe test.

“Well, the fact that all three are much older and all brilliant doctors and surgeons obviously couldn’t have helped. When Bill withdrew from chemistry last week, effectively ending his pre-med program, that could have been a precipitating event. Along with his weight loss and exhaustion. But we may never really know.”

“Suppose he doesn’t...” my father broke off.

“He is currently responding fairly well to Thorazine, as long as we remember to buffer it withCogentin. I am also going to try Melaril. About two in three persons with this degree of schizophrenia do respond, in time. I think there is every reason to expect that Bill will make a complete recovery.”

The fat green plug of a caterpillar ate everything in sight and then spun itself a beautiful, silken chamber in which to die. I checked the pupa every couple hours, with something like mild interest. The following morning my mother pointed at the green drape in our living room. A huge, chocolate brown Cynthia moth—six inches across—rested placidly on the curtain. My mother had let the moth out of the red wire cage in which we'd placed the pupa, waiting, waiting for John’s promised moth to appear. I drew up to within a foot of the mesmerizing creature, not quite able to believe that John’s promise had come true. At that age, and at that particular time, I had the experience without the vocabulary. I saw ermine, velvet, brocade...
Not long ago, I attended the annual meeting of the Association of American Colleges in Washington, DC. On the second day, the weather was so bad that the government sent home all the "non-essential people." Can you imagine what confusion that caused? "Am I essential? or non-essential? ... Which do I want to be? If I'm essential, I have to stay and work. If I'm non-essential, I can have a day of vacation! Wait a minute—what will that mean in the long run ... nonessential!" The weather was so bad that public transportation shut down, movie theatres closed, and department stores never opened.

In the middle of the afternoon, needing to escape the endless series of meetings and academic one-up-man-ships, I ventured out onto a sheet of ice. I skated across the open field past the Washington Monument. I stood and looked back in awe at the Capitol Building; then I turned and gazed at the White House. The White House! There it was in front of me. I felt as though I had just walked into a live history text. Never had I felt so patriotic: 50 flags with stars and stripes were whipping around me in the cold winter wind. "I'm here! In my capitol city! I belong!"

A bit later, I sat in solitude at the powerful Vietnam War memorial, where I found the name of my cousin's best friend, 21 years old when he was killed at my cousin's side. Then I climbed the treacherous steps of the Lincoln Memorial, joining a small group of brave winter tourists. We stood in silence at the feet of the incredibly large but gentle figure of Abraham Lincoln, and gazed at the carved words in the cold stone walls. You've all heard the Gettysburg Address, delivered in 1863:

"Fourscore and seven years ago
our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation ... ."

I looked over at the other people who were reading the same words: a middle-aged black couple and two teenagers who looked like their children. We read on, in silence:

"... conceived in Liberty,
and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal ... ."

As I glanced at the four black people at my side, my thoughts wandered, far away, to my father's home, in which there is a wonderful watercolor painting of the Lusterfjord in Norway. I learned early in life that my great-grandfather, Peder Heltne, was born "There, in that little white house just up from that old stone church." In 1866, Peder boarded a small boat at the Luster dock and sailed to Bergen, and then on to America. He was headed for Iowa, which had only become a state 20 years earlier.

1866. Three years after Lincoln's Gettysburg oration. My ancestors weren't even in this country when Washington was president, or when the White House was built. At the time Lincoln gave this address, my great grandfather was still fishing in the Lusterfjord and tending sheep in the Jotenhiem Mountains. And yet I had marched (or slid) that day from the Capitol to the Lincoln
Memorial, feeling very much like I was experiencing my history. I belong here!
Lyrics and tunes had been running through my head: “This—is—MY—Country!” I had never doubted it. The history books had all confirmed it; they showed pictures of people like me settling this country, and moving westward. Never had I been made to feel that I didn’t belong here.
I looked again at my chance-companions. I wondered what they were thinking. The United States of America is over 200 years old. If the ancestors of the people beside me were slaves, it is very likely they arrived on these shores 200 or even 300 years ago. One or two hundred years before mine. I wondered if they had always been made to feel like they belonged.

“. . . dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. . . ”

My thoughts wandered again, this time to my 19-year-old son. He is Asian by birth, adopted when he was 2-1/2 months old. America is all he has ever known. Except for a brief time in Arizona when we were on leave at the university there, Decorah, Iowa is all he has ever known.
He grew up collecting baseball cards, cheering for the Cardinals and hating the Twins. His favorite food is hamburgers and Lutheran church supper casseroles. And yet there were times when other people felt he didn’t belong. “It’s so wonderful you have adopted this beautiful little baby,” I was told by an elderly woman at church. “But what are you going to do when he learns to talk and you can’t understand him?”
Some of the encounters haven’t been so humorous. During his sophomore year at college, he went back to school after Christmas with a new rugby shirt fresh from under the Christmas tree. It was brightly striped, with the letters USA boldly printed on the pocket. At a party one night, a fellow student grabbed him by the shirt, yanked off the pocket and yelled hatefully, “What are you doing in that shirt? You’re not an American!”

Not an American? The only language he speaks is English, much to his high school Spanish teacher’s dismay. He plays football, and basketball, and baseball, and used to wear a red letter jacket with a big blue “D.” He listens to loud terrible music, fishes for trout, and in a hundred other ways, except for his black hair and his beautiful brown skin, he is like his other Decorah classmates. Yet at that party on the university campus where he goes to school, he didn’t belong. Oh, his friends rescued him that night; they explained that “he was one of us.” He really did belong. His parents, you see, were white. They were Americans.
But the words on the cold stone wall say that we are all created equal. . . Was my son suddenly “more equal” because his parents were white? Was he not “equal” until people knew that his parents were white? I think he has spent a fair amount of time wondering, “where do I belong?”

My father-in-law, Gustav Simon Røyksund, left Bergen, Norway, on the 15th of September, 1923, on the vessel called the Olympic. The First World War had ended not long before, and a hectoliter of herring was selling for one crown. Two years before, it had sold for 100 crowns. “So,” Gus told the interviewer in the oral history project, “I started to think, shall I migrate or shall I go sailing?” He had a chance to go sailing, but would have had to sign up for three years in the tropics. “Well, I never had much liking for the tropics; I like cold weather. So I said, ’No, I am not going to sign up for three years, because that’s too long to be in the tropics for me. I’ll go to America’. . . . There was emigrants from every nation in Europe—Scandinavia, Italian, French, Spanish, Polish. And I tell you, it was a Babel.”

When he got to Ellis Island, he was asked to say his name. “Gustav Simon Røyksund.”

“Oh, that will never do. What was your father’s name?”

“Simon Røyksund.”


He may have been Gustav Simon Simonson on government papers, but the hotel register in Bergen, where he stayed when he went back to Norway to visit, says Gustav Røyksund stayed there on his way home.

Gustav Simon Røyksund. Some fifty years later, as his father lay dying of cancer, his son (my husband), who at the time was called Conrad Simonson, reclaimed the family name. Two men
were very happy that day.

Gus goes on in the oral history to tell of searching for a place where he felt like he belonged. “When you are born on an island, you are removed from anything that you call a crowd. I have always had an aversion—even today, I don’t want to live in the city.” He tells of the journey from Sandstone to Duluth to the Dakotas; doing all kinds of work: picking potatoes, road work, deckhand on a fishing boat, harvesting for a farmer in Youngstown, North Dakota. Mr. Sortland, a farmer there, had come from the same island in Norway. Gus writes of his experience there, “I never been any place in my life where I was treated better than I was by Sortland. If I had been the son in the house, I couldn’t have been treated better.” He belonged. But the harvest ended, and so did the work. So he boarded the train to Tacoma, Washington, where, he said, “there were Norwegians wherever you went.” After fishing many years for other people, he finally acquired his own halibut boat. “Sometimes you got lots of fish, sometimes you didn’t get so many. I was accustomed to that. I had no problem there. I was right at home. That felt good.” He finally belonged.

What does it mean “to belong”? Many of us belong to all kinds of groups. We want to be accepted. As we are. When I was growing up on a farm, the same farm where Peder Heltne came in 1866, there was a wonderfully strong and supportive community of neighbors who shared their lives in a very real way. It was the early 50’s, “before TV”—Saturday night entertainment meant gathering at the next farm to play cards, and “honky-tonk” piano, and to listen to old Uncle Gilbert play the fiddle. It was a very warm and safe feeling. We were almost family. Even lots of the neighbors who weren’t Heltnes. We were “alike.” We belonged.

Every now and then, a neighbor lady would show up in our farmyard early in the morning to kidnap my mother and me for a “Come as You Are” coffee party. We joined other neighbors taken equally unaware; some in housecoats and curlers, others in barn clothes. The hostess was disappointed if she didn’t utterly surprise people,—there was much laughter at discovering the condition in which the guests would arrive. Years later, I asked my aunt why Mrs. Cundiff, the neighbor to the north, was never invited to “come as she was.”

“Oh, we asked her once, but she didn’t fit. She’s Irish, you know.”

There must have been some cruel, lonely times if you were living in Worth County in 1950, and happened to have been born to immigrant parents from the “wrong” country. And at my house, that meant just about anybody who wasn’t Norwegian. You were safe, and you belonged, as long as you were “just like us.” Come As You Are didn’t really mean “come as you are.” It meant “come and be like us.”

I wonder if that black family who stood near me at the Lincoln Memorial feel like they’ve been invited to come as they are. I wonder if the black students on our Lutheran campuses, and Asian and Spanish students, feel like they can really come as they are. Are they made to feel, like Mrs. Cundiff, that they “don’t belong”? I wonder how many of the neighbors knew that Mrs. Cundiff had a beautiful soprano voice? I used to walk over there and listen to her sing when she was hanging clothes out on the line. I assure you, her singing was finer than my great uncle’s fiddle! How much richer our Saturday nights could have been, had we wanted Mrs. Cundiff to belong.

After I had been in Luster i Sogn, Norway, and had visited the very house where my great grandfather grew up—that white house in the beautiful old watercolor painting—I wondered he would leave the majesty of those spectacular mountains rising out of the sea, and move to Iowa? Iowa: described by a New York reporter during the 1988 presidential campaign as “having all the geographic interest of a rumpled bedsheet.”

I think I know at least two reasons why Peder Heltne came to Iowa. First, he came here because he knew people here. He thought that if he needed help, it might be there; that if there were going to be parties, he might be invited; that he would belong. And second, he hoped that America was a better place than where he had grown up. As beautiful as Luster was, it was at that time also harsh, and narrow, and poor. His older brother had inherited the farm. And America was the New World, a second chance.
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We still, at times, pretend we are all Norwegians in a Norwegian college; that there are no Irish at our parties. My great grandfather was both right and wrong about this country. It is a place where we can belong. It is still a place where people want to belong. But it is not because all of us are Norwegians, or because Luther College is only for Olsons, and Petersons, and Heltnes. In our faith and in our lives, there is room to disagree; there is room to struggle. We share this space. We don’t want to iron out the rumples in the bedsheet to make a smooth but uninteresting surface. We like the surprise of a new wrinkle that we hadn’t seen or thought of, before. I really do believe what Abraham Lincoln said, that “all men are created equal”... that all people are created equal. But I am very glad that we are not created the same. I believe that we all belong here, together; not because we were carbon-copied, but because if we want this nation to survive as a worthwhile and beautiful place, we have to believe that we are all essential. There are no non-essential workers that the government can just “send home.” All of us must stay here “at work” no matter how bad the storm. All of us belong at the party.

My maternal grandmother, my other great-grandparents, my mother-and father-in-law, all became Americans by passing through Ellis Island. They chose their citizenship here. This is my country because of their choices. And it is not only my country. It is also my son’s country, even if he doesn’t look like his adopted parents or grandparents. I want him to belong. It is our country. If we choose not to be greedy, there are still resources to share. It is a far better country because of the wonderful differences. Luther is a better college because of the wonderful differences. Let’s throw a party and invite both Mrs. Cundiff and Uncle Gilbert; maybe Uncle Gilbert will learn a few Irish folksongs, and Mrs. Cundiff might learn to play the fiddle!

Let’s all come as we are.

GHAZAL OF GOD

Don’t look to me for astonishment;
I can’t turn bathtubs into wine troughs.

Lightning is not anger.
it is the sky celebrating itself.

You speak the Scientific Method.
You have never watched a child grow.

Stars, each a melodic resonance,
chart the value of symphony.

Don’t think of them as scars, he says, but as strands
of lacework, pathways through the gnarled forest.

Heath Davis Havlick
SUPPOSE

Suppose love changed
because we were not true,
and candles in cafes began to gutter.
And people could not sleep at night
but lay awake for nothing.
Letters would come and go
and rain splash idly on the town,
because love changed
because we were not true.

Suppose truth changed
because we could not love.
We’d go to the store because we had the legs
and hear peculiar strains in the onion aisles
and ask the produce supervisor
to change back to the static.
Parsnips would turn into rams’ horns,
the days would burn,
and nights would wring us dry,
because truth changed
because we could not love.

Suppose hope changed
because we could not sleep,
and mornings came
only to gum our eyes.
Near cemeteries there would spring up
support groups for the living,
and sex would be like
waiving a parking ticket.
We could not grow up
into anything wrenching.

Is it not
the most remarkable thing
that we can love
and be true
and dwell in hope?

William Aiken
The fact sheet sent out to prospective fellows by the American Institute of Yemeni Studies advises, “If you are a light sleeper, you may want to bring earplugs, to cut down the volume of the early morning prayer.” Being a father of two daughters and conditioned to listen for that cry in the night then consult with my spouse as to whose turn it is, I now qualify as a lighter sleeper; I threw a pair of earplugs into my shaving kit.

Arriving in Sana’a, the capital of Yemen, at 2:30 a.m., I had just put my bags down and lowered my body onto a too-soft mattress after thirty-six hours of travel when the first mu’adhīn began to rail the Tasbih followed by three or four other mu’adhīns clearing their throats over neighboring mosques’ PA systems to make sure the volume was sufficiently high and then chanting their own Tasbih. For seemingly hours the mu’adhīns competed with one another and I remained awake estimating the relative proximity of the various mosques, gauging wind directions (for sometimes one PA system dominated and then faded) and, of course, appraising the musicality of the mu’adhīns’ voices. The Tasbih, which I later found out is a Zaydis early morning exhortation—unique to Yemen—is followed by the Fajr (early morning prayer) at 3:50 a.m., followed by the Dula (sunrise call to prayer) at 5:25 a.m. Each prayer lasts about a half hour and seemed to me to fade into the next. In America we switch on religion on Sunday mornings and, if devout, a few minutes scattered through the week. In Yemen Moslems appear to learn to switch off religion which blares at them six times a day. One refrain in the Fajr seems particularly salient: as-Salāt Khayr min an-Nawm! (Prayer is better than sleep!)—and woe be to the visitor who tries to get any.

Perhaps a sentence or two about the reason I traveled to Yemen. Research I have undertaken on the economic history of the Horn of Africa (Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Djibouti) suggests deep and longstanding relations with the Arabian Peninsula and especially Yemen, the country directly across the Red Sea from the Horn. Yet no one has written on trade, commerce, monetary issues, or various other economic indices for the purpose of a comparative economic history of Africa and Arabia. My trip to Yemen was a reconnaissance to explore government and private archives and conduct interviews with elderly merchants and retired officials. While in Sana’a I stayed at the American Institute for Yemeni Studies, a large villa which has accommodations for seven fellows, plus kitchen facilities, a library, offices, and two public audience rooms known as the diwan and mafraj. Invariably between three to six other archaeologists, anthropologists, and historians were in residence, some of them taking intensive Arabic classes, others conducting field research; in any case, the kitchen was the central gathering place where discussions about Yemen, the Yemenese character, and Islam usually began around 6:00 a.m. when bleary-eyed and dragging we would stumble to the kitchen for a much-needed cup of coffee and ask, “When did the mu’adhīn wake you up?”

So “oriental” is Yemen that seldom did conversation stray beyond the country or, in true post-modernist fashion, beyond deconstructing our own “orientalisms.” My most lasting impression of Yemen is its devotion to tradition. All buildings in Sana’a are of traditional
architecture constructed with locally quarried stone colored brick red, granite grey, and sandstone and laid in intricate design, especially framing the doors and windows. To the revolution of the population, Yemenia Airlines built a modern steel framed highrise with a reflective glass facade. It was so chided that no one has dared break architectural norms for some years now. Tradition is also seen in dress: the majority of the men and boys wear juta (loose cotton skirts) held up by their jambiya, a ceremonial dagger worn on a stylized belt at their waist; women are draped in black robes and veiled, even their hands are covered by black gloves. Certainly western tastes exist; the number of electronic stores and boutiques attest to that, yet there appears to be a palpable distaste for aping the West and fierce pride in Islamic culture, giving the society an integrity and sense of identity absent in much of the rest of the Middle East.

The dominant form of religious expression is Zaydis Islam, which more than fifty percent of the Yemeni population profess. Islam, like many major religions, is divided into sects or "denominations." The original schism between the two main sects, Sunnis and Shi'ites, arose over who was to rule the theocratic state of emergent Islam in the seventh and eighth centuries. Following the death of the Prophet Muhammad, rivalry over succession centered around the imam (theocratic leader) was an elected or hereditary office. 'Ali, cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad, claimed the imamate for himself and his line; however, the electoral elite of Medina (latter to become the Sunnis) saw otherwise. To distill a long and elaborate history, details of which constitute the corpus of the abridged, yet incomplete, eight volume Encyclopedia of Islam, the Shi'ite or Legitimist Party of 'Ali broke away for political reasons and added the theological disension later. The relevance of this digression is to situate the Zaydis between these two major groups.

Zaydis are considered the most moderate of the Shi'ite factions for they are closest to the Sunnis, sometimes in fact referred to as the "fifth school" of the four Sunnis schools. Moreover, they reject the Shi'ite notion that the imam is a quasidivine person with miraculous powers. To confuse characterizing Zaydis further, while deriding Sufi mysticism as being too ecstatic for pious believers, Zaydis youth are encouraged to gather in mosques Friday afternoons and chant a Dhikr, a mystical couplet sung repetitively with trance-like results—a practice other pious sects shun. In reality, though, Zaydis and Sunnis inhabit the same neighborhoods and worship in the same mosques. Yet despite being an amalgam of various theological, judicial, and political streams of Islam, Zaydis Islam displays a certain confidence and vitality missing in other parts of the Middle East.

The power of Zaydis Islam on the lives of the Yemeni is demonstrable, perhaps most intensely felt by women forced to wear black robes made of nylon or other non-breathable, synthetic material and either veils covering the entire face or a shawl and veil with only a slit for their eyes. It is disconcerting to be crossing a street and see a completely veiled woman at the wheel of a Toyota Land Cruiser bearing down on you. In a conversation I had with the microfilm archivist at the Aden Public library, one of two conversations I had with a Yemenese woman, I asked her whether she found it uncomfortable to wear such hot, black clothes, considering that June temperatures in Aden are routinely over 100°F with an 80-90 percent humidity. Her response was that five years ago women wore western clothes with only a shawl over their heads, but now since the civil war and the unification of Northern and Southern Yemen in 1994, the Zaydis of the North, around Sana'a, have imposed their traditions on all Yemeni women. She went on to say that often she feels like she is going to faint and now prefers to simply remain at home which is, of course, the intent of the edict. Western condemnation of the veil persists, but fails to understand the rationale for modest dress decreed for both men and women or recognize the goal of the original injunction, which was to minimize disension and conflict within the community of believers.

Prior to the diaspora of Yemenite Jewry to Israel this century, thriving Jewish communities existed in every city. Hindu and Christian communities also worshipped openly; now the stridency of Islam in Yemen renders other religions invisible. Proudful, resilient, perhaps a bit xenophobic are the impressions this Western tourist attributes to Zaydis Islam, but that paints too
Qat is an acquired skill. Only the youngest and freshest leaves are suitable. The leaves themselves are not swallowed; instead, they are pushed against one cheek, where the chewed paste forms a slimy ball that grows steadily as new leaves are added. Maintaining that lump between your teeth and cheek is a complicated trick... Some kind of anatomical adaptation obviously occurs over many years of chewing; old men’s cheeks often appear extraordinarily wrinkled when empty but are capable of holding a wad of qat the size of a tennis ball. Those with the most bulging cheeks are admired most.

Qat is a social drug and all business transpires at qat parties. From noon until around 4:00 stores are closed and streets deserted. Men and women are at qat parties, not together, though nevertheless in almost equal numbers. Once more quoting from Lonely Planet’s Guide to Yemen: “Every male Yemeni has to attend such parties at least once a week; those who can afford it attend daily. A man who avoids these parties will soon be regarded as some kind of freak, a voluntary social outcast.” The prevalence of qat chews extends from peasant to president, “nobody has a say at the government level if he’s not invited to President Salah’s qat parties.”

One weekend some of us from the institute rented a Land Cruiser to travel to Shahara, and to Sada, the seat of Zaydis Islam. Our driver began the tour by driving cautiously; however, around noon he pulled out his bundle of qat and our speed rose steadily. The speed bumps one encounters every few hundred yards in every town are known by their French nickname: gendarmes allongés meaning “lounging policemen.” This seems apropos since most Yemeni policemen are propped up by pillows on Persian carpets in some friend’s mafraj chewing all afternoon. Lounging policemen are rather ineffectual attempts to induce wired drivers to reduce their speed and take notice of pedestrians, yet according to the Yemen Times the majority of fatal accidents take place between 2:00 and 6:00 p.m.

Yemenese believe many things about qat: it will increase endurance; conversely it helps one to relax. It is said to ease hunger—necessary in the desert; conversely it is customarily chewed before a banquet because it increases appetite. It is said to alleviate sexual drive; conversely one old man in a minibus told me how it strengthened his potency “five or ten times.” You get the idea.

My own experience at qat chews (please recall that all business transpires over qat) was interviewing merchants and government officials. Staying lucid to take notes and ask sensible questions, I had opportunity to observe its effects. For the first couple hours conversation was animated and fast as the stimulant took
effect; however, as the afternoon wore on the interviewees would become depressed and introspective, affording this interviewer a convenient time to say “Thanks” and slip away.

The effects of qat on the environment and economy go well beyond the highs and lows of drug usage. The ecological issue is not that fields are being taken out of crops and planted in qat, but that qat requires prodigious amounts of water. Now even semi-arid mountainsides have labyrinths of irrigation piping traversing, ascending and descending from one terrace to the next. Hydrologists estimate that the water table will be depleted before 2010. The Romans gave the name Arabia Felix to Yemen when they conquered it in 25 BC in recognition of its fertile soil and climate, but one has to remember the Roman soldiers had just slogged through the sands of Arabia and any vegetation must have looked lush. In reality, rainfall is meager and an exhausted subterranean water table would be catastrophic.

Ibrahim, an Ethiopian refugee I met who had not yet acquired the taste, could not figure out how men are able to spend between 400 to 1200 riyals (US$4–12) per day on qat when so many of them are unemployed and when an unskilled laborer earns around 350 to 500 riyals a day and a skilled worker only double that. Official statistics bear this out. GDP for Yemen in 1995 was close to US$7.65 billion implying a per capita figure of around US$500. However, economist Gerd Nonneman reports in a reprint in the Yemen Times that “for an indication of the ‘real’ picture concerning the standard of life in the country, this figure probably needs to be doubled.” The formal GDP figure ignores the performance of the informal sector in which most of the qat is transacted. Nonneman acknowledges that “about half of Yemen’s economic activity [does] not appear in the statistics.” My Ethiopian friend, Ibrahim, confided that to augment his meager wages as a waiter in a restaurant he deals in qat.

This points to another characteristic of Yemen besides the government’s inability to regulate the economy: the government politically controls only about half of the country. Areas of the northern mountainous regions and huge expanses of the desert to the east remain tribal. Fire fights are common, and the Yemenese army is deployed not against foreign aggressors but internal clan skirmishing in which the President and his family participate with the aid of the army. A few kilometers north of Sada, the seat of Zaydis Islam, is Suq at–Talh, Arabia’s largest arms market—AK47 submachine guns are sold by the hundreds, grenades are available over the counter, land mines are displayed, and land-to-air missile and tank purchases suppos­edly can be negotiated. Legal? In an area where sheikhs of the Bakil tribes govern, who is to say what is legal and what is smuggling?

What the rest of the world dubs illegal trade the Yemenese specialize in. Another example is the trade in endangered species. All Sierra Club-conscious Westerners are aware of the plight of African rhinos; fewer people know that Yemen is the chief consumer of rhino horn. The hilt of the most highly valued jambiyas are made of rhinoceros horn and inlaid with old gold coins. Prices for those jambiyas are insane, anywhere from US$3000 to over US$9000 for a knife whose flimsy blade does not even cut well. The surprising thing, though, is that they are found in every market—no wonder rhino populations are having a tough time rebuilding.

To many foreign visitors Yemen comes across as unruly and at times Yemenese men can be rather belligerent, but these rash conclusions highlight only one side of the Yemenese character. Yemenese hospitality is the hospitality of the desert, where if one comes in peace, all one’s needs will be attended to. Ibn Khaldun, the four­teenth-century Arab historian who probed the relationship between history and culture, wrote words that this first-time visitor found true to his own experience:

Because of the characteristics of wildness in them [the Arabs], they are, of all peoples, too refractory for one to submit to another, on account of their toughness, pride, lofty ambition, and rivalry for supremacy. Rarely, are their aspirations united. When, however, religious law [Islamic law] exists ... the restraining of them comes from within themselves, and the character of haughtiness and rivalry passes from them.
One of the many pointed developments in Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* concerns a pouting cook who feels that the men on his air force base don't appreciate the fine cuisine he labors to provide for them. So to teach the men a lesson, he puts soap cakes into their mashed potatoes, even though he knows that if they eat it, they'll get sick. And they do get sick. But that doesn't stop them from eating it, doesn't even stop them from coming back for seconds.

It is my premise that the major Hollywood studios are just like that sour-spirited cook. And America's moviegoers are just like the men on the air base. Hollywood serves us up soap cakes of dreck, and the moviegoing public keeps coming back for more. During the long summer season that starts before Memorial Day and stretches all the way to Labor Day, Hollywood serves up little other than soap cakes. And to prove how smart those mean Hollywood cooks are, we've just spent enough admission cash on two of those soap cakes to place them among the highest grossing films of all time.

**that she blows**

This past summer's first big hit was *Twister*. Written by Anne-Marie Martin and Michael Crichton (who never met a scientific topic he couldn't populate with preposterous characters and situations) and directed by Jan De Bont, *Twister* is the story of a team of scientists who study tornadoes, an undertaking that requires them to race along country roads behind their internal combustion engines to get as close a look at the devastating storms as possible. There's probably at least a germ of factual basis for what happens here. But as you know, like soap cakes in your mashed potatoes, germs make you sick.

The story goes like this: Jo Harding (Helen Hunt) and Bill Harding (Bill Paxton) used to be married (actually they're still married— their divorce papers still need her signature to be finalized). Jo and Bill are a couple of crack weather scientists with a speciality in tornadoes. Together they used to head a team of tornado chasers. Bill even dreamed up a new gizmo that he wanted to stick in a tornado's bottom like a suppository. As I understand the concept, once in position, the gizmo would enable him to prove beyond the shadow of a scientific doubt that a tornado is a big pile of wind that whirls around really, really fast.

But then Bill decided Jo was obsessed, and so they broke up. (Wasn't this the domestic plot of *Outbreak*, one of 1995's soap cakes?) And Bill decided to become a weatherman. And now he's got this drawlin' brunet girlfriend named Melissa Reeves (Jami Gertz) who isn't nearly as stupid as she sounds, looks and acts. We know she's not that stupid because she's a doctor of some kind and has a practice of some kind in something called "reproduction therapy." It's fortunate that Melissa has this practice since she doesn't have anything to do except sound, look and act stupid, nothing except talk to people on the phone about sex acts.

Well, Bill really wants Jo to sign those divorce papers so that he and Melissa can legalize their own sex acts. But when he goes to capture that needed signature, Jo springs a big surprise on him. She's built his tornado suppository gizmo. And wouldn't you know it, there's supposed to be a whole string of tornadoes just about to happen. And what's a suppository if you don't insert it? So—just this once—Bill agrees to accompany Jo and his former team of colorful lunatics on an insertion quest. There are
just two minor problems. First, Bill’s archrival, Jonas Miller (Cary Elwes), has stolen Bill’s idea and built a suppository gizmo of his own. Even more dastardly, Jonas has taken, yes, gasp, “corporate money.” This means that Jonas and his team drive around in nice internal combustion vehicles rather than battered pick-up trucks. And this also means that Jonas’ gizmo actually looks like a suppository, whereas poor Bill’s gizmo looks like a 1930s washing machine. The second minor problem is evidently less troubling: namely that chasing tornadoes is the kind of activity that frequently involves getting killed.

There are a few hundred thousand things wrong with all this, but let me list just 10. 1) In the movie’s opening scene, Jo’s father tries to hold onto the cellar door during a tornado and gets kited off to kingdom come for his efforts. What kind of nitwit would do such a thing? 2) Given that Jo and Bill are geniuses enough to build a tornado suppository gizmo, does it make sense that they wouldn’t devise a superior procedure for inserting it? Their process involves driving up to the front of a tornado, getting out of their pick-up, lifting the gizmo to the ground by hand, and then driving away as fast as possible. Somewhere in there it seems they’re required to yell, “Damn, this thing is stuck.”

3) Why is Jonas deemed a sell-out for getting a corporate sponsor? How is it that getting a corporate sponsor constitutes being “in it for the money and not for the science”? How much money is there in sticking a suppository gizmo up the bottom of a tornado? 4) When Jo and Bill have a close encounter with their first two tornadoes, why don’t they even attempt to insert their suppository gizmo? Is it because the filmmakers don’t want to give away too early in the movie that a tornado is a big pile of wind that swirls around really, really fast? 5) How do Jo and Bill manage to arrange the schedule of approaching tornadoes so that they can have a nice leisurely lunch with Jo’s Aunt Meg (Lois Smith)? And once you got a gander at Aunt Meg, how long did it take you to begin chanting “twister bait?”

6) When that second meanest tornado throws a telephone pole on top of Bill’s truck, how do he and Jo get it off there? 7) When some tornado debris cracks the windshield on Bill’s truck, where did he find that speedy glass repair shop so that it is already fixed in the next shot? 8) When Jo, Bill and the gang take refuge in a grease pit and car windshields are shattered all around them, how come no one is turned into humanburger by the flying glass? 9) When Jo and Bill try to outrun that meanest of tornadoes on foot, how come they aren’t skewered like pieces of shish kebab by those fence pickets which are flung through the air like arrows? And 10) if you had to pick one character you knew would be killed in this picture, how long would it take you to pick Jonas?

kickin’ intergalactic butt

Of course, the monster hit of the summer of 1996 was Independence Day, a serious rival to pass Jurassic Park (the big soap cake of 1993) as the biggest ticket seller in motion picture history. To my mind the primary achievement of Independence Day was its success in invoking the subtitle to Stanley Kubrick’s Dr. Strangelove: “How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb.”

For 40 years I worried that some fatal miscommunication between us and the Ruskies was going to result in a short nuclear war and a long hereafter. Then came the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe and the breakup of the Soviet Union, and I breathed about a 10-second sigh of relief -- until I realized that all those nukes were still out there and might next relocate themselves in the hands of someone with the political agenda of Pol Pot. But just about the time I started wishing for an array of international treaties to dismantle that forest of H-bomb-tipped ICBMs, I saw Independence Day and realized how foolish I’d been. We may need those nukes any day now to blast E.T. right back to his own godforsaken galaxy.

Written by Dean Devlin and Roland Emmerich and directed by the latter, Independence Day is the story of an alien invasion and heroic human efforts to send those gremlin-headed, roach-bodied, snake-fingered, bird-legged creatures (who, like us, are too smart for their own good) an atomic invitation to get the hell out of Dodge. This is the way it goes down. Somewhere about a billion (maybe more, who can tell, actually) of these unfriendly E.T.s arrive from Way Out There in the Mother of All Space Ships which is about a quarter the size of
our moon. Can you imagine the hangar in which they built that baby? Once they get just outside our atmosphere, they pull up and dispatch a handful of smaller space ships which are still so humongous that if we hadn’t already seen the Mother of All Space Ships we’d think these daughter space ships were mothers themselves. Each daughter is a big round sucker about 15 miles across. They adopt hover positions right up above some of the world’s biggest and most important cities. In the U.S. of A. they select New York, Los Angeles and Washington, which were the popular choices with everybody not residing there. Then these aliens just sit there and menace us for a while, letting us sweat and try toadying up to them, taking their own E.T. time for no good reason I can imagine. For the first hour of the movie they mainly cover us with shadows. Finally, they use this big blue laser to blast our buildings and cars to smithereens. (Did you ever wonder if Hollywood directors take so much pleasure in smashing up cars because they just hate the traffic in L.A.?) No doubt a bunch of people get killed too, but we wouldn’t want to concentrate on that since this is basically a feel-good movie.

Anyway, in this really cool escape, President Whitmore (Bill Pullman) roars out of D.C. on Air Force One with the huge fire storm of the alien destruction licking at his rear wheels. Whitmore is like Bill Clinton with a war record instead of a record for not inhaling. He’s got a pretty wife (Mary McDonnell) and a little daughter (Mae Whitman). He wants to do the right thing and keep everybody from getting too scared and surrendering to panic. But don’t push him too far. He’ll bend, but he won’t break. Blow up a trio of his cities and you’re bound to make him mad. What I’m saying is that he’s the kind of guy who can feel your pain and stick a nuke down your smokestack, too. And with the president at large, the world has a fighting chance, although it’s not much clear how.

Well, a bunch of inconsequential stuff happens at various locations around the U.S. until the president orders a full aerial assault on one of the daughter spaceships. This is somewhat akin to trying to sink an aircraft carrier with a BB gun. As everyone knows who ever watched even one episode of Star Trek, all spaceships come with invisible shields. So eventually humans have to figure out a way to get all the marauding space ships to lower their shields so they can be effectively nuked. This involves a mysterious computer virus concocted by nerd scientist David Levinson (Jeff Goldblum) and flown right into the uterus of the Mother of All Spaceships by crack Marine pilot Steven Hiller (Will Smith).

Now I have this theory that we finally beat these E.T.s because we’re smarter than they are. For instance, they can read all our communications, but they don’t bother to do it when we’re launching our virus attack at them. And they may have these daughter spaceships that are about the size of Mt. Everest. But they ain’t got nukes. And the daughters themselves are kind of lumbering. It’s gonna take them thirty-six hours to wipe out human civilization. Why, between us and the Ruskies we could blow the world up in less than half an hour. These daughters can only do one city at a time and then they have to sail off at about snail speed to aim their lasers at the next town. So who’s better? We may be smaller but we got a lot more lead in our pencils.

Of course, I’ll admit there are some things about Independence Day that I don’t altogether understand. I didn’t know, for instance, that if you’ve flown one plane, you’ve flown them all, including all those built in Way Out There. But then I can’t fly any plane that isn’t made out of paper. And I don’t quite grasp why all the people in New York start looting each other’s houses just as soon as this big daughter ship shadow shows up. You’d think people would be fully occupied with such activities as screaming and wringing out their socks. Also, I don’t quite follow how people like Steve Hiller’s girlfriend Jasmine (Vivica Fox) can outrun fireballs when Air Force One can barely do it at full throttle. But maybe Vivica Fox is just a pseudonym for Gail Devers. Mostly, I don’t understand how folks get over the deaths of their loved ones so quickly. The president and his daughter seem kind of sad when the First Lady dies from internal bleeding that no one thinks to treat with say, surgery and transfusions. But the next day after the president and his men have kicked some intergalactic butt, the First Lady’s demise seems an ancient concern. Of course, given that she’s the First Lady and all, maybe she’s screwed up the nation’s chance for decent health care reform and so got just the kind of medical atten-
tion she deserved.

In sum, Independence Day is pleasing all those multitudes for darn good reasons. It's got a rousing "We will not go quietly into the night" speech from the president that will make you want to leap from your seat and salute something. It gives us an enemy so ruthless and irredeemable that only the most rabid animal rights advocate would speak against our smoking his butt. And what feels better than absolutely self-righteous violence. Critically, most of the human race is arguably brain dead, and so is this movie. Republican presidential candidate Bob Dole has been widely critical of the moral tone set for the country by Hollywood. But when he saw Independence Day, a movie in which no one can remember thirty million dead Americans for even twenty-four hours, he said, "We won, the end. Leadership. America. I like it."

Need I say more?

bringing in the reeves

Not all summer movies actually manage to become blockbusters, however. Some just remain blockbuster wannabes. An example is Andrew Davis' Chain Reaction which destroys almost as much property as either Twister or Independence Day but did so before a lot fewer paying customers. It's interesting to contemplate why that was.

Written by J.F. Lawton and Michael Bortman, Chain Reaction stars Keanu Reeves as Eddie Kasalivich, a University of Chicago undergraduate machinist (is that a U of C major these days?) assigned to a high priority science project run by the idealistic Dr. Alistair Barkley (Nicholas Rudall) and overseen by the preternaturally calm Mr. Paul Shannon (Morgan Freeman, who will soon be deleting this film from his resume). Barkley and his team of international physicists and one undergraduate machinist are trying to figure out how to use lasers to split water molecules into their hydrogen and oxygen components. The oxygen can be put to good use for, say, breathing, and the hydrogen can be used for clean fuel. According to Dr. Barkley, there's enough hydrogen in a single glass of tap water to run the city of Chicago for a year. (My precise calculations indicate that means I could heat, cool, light and run the TV at my house for the rest of my life with just a thimbleful.) So you can see how important it is to

Helen Hunt and Bill Harding in Warner Bros.' and Universal Pictures' Twister.
© 1996 Warner Bros. and Universal City Studios, Inc. Photo by David James
have an undergraduate machinist on a project like this.

Well, before you know it, the egghead physicists get everything figured out except for the tubes running in and out of this one important jar. Then, presto, Eddie gives this tube a twist and the whole thing a rattle and the world is just about to have enough energy to grow all the food we'd ever need in a hothouse on Antarctica. But it seems that Dr. Barkley is such an idealist that, rather than patenting his discovery so that he, his physicists and lone machinist could become indecently rich, he's planning on giving the technology away. Put the info on the internet so that all the little eggheads with a machinist friend anywhere in the world they could get ahold of tubes, a laser, and a glassful of water a year, could turn their areas completely energy self-sufficient. Is he altruistic or what? Nobody was altruistic in either *Twister* or *Independence Day* so that may be one of this film's key problems.

Now we might imagine a couple of folks who'd look unkindly on the proliferation of such technology, not even including people in desert countries who couldn't spare the water. I'm thinking of the stockholders in Exxon, for instance. Well, we're right to anticipate that Dr. Barkley's scheme to satisfy the world's energy needs forever will provoke resistance. And since Barkley is played by an actor we've never heard of before, we're right to suspect that he will shortly be known as the late Dr. Barkley. But, in the picture's lone surprise, the villains are not oil company capos, not even an oil-rich sheik worrying about having to trade in his Mercedes for a used camel. No, in the best tradition of Oliver Stone, the villain is the CIA. But hey, to make sure *Chain Reaction* is not merely another anti-federal-government tirade, the heroes of the piece are FBI agents. (Not counting that all-important undergraduate machinist, of course.) If my memory is correct, an FBI agent hasn't been a hero in any Hollywood production since *I Led Three Lives* ended its TV run in the fifties. So that's clearly another of the problems here.

But *Chain Reaction* does come complete with all the standard Hollywood baloney. This high-tech high concept is finally just a low-rent chase flick with the CIA guys trying to capture Eddie, who splits when he discovers the good Dr. Barkley is deceased. The CIA has got all the eggheads they need to make the project work with Barkley out of the picture. But as everybody who has ever owned a car knows beyond a doubt, it's almost impossible to find a good machinist.

Now Eddie may be just a machinist, and an undergraduate machinist at that, but he's an excellent runner. He can outrun huge fireballs (a requirement for stardom in contemporary Hollywood) as well as cars and helicopters. And like every Hollywood hero, Eddie knows the exact location of that tunnel that leads to the very heart of the villain's compound, this time an isolated place in Virginia where CIA eggheads are trying to duplicate Dr. Barkley's science, sans the all-important machinist, of course. And finally, though a machinist, Eddie is a also a computer whiz who can really muck things up for the CIA eggheads once he tunnels his way into the compound.

In short, this is like every other movie this summer, only more so. So it mustn't have worked because of its unfortunate name. Didn't it occur to anybody that a chain reaction is dangerous and can lead to a bomb?

Soap cakes. Are they tasty or what?
SLEEPING WITH THE DEAD

When I woke with the slap of bird shit
on my cheek like a large, white tear,
I thought the dead had come to chastise me,
bird-like souls taking careful pot shots
at my head for sleeping on their sacred
ground. How I got there, question one,
why I slept there, number two, the night’s
distant revelries a mess of scotch and Fritos,
impromptu lessons in the lambada, salsa,
meringue and mamba (or was that the snake
the bearded bio student studied for his masters?).

We might have danced to the graves—spinning
down dark streets and bumping hips in the faint glow
of distant streetlights, remnants of the mariachi’s tune
carried like dust through the night’s thin air
converting oaks into palms, swimming pools
into crisp ocean inlets teeming with the sea’s
bright life—then stomped on the ancient graves
and rattled long-dead bones in their padded caskets,
knee joints clapping like castanets, white stones
grinding deeper in the unmowed earth,
until our hips unfolded from their constant pulse
to dump us shrieking to the graveyard grass.

But did we stop right there, or did we prop
our weary heads against the limestone blocks,
rubbing red eyes to ward off sleep in the sea-blue
moonlight, concocting tales, composing lives for the dead
just six feet down? Hell, we would have basked
in our living, aching shins and throbbing thighs
until the night petered out and danced us down to sleep
on the dew-bespeckled earth. . .

So there I woke,
a day drawn new, the blended scotch still pounding
on my brain, the tired bodies of my lambada partners
sprawled in heiroglyphs across the stone-chopped lawn.
I woke to the milk-white splash on my head,
shook my trembling fist at the singing birds,
and scratched my aching back on a child’s small stone.

Mike Chasar
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His memories of cultural cohesion in mid-century Nebraska fuel a search for possible consensus today.

We’ve come a long way. As late as 1954, when Chief Justice Earl Warren could say that we “are a Christian land governed by Christian principles,” he went on to argue that the Bible gave our founders their belief in the “freedom of belief, of expression, of assembly, of petition, the dignity of the individual, the sanctity of the home, equal justice under law, and the reservation of powers to the people” (Time, 2/14/54, 49).

Those sentiments echo Washington’s much earlier dictum that the Republic was based upon the twin pillars of religion and morality. For much of its history, the American tradition seems to have presumed that the virtues and practices provided by a common religiously-based culture are indispensable for a humane, ordered freedom.

Daniel Bell certainly argued that line in The Coming of Post-Industrial Society and in The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism. In those books he asserts that the “Protestant Ethic” provided the cultural glue for American society, polity and economy. It provided the moral grounds—the guidance system—for a coherent society. Martin Marty called this mainstream Protestant ethos the the culture. It provided the normative moral meanings and norms for the American project.

As a child of the late forties and fifties, I can attest to the reality of such a culture. It was taught in the schools, in the media, and in the institutions of higher education. It was reinforced in church and Sunday school. The few non-Christians in our town were brought up with the same moral ideals that we Christians were. These moral norms were sanctioned by both church and culture.

Though there were rebels and sinners, they knew, as did the rest of the town, that they were rebels and sinners.

I knew of no divorced parents in my town in northeastern Nebraska. Illegitimacy was unheard of though we did know of a number of “shotgun marriages.” Sex was connected with marriage...they “went together like a horse and carriage,” as Frank Sinatra assured us in a pop favorite. Co-habitors would have found no place to in-habit our town. All persons had callings and, be they ever so humble, their obligation was to do the best they could. Honest work brought blessing; laziness brought hardship. Persons were responsible for their actions; self-reliance was a central principle of life. The deserving poor and the truly unfortunate were the objects of compassion; the undeserving poor had to find their way the best they could. America’s role in the world was noble and altruistic; America was a beacon to the nations. Almost everyone belonged to a church. Martin Marty, a fellow townsmen of the same burg (along with Fred Niedner, I might add), calculated that the people in the surrounding county were 105% churched.

The the culture was real, and I have much affection for it, though I might have felt somewhat differently if I were a woman or black. I say “might” because the majority of women did not appear to find that culture as oppressive as the feminists were later to aver. Blacks would have a much better case to feel distinctly non-nostalgic about that older culture. It was avowedly racist, though not always in a crass or vicious way. For most whites it was a racism of omission rather than commission.

This Protestant culture (shared to a
great extent by Catholics) was substantive. It stipulated what the freedom that Americans enjoyed should be used for. It was not merely procedural, focusing on the "rights" to do what one pleased or entitlements to what one was owed. It said "yes" to the specific patterns and practices I have mentioned above, and "no" to attitudes and behaviors that violated them. That old culture was not Christian in any direct sense but it certainly was to a great extent the product of the churches' mission on this continent.

This old culture has not vanished by any means, and still lives strongly in many pockets of American society. It has, however, definitively lost its normative power for the whole society. As Andrew Sullivan, the gay former editor of The New Republic, approvingly put it, "Now we have only sub-cultures." The cultural unum has been fractured and we now have only Alasdair MacIntyre's fragments to depict our current condition. We now live "after virtue," to use his famous phrase, though the virtues whose loss he laments are not necessarily those of the older American culture.

Other social philosophers have made similar observations. Robert Bellah's work communicates alarm about the loss of what he calls "republican" and "biblical" virtue. Richard Neuhaus decries a naked public square denuded of substantive, religiously-grounded morality. Os Guinness points to a loss of "cultural authority" that may bring America to a chaotic and violent decline. Robert Putnam fears the consequences of bowling alone. Francis Fukuyama laments the loss of trust that accompanies the decline of reliable moral patterns. Michael Sandel outlines the poverty of the "procedural state," where "rights" and "choices" gradually liberate us from the moral practices that enable civic responsibility.

One gets the sense that things may get worse. The forces driving this emerging pluralism that threaten the basic order humans need to live in community. I see no abatement of our capitalistic culture's tendency to market hedonism and to entertain us to death while it defines down deviancy and pushes relentlessly at the limits of decency. I anticipate the continued elaboration of "rights" that undermine every local community's ability to sanction its substantive moral commitments. If the courts on their own don't "discover" more of these kind of "rights" in the Constitution, the ACLU will certainly help them. Our adversarial culture will continue to deconstruct the older culture as a socially constructed instrument of oppression.

This is not to say that there are not genuinely liberating impulses in this postmodern world. There was and is much in the old culture about which to be skeptical. Besides, too many of us enjoy the freedoms we have to do as we please. As Roger Scruton has observed, we're not ready for virtue, much as Chicago was not ready for reform. Things will have to get a lot worse before we divert our freedoms toward communal purposes. Virtue, like socialism, leaves too few free evenings.

But I must admit to being very uneasy in this world of fragments. I often feel that the common world we inhabit is in serious decline and the best thing to do is retire (literally and figuratively) to some isolated home in the Blue Ridge. But that seems premature, if not paranoid. Besides, there is much I like about the modern world. So I cast about for different strategies that might make sense for serious Christians at the dawning of a new millenium.

We might begin with several "optimistic" interpretations and responses. One of them might be termed the "progressive" orientation, to use the language of sociologist James Hunter. Progressives would simply disagree with the alarmist tone of the interpretation of the modern world given above. They believe the old culture needed thorough purging and revision. It was sexist, classist, heterosexist, and imperialist with regard to the rest of the human and the natural world. The emancipatory impulses that shattered the unum were necessary and overdue. It is only natural that we should go through some rough phases as we pass through a transition from the old to the new. But the new promises to be much more just and harmonious than the old even though we don't know exactly what that new order will look like. We must undergo with hope the confusion that necessarily arises as the tradition is revised powerfully by the liberating experience of the present. So, go with the flow; participate in the "progressive" movements of our time and hope for a new and brighter unum.
Less optimistic but yet realistically hopeful are the communitarians, who seem to be popping up as rapidly as mushrooms these days. They participate in the lamentations I have elaborated above, but believe that the good society—with a common culture—can be rebuilt by attending seriously to civil society. The intermediate organizations between state and family need to be strengthened, and communitarians seem to think American culture has the capacity to rejuvenate the civic virtues. The communitarians are much more skeptical of the centrifugal forces of “progress” than are the progressives, and therefore are much more inclined to honor the traditions of a good deal of the older culture. They are coming more and more to recognize the important role that religious institutions have played in the past, and look expectantly to the churches to play their part in rebuilding civil society. Indeed, many important communitarians—such as Elshtain and Bellah—are Christians.

These first two interpretations and strategies are held by elite sectors of American society. A third “optimistic” orientation is much more populist in character, located in the lower-middle and working classes. Just as apocalyptic in its interpretation as anything outlined above, the populists believe that they can storm the walls of American institutions and re-install the “Christian” culture that has been dismantled by the progressives. A group like the Christian Coalition, which draws upon populist sentiments among religious and cultural conservatives of all religious traditions, is an example of such populism. The religious right argues that since political levers were used to tear down the old culture, the same levers can be used to reinstate it. The silent, moral majority can exercise its muscle and “take our country back.” Such hope accrues to groups that are growing in numbers and confidence. And the world of religious conservatives is a large one indeed, mostly invisible to the mainstream Christian and secular worlds. American elites hold this “other” world in such contempt that they do not even bother to learn about the huge counter-culture that has been constructed, a culture with its own music, books, radio, TV and organizational life. The Promise-Keepers are currently the most visible part of this robust organizational life. And, different from the religious conservatives of a generation ago, this counter-culture is not a reclusive and retiring one. It is a transformative movement bent on reviving many of the older cultural norms.

There is a further populist attitude that is not nearly as “political” as the religious right but yet is fundamentally optimistic. There are many ordinary folks that believe that “this, too, shall pass away.” They observe with bemusement the fragmentation of our common culture but believe that good sense will prevail over the long run. The generic American voter, for example, seems to aim for prudent change. He or she seems diabolically—or wisely?—to aim at diffusing the more enthusiastic and concerted efforts of true-believing parties. The same people who voted for a Republican congress will vote for a Democratic president. Those who resist birth control education in the schools will vote out of office the Christian Coalition candidates for the local school board. These folks are the ordinary citizens who seem to keep their gyroscopes steady as they are buffeted to and fro by the stormy blasts of postmodernity. They believe the society will weather those blasts in the same way they have: with patience and good sense.

There are far more pessimistic interpretations and strategies than those already examined. Among the Christian elite, there is a party that could be called neo-Augustinian, that believes the barbarians have pretty much taken over our world. Heavy hitters like Alasdair MacIntyre, Stanley Hauerwas and John Milbank tend in this direction. While remaining “worldly” in an external sense (they hold prestigious university positions), these intellectuals commend a disciplined construction of a churchly Christian culture. Thoroughgoing historicists, they believe that civilization is formed by particular religious “cultural-linguistic systems.” Christendom, imperfect though it was, was such a civilization but it has been thoroughly subverted, first by the Enlightenment and then by modern secularism, especially liberalism. There is not enough left of Christian substance in the common culture to rescue and, moreover, Christians should not be in the business of imposing their will by political means. Better to be about constructing real Christian communities that will then begin to build a churchly culture and civi-
lization from the ground up. In this scenario the church would provide the “world” that we inhabit. It would not aim at transforming or managing culture. It would simply abandon its attachments to a dying pagan culture and build its own on Christian grounds. “Lord, to whom shall we go? . . . You have the words of eternal life” . . . and, one might add, cultural well-being.

An unusual variant of this perspective is offered by James Skillen in his provocative little book, Recharging the American Experiment. Skillen does not recommend that we give up serious citizenship in America, but that we limit it to a loose set of procedural rules that would order our public lives. That would be the extent of the *unum*. In his vision of “principled pluralism,” however, the real cultural content of our lives would be provided by full-blooded traditions supported by the public sphere. Skillen draws upon the Dutch Calvinist theologies that have led to what some sociologists have called the “columbization” of Dutch life. That is, the public treasury helps support the schools, neighborhood associations, social agencies, newspapers that each tradition employs to maintain and communicate its vision.

Skillen believes that such an arrangement is the most persuasive and honest for Christians and others who want both to be Americans and to possess a coherent culture. Any effort to have a common culture, a substantive *unum*, will necessarily be an imposition and will be met with distrust and resistance, much as we are experiencing today. So why not admit that there can be no common culture and instead concentrate on developing a rich pluralism that lives and lets live? Christians could then focus on building a strong subculture.

There are, of course, more populist versions of the pessimistic interpretation. On the violence-prone fringe, we have those militia movements which fervently believe a centralized state is forcibly-pressing an alien culture on them. Other non-armed survivalists have similar interpretations. And there are many grass-roots fundamentalist Christian efforts to create a separate Christian culture for themselves and their children. These groups do not enter the political sphere because they believe things are too far gone, and that it is better to withdraw to their own enclaves. They become energized only when something directly threatens them, such as when their home-schooling arrangements are threatened by legislation.

Where then, does this leave me? I find the “progressive” attitude far too optimistic about our current chaos and I think the communitarians beg the question by assuming the health of the churches. I have some affinity for the populist Christians who are entering the political fray, but shy away from their near identification of partisan political agendas with Christianity, and I think it unwise to press too hard for a common culture in the face of overwhelming pluralism, though certain specific items, for example school vouchers, seem to me worth fighting for.

I am attracted to the neo-Augustinians because I think that the churches have to get much more serious than they have been about forming their own participants, but I am reluctant to give up serious engagement with the public world, which they, and Skillen, seem to commend. That leads me to endorse something like the proposal that Os Guinness makes in his The American Hour. Unlike the progressives, Guinness does not downplay the “crisis of cultural authority” which he and I think is at the heart of our current unease. He believes with the neo-Augustinians that Christians have first to deal seriously with the crisis of cultural authority in their own religious communities. But he also suggests robust engagement with the civil and political spheres at the same time. He calls for a “chartered pluralism” wherein each faith community enters into “principled persuasion” with other perspectives in order to find an overlapping consensus on cultural norms. In this scenario, there is neither a naked public square nor a mere procedural republic nor an imposed common culture. Rather, there is an ongoing process of public deliberation to find the common ground for a common culture. Guinness hopes, as do I, that such an ongoing process would lead to neither chaos nor conformity, but some semblance of a common culture.
Letters from the Front

name tag! you’re it

Tom Willadsen

Someone asked me today what I want on my name tag. The first hundred times I was asked this I said, “My name,” in a tone of voice that is followed by “duh” when used by someone between the ages of ten and thirteen. But that response (whether “duh” is stated or implied) simply is not helpful to some people who want things to be “just so.”

In this case the asker gave me some choices: Rev. Thomas Willadsen, Rev. Willadsen, Thomas Willadsen, or Tom Willadsen. I chose the last one, though I’ll answer to any of them. I started working at a new church last November and no one knows what to call me. This is a relatively new problem in my life. When I was growing up in Peoria, IL (It’s a good place to be from, if you know what I mean), I was always “Tom W.” This handle distinguished me from Tommy R. in kindergarten, Tom Y. in first grade and Tom Y. and Tommy O. in third grade. Looking back, I have pity for Mrs. Miller, my third grade teacher. She had three Tom’s, three Tammy’s, three Tim’s, a Todd and a Tracy in a class of thirty. A year later, she retired and moved to Texas for her health. Being plain old Tom simply was not an option back then: I was Tom W.

After third grade I changed schools and the Tom ratio plummeted. Still I clung to my identity and kept the W; a simple “Tom” at the top of my math homework just looked, well, naked.

In high school I put aside my childish ways—at first. Every one of my papers had “Thomas C. Willadsen” on the upper left-hand corner, with the date underneath. My French teacher gave us a ditto sheet of homework every night, something she’d handwritten the hour before. These sheets always looked about the same, so after about the third week of class I started resubmitting earlier days’ homework, just to see what would happen.

Nothing happened.

At first I felt a sort of glee, but nothing gets pretty dull, even to a fourteen year old. So I began shortening my name. For a week I dropped my middle initial (an unappreciated oxymoron, “middle initial”), then I truncated to “Tom W., then “Tom” and finally “T.” At last “T” got a reaction!

“C’est le votre?” Mrs. Irwin queried. It was still the first semester; high school was going to be a very, very, long four years, I just knew it. I endured those years by looking ahead to when I could go away to college and become an entirely new person.

It was not to be. Suddenly switching to my middle name, Carl, seemed forced. And “Tom” is so solid, plain, and ordinary that it’s like changing the sky from blue to orange. I came to take my name’s very averageness as a challenge to be different, to be nothing like someone named Tom from Peoria is supposed to be like. It took a lot of diligence, hard work and wearing bowling shirts to formals, but I managed to deviate from the norm, safely and humanely.

Midway through my freshman year Sara, a woman who lived in my residential college who took great pride in not having that dopey silent H at the end of her name, asked me why Thomas is shortened to Tom and not Thom.

“Hell, I don’t know; that’s just how it is, accept it and get on with your life,” I reasoned with her.

She was determined to give me a silent letter, similar to the one she was so brazenly without. That summer I got letters addressed to “Ptom Willadsen.” Whenever people asked me about the silent P I told them it was short for
Thus, in chapter 1, for example, he explores the Jewish wisdom tradition to show how it was that tradition was transformed by the Jewish Christians who composed the Prologue. The tradition of personified wisdom, especially that version according to which Wisdom failed to find a home among her own people, was attractive to the Johannine community's experience of rejection among the Jews, in what Wayne Meeks has called "the continual, harmonic reinforcement between social experience and ideology."

Again, in another fascinating study in chapter 3, entitled, "Bridging Ambiguities," Ashton explores the Johannine claim that Jesus, a human being "whose father and mother are known," made himself equal to God. How could such a bold new idea, such a provocative challenge to monotheism arise? Ashton follows the scholarly convention that the historical Jesus of Nazareth did not make such a claim (based on the silence of the synoptic Gospels). But if Jesus did not say so expresssis verbis, and if, as Ashton holds, the roots of the Gospel are Jewish and not Greek, then where is one to look for the origin of such a fundamental attack upon Jewish monotheism? Ashton looks away from the term Logos and the title Son of Man, since neither of these in the Gospel account was the object of Jewish ire. Instead he proposes as key an "angel (messenger)-christology." His examination of the relevant Old Testament texts establishes such a christology as a possible bridge from Jewish monotheism to the horrified perception of ditheism; more than that Ashton does not claim. His theory however rests on two poles; one, the Jewish law of agency that posits a theoretical identity between sender and sent, alongside a suspended awareness of the difference between the two; and the other, just as vital, the particularity of the mission of Jesus, where God is the sender and Jesus his angel-emissary.

Ashton concludes his defense of historical criticism by invoking the traditional double aim of all Bible study: the first, that of understanding, or of deriving meaning (the traditional explicatio), which includes historical study; and the second, that of application, or of discovering meaning for (the traditional applicatio). He argues that "any legitimate application must build on historical criticism; otherwise it will be nothing more than a bombastic fervorino, ... an arbitrary act of interpretation; its power to persuade, divorced from any reference to the original meaning of the text, must reside solely in the rhetorical skills of the preacher, playing upon the prejudices of audience or readers."

Ashton declines himself to enter into questions of application or meaning for. However he does warn that while "feminists and liberationists, and any whose programme is based on or prompted by current ethical concerns ... may be perfectly entitled to seek ... inspiration or argument ... (in the Bible for) the cause they are eager to promote," they should "not pretend that they are attempting to understand the biblical text." But if Ashton fears application which ignores explication, he is equally afraid of a "quasi-fundamentalism setting in," a fundamentalism which ignores explication in "the conviction that the true meaning of the text is already given, and that critical exegesis, the product of merely human reasoning, has nothing of importance to add."

Ay, there's the rub. In a fundamental sense the basic meaning of the Bible, and thus its explicatio, is known in advance of historical criticism: from liturgy, from Creed, from Sunday School. These all point to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of Moses and the prophets, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who continues to work by His Spirit in His Church. And there is something deeply felt to be terribly wrong, in advance of any biblical explicatio, in every form of injustice, ancient or modern. It is one thing to say that there may be no application without proper historical explication, and Ashton has said it most cogently. But if such application as have been essayed by Ashton's bene noire—negative critics, deconstructionists, and liberationists—are admittedly over-hasty and incautious in their neglect of historical understanding, that leaves the burning question wide open: "Where shall proper explication with proper application be done?"

I think that Ashton may have left an historical clue in his observation that most biblical narratives, and certainly the Gospels, build upon already existing traditions and sources that to a greater or less extent limit as well as stimulate the creative freedom of their authors. If indeed the Bible is built upon existing traditions and sources which both limit and stimulate, then it strikes me that the where of authentic biblical study is where those limiting and stimulating traditions and sources are not merely historical vestiges, but also living realities. I speak of the Church.

Walter Keller
On poets—

Heath Davis Havlick
who last published poems in *The Cresset* in the Trinity issue, 1996, works in Mt. Hermon, California. A recent message from her confides that “I had despaired of having my poems that referred to God published. . . . thanks to you all for bearing the standard.”

William Aiken

Mike Chasar
is a graduate student in creative writing at Miami University of Oxford, Ohio. This year his poems will appear in *Southern Poetry Review* and *Nimrod*.

Daniel Tobin,

J. T. Ledbetter
has sent his poetry regularly from California, where he is a member of the faculty at California Lutheran University. His story “The Red Pump” has just been anthologized in *The Best of Crosscurrents*. His work last appeared in *The Cresset* in March, 1996.

On book reviewers—

The Rev. Dwayne J. Westermann, M.Div.,
is Senior Pastor of College Evangelical Lutheran Church, Salem, Virginia. He currently serves as chair of the Virginia Synod, ELCA Committee on World Hunger.

Walter Keller
is Emeritus Professor of Theology at VU. Recently retired from full-time teaching, Professor Keller chairs a committee to study women’s roles at the Chapel of the Resurrection there.