URSULA K. LE GUIN

the wave in the mind

TALKS AND ESSAYS ON
THE WRITER, THE READER,
AND THE IMAGINATION

The WAVE in the MIND

Talks and Essays on the Writer, the Reader, and the Imagination

Ursula K. Le Guin

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PERSONAL MATTERS

INTRODUCING MYSELF

Written in the early nineties as a performance piece, performed a couple of times, and slightly updated for this volume.

I am a man. Now you may think I've made some kind of silly mistake about gender, or maybe that I'm trying to fool you, because my first name ends in *a*, and I own three bras, and I've been pregnant five times, and other things like that that you might have noticed, little details. But details don't matter. If we have anything to learn from politicians it's that details don't matter. I am a man, and I want you to believe and accept this as a fact, just as I did for many years.

You see, when I was growing up at the time of the Wars of the Medes and Persians and when I went to college just after the Hundred Years War and when I was bringing up my children during the Korean, Cold, and Vietnam Wars, there were no women. Women are a very recent invention. I predate the invention of women by decades. Well, if you insist on pedantic accuracy, women have been invented several times in widely varying localities, but the inventors just didn't know how to sell the product. Their distribution techniques were rudimentary and their market research was nil, and so of course the concept just didn't get off the ground. Even with a genius behind it an invention has to find its market, and it seemed like for a long time the idea of women just didn't make it to the bottom line. Models like the Austen and the Brontë were too complicated, and people just laughed at the Suffragette, and the Woolf was way too far ahead of its time.

So when I was born, there actually were only men. People were men. They all had one pronoun, his pronoun; so that's who I am. I am the generic he, as in, "If anybody needs an abortion he will have to go to another state," or "A writer knows which side his bread is buttered on." That's me, the writer, him. I am a man.

Not maybe a first-rate man. I'm perfectly willing to admit that I may be in fact a kind of second-rate or imitation man, a Pretend-a-Him. As a him, I am to a genuine male him as a microwaved fish stick is to a whole grilled Chinook salmon. I mean, after all, can I inseminate? Can I belong to the Bohemian Club? Can I run General Motors? Theoretically I can, but you know where theory gets us. Not to the top of General Motors, and on the day when a Radcliffe woman is president of Harvard University you wake me up and tell me, will you? Only you won't have to, because there aren't any more Radcliffe women; they were found to be unnecessary and abolished. And then, I can't write my name with pee in the snow, or it would be awfully laborious if I did. I can't shoot my wife and children and some neighbors and then myself. Oh to tell you the truth I can't even drive. I never got my license. I chickened out. I take the bus. That is terrible. I admit it, I am actually a very poor imitation or substitute man, and you could see it when I tried to wear those army surplus clothes with ammunition pockets that were trendy and I looked like a hen in a pillowcase. I am shaped wrong. People are supposed to be lean. You can't be too thin, everybody says so, especially anorexics. People are supposed to be lean and taut, because that's how men generally are, lean and taut, or anyhow that's how a lot of men start out and some of them even stay that way. And men are people, people are men, that has been well established, and so people, real people, the right kind of people, are lean. But I'm really lousy at being people, because I'm not lean at all but sort of podgy, with actual fat places. I am untaut. And then, people are supposed to be tough. Tough is good. But I've never been tough. I'm sort of soft and actually sort of tender. Like a good steak. Or like Chinook salmon, which isn't lean and tough but very rich and tender.

But then salmon aren't people, or anyhow we have been told that they aren't, in recent years. We have been told that there is only one kind of people and they are men. And I think it is very important that we all believe that. It certainly is important to the men.

What it comes down to, I guess, is that I am just not manly. Like Ernest Hemingway was manly. The beard and the guns and the wives and the little short sentences. I do try. I have this sort of beardoid thing that keeps trying to grow, nine or ten hairs on my chin, sometimes even more; but what do I do with the hairs? I tweak them out. Would a man do that? Men don't tweak. Men shave. Anyhow white men shave, being hairy, and I have even less choice about being white or not than I do about being a man or not. I am white whether I like being white or not. The doctors can do nothing for me. But I do my best not to be white, I guess, under the circumstances, since I don't shave. I tweak. But it doesn't mean anything because I don't really have a real beard that amounts to anything. And I don't have a gun and I don't have even one wife and my sentences tend to go on and on and on, with all this syntax in them. Ernest Hemingway would have died rather than have syntax. Or semicolons. I use a whole lot of half-assed semicolons; there was one of them just now; that was a semicolon after "semicolons," and another one after "now."

And another thing. Ernest Hemingway would have died rather than get old. And he did. He shot himself. A short sentence. Anything rather than a long sentence, a life sentence. Death sentences are short and very, very manly. Life sentences aren't. They go on and on, all full of syntax and qualifying clauses and confusing references and getting old. And that brings up the real proof of what a mess I have made of being a man: I am not even young. Just about the time they finally started inventing women, I started getting old. And I went right on doing it. Shamelessly. I have allowed myself to get old and haven't done one single thing about it, with a gun or anything.

What I mean is, if I had any real self-respect wouldn't I at least have had a face-lift or some liposuction? Although liposuction sounds

to me like what they do a lot of on TV when they are young or youngish, though not when they are old, and when one of them is a man and the other a woman, though not under any other circumstances. What they do is, this young or youngish man and woman take hold of each other and slide their hands around on each other and then they perform liposuction. You are supposed to watch them while they do it. They move their heads around and flatten out their mouth and nose on the other person's mouth and nose and open their mouths in different ways, and you are supposed to feel sort of hot or wet or something as you watch. What I feel is like I'm watching two people doing liposuction, and *this* is why they finally invented women? Surely not.

As a matter of fact I think sex is even more boring as a spectator sport than all the other spectator sports, even baseball. If I am required to watch a sport instead of doing it, I'll take show jumping. The horses are really good-looking. The people who ride them are mostly these sort of nazis, but like all nazis they are only as powerful and successful as the horse they are riding, and it is after all the horse who decides whether to jump that five-barred gate or stop short and let the nazi fall off over its neck. Only usually the horse doesn't remember it has the option. Horses aren't awfully bright. But in any case, show jumping and sex have a good deal in common, though you usually can only get show jumping on American TV if you can pick up a Canadian channel, which is not true of sex. Given the option, though I often forget that I have an option, I certainly would *watch* show jumping and *do* sex. Never the other way round. But I'm too old now for show jumping, and as for sex, who knows? I do; you don't.

Of course golden oldies are supposed to jump from bed to bed these days just like the horses jumping the five-barred gates, bounce, bounce, bounce, but a good deal of this super sex at seventy business seems to be theory again, like the woman CEO of General Motors and the woman president of Harvard. Theory is invented mostly to reassure people in their forties, that is men, who are worried. That is why

we had Karl Marx, and why we still have economists, though we seem to have lost Karl Marx. As such, theory is dandy. As for practice, or praxis as the Marxists used to call it apparently because they liked *x*'s, you wait till you are sixty or seventy and then you can tell me about your sexual practice, or praxis, if you want to, though I make no promises that I will listen, and if I do listen I will probably be extremely bored and start looking for some show jumping on the TV. In any case you are not going to hear anything from me about my sexual practice or praxis, then, now, or ever.

But all that aside, here I am, old, when I wrote this I was sixty years old, "a sixty-year-old smiling public man," as Yeats said, but then, he *was* a man. And now I am over seventy. And it's all my own fault. I get born before they invent women, and I live all these decades trying so hard to be a good man that I forget all about staying young, and so I didn't. And my tenses get all mixed up. I just am young and then all of a sudden I was sixty and maybe eighty, and what next?

Not a whole lot.

I keep thinking there must have been something that a real man could have done about it. Something short of guns, but more effective than Oil of Olay. But I failed. I did nothing. I absolutely failed to stay young. And then I look back on all my strenuous efforts, because I really did try, I tried hard to be a man, to be a good man, and I see how I failed at that. I am at best a bad man. An imitation phony second-rate him with a ten-hair beard and semicolons. And I wonder what was the use. Sometimes I think I might just as well give the whole thing up. Sometimes I think I might just as well exercise my option, stop short in front of the five-barred gate, and let the nazi fall off onto his head. If I'm no good at pretending to be a man and no good at being young, I might just as well start pretending that I am an old woman. I am not sure that anybody has invented old women yet; but it might be worth trying.

BEING TAKEN FOR GRANITE

Sometimes I am taken for granite. Everybody is taken for granite sometimes but I am not in a mood for being fair to everybody. I am in a mood for being fair to me. I am taken for granite quite often, and this troubles and distresses me, because I am not granite. I am not sure what I am but I know it isn't granite. I have known some granite types, we all do: characters of stone, upright, immovable, unchangeable, opinions the general size shape and pliability of the Rocky Mountains, you have to quarry five years to chip out one little stony smile. That's fine, that's admirable, but it has nothing to do with me. Upright is fine, but downright is where I am, or downwrong.

I am not granite and should not be taken for it. I am not flint or diamond or any of that great hard stuff. If I am stone, I am some kind of shoddy crumbly stuff like sandstone or serpentine, or maybe schist. Or not even stone but clay, or not even clay but mud. And I wish that those who take me for granite would once in a while treat me like mud.

Being mud is really different from being granite and should be treated differently. Mud lies around being wet and heavy and oozy and generative. Mud is underfoot. People make footprints in mud. As mud I accept feet. I accept weight. I try to be supportive, I like to be obliging. Those who take me for granite say this is not so but they haven't been looking where they put their feet. That's why the house is all dirty and tracked up.

Granite does not accept footprints. It refuses them. Granite makes pinnacles, and then people rope themselves together and put pins on their shoes and climb the pinnacles at great trouble, expense, and risk, and maybe they experience a great thrill, but the granite does not. Nothing whatever results and nothing whatever is changed.

Huge heavy things come and stand on granite and the granite just stays there and doesn't react and doesn't give way and doesn't adapt and doesn't oblige and when the huge heavy things walk away the granite is there just the same as it was before, just exactly the same, admirably. To change granite you have to blow it up.

But when people walk on me you can see exactly where they put their feet, and when huge heavy things come and stand on me I yield and react and respond and give way and adapt and accept. No explosives are called for. No admiration is called for. I have my own nature and am true to it just as much as granite or even diamond is, but it is not a hard nature, or upstanding, or gemlike. You can't chip it. It's deeply impressionable. It's squashy.

Maybe the people who rope themselves together and the huge heavy things resent such adaptable and uncertain footing because it makes them feel insecure. Maybe they fear they might be sucked in and swallowed. But I am not interested in sucking and am not hungry. I am just mud. I yield. I do try to oblige. And so when the people and the huge heavy things walk away they are not changed, except their feet are muddy, but I am changed. I am still here and still mud, but all full of footprints and deep, deep holes and tracks and traces and changes. I have been changed. You change me. Do not take me for granite.

INDIAN UNCLES

By Ursula Kroeber Le Guin

From a talk given for the Emeriti Lectures at the Department of Anthropology of the University of California at Berkeley, November 4, 1991. I rewrote the piece for a celebration of the hundredth anniversary of the department, November 16, 2001.

Because I was talking to people who knew my background (some of them perhaps better than I did) and all the people I mentioned, I did no explaining; therefore a few explanations are in order:

Alfred L. Kroeber, my father, founded that department in 1901, and taught in it till he retired in 1947. He married Theodora Kracaw Brown, my mother, in 1925. We lived in Berkeley near the campus.

In 1911 a "wild" Indian appeared in a small northern California town. He spoke a language the remaining local Indians did not know, and had evidently lived his entire life in hiding, with the remnant of his people, from the whites. A linguist from the university, T. T. Waterman, was able to talk a little with him, and brought him down to the museum of anthropology, then in San Francisco. He lived there from then on, learning the ways of the new world he had entered and teaching the ways of his own lost world to the scientists and to visitors to the museum. His people did not name themselves to others, so he was called Ishi, which means "man" in his own Yahi language. I relate below how my mother became Ishi's biographer. Her books about him are Ishi in Two Worlds and Ishi, Last of His Tribe. His story is, I think, essential reading to anyone who thinks they know, or wants to learn, how the West was won, and who Americans are.

Many, many people have asked me, eager and expectant, "Wasn't it wonderful to know Ishi?"

And I'm floored every time. All I can do is disappoint them by explaining that Ishi died thirteen years before I was born. I can't remember even hearing his name until the late fifties, when a biography of him became first a subject of family conversation and then the consuming object of my mother's work and thought for several years.

But my father, in my recollection, didn't talk about Ishi. He talked very little about the past; he didn't reminisce. As a man twenty years older than his wife, a father of grandfather age, he may well have determined never to be a garrulous old bore bleating about the good old days. But also by temperament he didn't live in the past, but in the present, in the moment, right up to his death at eighty-four. I wish he had reminisced more, because he had done so many interesting things in interesting places, and was a fine storyteller. But getting his own past out of him was like pulling hen's teeth. Once he did describe to us what he did during the 1906 Fire in San Francisco (it's in my mother's biography of him), and while he was in the remembering vein I asked him what he *felt* during the earthquake and after. He worked on his pipe for a while, lighting matches and making neat little piles of them, and then he said, "Exhilaration."

I don't mean to suggest that he was one of those yup-nope men. He was a highly conversable person, but he was too interested in what was happening now to look back much. I longed to know something about his first wife, Henrietta Rothschild, of San Francisco, but I didn't know how to ask and he didn't know how to answer, or there was too much old grief buried there and he wasn't going to dig it up and display it. There is a modesty of grief, and he was a modest man.

That may also be why he didn't talk about Ishi. So much old grief, old pain, still sharp. Not the cheap guilt trips the psychodramatisers pull out of their cheap hats: emotionally stunted scientist exploiting noble savage—Dr. Treves and the Elephant Man, Dr. Kroeber and

Ishi—that is not what happened. It has happened, as we all know, and as he knew. But not in this case. Perhaps just the opposite.

The idea that objective observation can be performed only by an observer totally free of subjectivity involves an ideal of inhuman purity which we now recognise as being, fortunately, unattainable. But the dilemma of the subjective practitioner of objectivity persists, and presents itself to anthropologists in its most acute and painful form: the relationship between observer and observed when both of them are human. Novelists, people who write about people, have the same moral problem, the problem of exploitation, but we rarely face it in so stark a form. I'm awed at the courage of any scientist who admits it in all its intractability.

Looking at it from my naive, outsider's standpoint, it seems to me that most of the Boasians had a pretty strict take on it. I know my father distrusted whites—amateurs or professionals—who claimed emotional or spiritual identification with Indians. He saw such claims as sentimental and co-optative. To him the term *going native* was one of disapproval. His friendships with Indians were that: friendships. Beginning in collaborative work, based on personal liking and respect, they involved neither patronisation nor co-optation.

With Ishi, a man almost unimaginably vulnerable in his tragic solitude, dependent by necessity, yet strong, generous, clear-minded, and affectionate, an extraordinary person in every way, this relationship of friendship must have been unusually complex and intense.

My father was consciously, consistently loyal to the ideal of objective science, but it was the passions of personal grief and personal loyalty that dictated his message from New York trying to prevent the autopsy of Ishi's body—"Tell them as far as I am concerned science can go to hell. We propose to stand by our friends."

His message came too late. A contemporary anthropologist has said that if he felt so strongly about the matter, why didn't he get on an airplane and come West and see about it? One would think that an anthropologist might be aware that in 1916 there was a certain lack of

airplanes to get on. A telegram was the only means he had to try to prevent the desecration.

I know little of the circumstances of the subsequent grotesque division of the body, which reminds me of the way kings and emperors were buried in bits, the head in Vienna, the heart in Habsburg, other pieces in other parts of the empire. Saints the same—an arm here, a finger there, a toe in a reliquary. . . . It would appear that to the European, dismembering a body and keeping bits of it around is a sign of respect. This is definitely a strain on our American cultural relativism. I leave it to you anthropologists to work it out.

Kroeber accepted defeat and got on with the work to be done. I do not think his silence was indifference but the muteness of undesired complicity and the dumbness of the bereaved. He had lost his friend. He had lost a person whom he loved and was responsible for, and lost him to the same sickness that had killed his wife a few years earlier, tuberculosis, the "White Sickness." Over and over he had worked with individuals who were among the last of their people. One way or another his people and their white sicknesses had destroyed them. He was silent because neither he nor his science had a vocabulary for his knowledge. And if he couldn't find the right words, he wouldn't use the wrong ones.

Not long after Ishi's death, my father took leave from anthropology, was psychoanalyzed, and practiced analysis for some years. But I don't think Freud had quite the words he needed, either. The scope of his work and writing widened with the years, but at the very end of his life he returned to Californian ethnology, using his long-accumulated expertise to support Californian tribes in their suit against the U.S. government for restoration and reparation of their lands, spending months of testimony and cross-examination in a federal courtroom. My brother Ted, who drove him to many of these sessions, recalls the judge's attempts to give the old man a break now and then, and Alfred's patient but urgent determination to get the job done.

He wrote as little about Ishi as possible. When asked about Ishi, he answered. When it was suggested he should write a biography of Ishi,

he declined. Robert Heizer took the excellent expedient of offering the task to my mother, who had never known Ishi, never been his friend, was not an anthropologist, was not a man, and could be trusted to find the right words if anybody could.

I was in the Lowie Museum here with Alfred Kroeber's little great-granddaughter, ten years ago, and she showed me the headphones at the Ishi exhibit, where you can hear Ishi telling a story. I put them on and heard his voice for the first time. I broke into tears. For a moment. It seems the only appropriate response.

Some of you may have hoped to hear more about the family or about my father's colleagues and students, who were certainly a large element in our family life. I am afraid I share Alfred's incapacity for reminiscence. I am much better at making things up than at remembering them. The two Indian friends of my father's that I can say something about, because as a child I did really relate to them, are the Papago Juan Dolores and the Yurok Robert Spott. But here I run into the moral problem we storytellers share with you anthropologists: the exploitation of real people. People should not *use* other people. My memories of these two Native American friends are hedged with caution and thorned with fear. What, after all, did I or do I understand about them? When I knew them, what did I know about them, about their political or their individual situation? Nothing. Not their people's history, not their personal history, not their contributions to anthropology—nothing.

I was a little kid, youngest of the family. We always went up to the Napa Valley in June as soon as school was out. My parents had bought a forty-acre ranch there for two thousand dollars. We settled in and set up the packed-dirt croquet court, and Juan—a killer croquet player—always got there in time for his birthday.

I was amazed to learn that Juan Dolores, a grown-up, actually didn't know what day he was born on. Birthdays were important. Mine and my brothers' and my parents' were celebrated with cake and ice

cream and candles and ribbons and presents, and it was a matter of great moment that one was now seven. How could it *not matter* to a person? In pondering this first discovery of the difference between Western time and Indian time, I was perhaps composting the soil from which the cultural relativism of my fictions would grow and flourish. But Juan (we kids called him Wahn, we didn't know Spanish Hwahn)—Juan had to have a birth date in order to fill out the papers for his social security or his pension from the university or something; bureaucrats, like me, believe in birthdays. So he and my father chose him a birthday. Now, that was nifty, sitting around and deciding when you wanted to be born. They picked St. John's Eve, Midsummer Night. And thereafter, Juan's birthday was celebrated with cake, candles, and all the rest: a festival of this small tribe, celebrated soon after their annual migration sixty miles to the north, marking both the summer solstice and the ritual visit of the Papago.

The Papago stayed for a month or longer. The top front bedroom of the old house in the Valley is still called Juan's Room by the elders of the tribe. During those visits he and my father may have worked together. I paid no attention to that. All I remember about Juan's visits is using him. The use of grown-ups by children is one of the numerous exceptions to my absolute rule that people should not use other people. Weaker people, of course, get to use stronger ones; they have to. But the limits of use are best set by the strong, not by the weak. Juan was not very good at setting limits, at least when it came to children. He let us get away with murder. We got him to make a drum for us, and as I recall we insisted that it be a Plains Indian drum, because that was a *real* Indian drum, no matter that he was a real non–Plains Indian. In any case he made a marvelous drum, and we beat on it for years.

We picked up phrases like "Lo! the poor Indian!" and, from some magazine article, a title, "The Vanishing Red Man." With what is called the cruelty of children, we used these phrases; we called Juan Lo, the Vanishing Papago. Hello, Lo! You haven't vanished yet! I think he thought it was funny too; I think if he hadn't, we'd have known it, and

shut up. I hope so. We weren't cruel, we were ignorant, foolish. Children are ignorant and foolish. But they learn. If they are given a chance to learn.

There's a lot of poison oak in those hills, and we were all covered with calamine lotion all the time. Juan boasted that Indians never got poison oak. My brothers challenged him—Indians don't *ever* get poison oak? Never? Prove it! Dare you!—Juan went down on a hundred-degree day into a twelve-foot thicket of poison oak by the creek and cut it all down with a machete. We have a tiny Kodak picture: a sea of poison oak, one small, bald, dark head just visible in it, shining with sweat. He got tired, but he didn't get poison oak. Decades later when I read in Sarah Winnemucca's autobiography how she nearly died as a child from her first exposure, I modified Juan's claim: *some* Indians never get poison oak. It may have been that he was determined not to.

He was, I think, a strong, determined man; the intellectual work he did is proof of it; which makes his endless patience with us kids even more beautiful. This memory is not my own but of my mother's telling: Juan's first summer visit, long before he had a birthday, was the summer I learned to walk, 1931 I suppose. This infant would stagger over to Juan and say "Go-go?" And whatever he was doing, writing or reading or talking or working, Juan would excuse himself and gravely accompany me across the yard and up the driveway on a great journey of a hundred yards or so, I holding on to him firmly by one finger. Now that part I do seem to remember; perhaps it's just my mother's vivid telling; but I know which finger it was, the first of his left hand, a strong, thick, dark finger that entirely and warmly filled my hand.

In the forties when he was living in Oakland, Juan was mugged, robbed, and badly beaten. When he came for a visit at our Berkeley house after he got out of the hospital, I was afraid to come downstairs. I had heard that "his head was broken," and imagined horrors. I finally was ordered down, and said hello, and sneaked a look. He wasn't horrible. He was tired, and old, and sad. I was too ashamed and shy

to show him my affection. I didn't know I loved him. Children brought up in great security, tribal or familial, aren't very aware of love, as I suppose fish aren't very aware of water. That's the way it ought to be, love as air, love as the human element. But I see Juan now, a gentle, intellectual man, living in exile and poverty, licensed by bigotry to be a prey of bullies—the world was full of such people in the 1940s. It is full of such people now. I wish I had had the sense to take his hand.

The first time Robert Spott came to stay with us in the Valley, his major problem must have been getting enough to eat. My memory of Yurok table manners is that if anybody speaks during a meal, everybody puts down their fork or soupspoon or whatever, swallows, and stops eating till the conversation is done. Only when speech is over does eating resume. Such a custom might arise among a rather formal people who had plenty to eat and plenty of time to eat it in. (With that idea in mind, as a novelist, I once invented some people living on an Ice Age planet where food, warmth, and leisure were often hard to come by: to them it was extremely bad manners to speak at all during a meal. Eat now, talk later—first things first. This is probably far too logical for a real custom.) And I may well have misunderstood or misremembered; my brother Karl's recollection of correct Yurok table manners is that having taken a bite, one puts one's spoon or hand down on the table until quite done chewing; and that also, when the host stops eating, the guest stops. In any case, there was Robert, and us four kids and Aunt Betsy and my parents and probably some other odd relatives or ethnologists or refugees around the dinner table, and we were a talkative and discursive and argumentative lot, with the kids encouraged to take a responsible part in the conversation. So every time anybody said anything, which was constantly, poor Robert laid down his fork, swallowed, and looked up with courteous and undivided attention, while we gobbled and babbled on. And as my father ate with extreme, neat rapidity, Robert must have had to stop eating before he

had had anything much to eat at all. I believe he learned eventually to imitate our uncouthness.

I often felt uncouth around Robert Spott. He had tremendous personal dignity and authority. I believed for years that he was a—what my linguistic nephew informs me is now pronounced shawman, but which I continue to pronounce shayman, since my father did, and it doesn't sound so New Agey. My brother Ted's memory, more enlightened than mine by six years, is that Robert's mother was the shaman, and that she and perhaps other women of his people trained him, not specifically as a shaman or doctor but in the knowledge of tribal and religious customs. They demanded this learning of him, a heavy and lifelong commitment, because there was no other fit candidate and the knowledge would die with them if he did not accept it. I have it in my head that Robert accepted the burden only with reluctance. Ted tells me that Robert served as an advocate for his people in Sacramento, taking on the then seemingly hopeless struggle to preserve Yurok culture and values against white contempt and exploitation—a task that might daunt anyone. At the time, I understood nothing of that grim political work, and may have romanticised it by mythologising Robert as an unwilling shaman. A girl does tend to spin romances about a handsome, stately, stern, dark man who doesn't say much.

Robert was grave, serious; we took no liberties with him. Was it a cultural or a temperamental difference, or both, that Juan Dolores was long-suffering with us brats, and Robert Spott was aloof and instructive? I can still blush when I remember myself rather unusually holding the table, chattering away breakneck, telling some event of the day, and being abruptly silenced by Robert. I had far exceeded the conversational limit proper to a well-bred Yurok girl, which I imagine may be a word or two. Robert laid down his fork and swallowed, and when I paused for breath, he spoke to the adults on a subject of interest to adults. My culture told me that it is rude to interrupt people, and I was resentful; but I shut up. Children have to be stupid, or to have been culturally stupidised, not to recognise genuine authority. My resentment

was an attempt to justify my embarrassment. Robert had introduced me to a very Yurok moral sentiment, shame. Not guilt, there was nothing to be guilty about; just shame. You blush resentfully, you hold your tongue, and you figure it out. I have Robert to thank in part for my deep respect for shame as a social instrument. Guilt I believe to be counterproductive, but shame can be immensely useful; if, for example, any member of Congress was acquainted in any form with shame—well, never mind.

Both Juan and Robert are associated in my mind with the moving of great rocks. Blue boulders of serpentine, dug from the reddish dirt above the road. The menfolk and my great-aunt Betsy built a drylaid wall of them. The end rock nearest the house, a beautiful blue-green monster, is still called by all members of the tribe Juan's Rock, though some of them may not know why. He selected it and directed and labored in the levering and rolling of it from above the driveway down to its present place. No one got killed or even maimed, though the women worried and lamented in the kitchen, and I was told two thousand times to *keep uphill* from that rock.

Then, or before that—there was definitely some competition between the two men, some matter of my rock is bigger than your rock—Robert built us a marvelous outdoor fireplace. It is both technically and in fact a sacred place. It is built as a Yurok meditation shelter is built, and so oriented; but the fire burns where the meditator would sit, and so he completed the half circle of the shelter with a half circle of flat stones for people to sit on around the fire. And there my people have sat for seventy years, to eat, and tell stories, and watch the summer stars.

There is a photograph of my father and Robert, one listening, the other telling, with lifted hand and faraway gaze. They are sitting on those fireplace stones. Robert and Alfred talked together sometimes in English sometimes in Yurok. It was perhaps unusual for the daughter of a first-generation German immigrant from New York to hear him talking Yurok, but I didn't know that. I didn't know anything. I thought everybody spoke Yurok. But I knew where the center of the world was.

MY LIBRARIES

A talk given in 1997 at a celebration of the renovation of Portland's Multnomah County Library.

A library is a focal point, a sacred place to a community; and its sacredness is its accessibility, its publicness. It's everybody's place. I remember certain libraries, vividly and joyfully, as *my* libraries—elements of the best of my life.

The first one I knew well was in Saint Helena, California, then a small, peaceful, mostly Italian town. The library was a little Carnegie, white stucco, cool and sleepy on the fiery August afternoons when my mother would leave my brother and me there while she shopped at Giugni's and Tosetti's. Karl and I went through the children's room like word-seeking missiles. After we had read everything, including all thirteen volumes of the adventures of a fat boy detective, we had to be allowed to go into the Adult Side. That was hard for the librarians. They felt they were hurling us little kids into a room full of sex, death, and weird grown-ups like Heathcliff and the Joads; and in fact, they were. We were intensely grateful.

The only trouble with the Saint Helena library was you could only take five books out at a time and we only went into town once a week. So we checked out really solid books, I mean five hundred pages of small print in two columns, like *The Count of Monte Cristo*. Short books were no good—two days' orgy and then starve the rest of the

week—nothing but the farmhouse bookcase, and we could recite everything in it by the time we were ten. I imagine we were the only people in the Napa Valley who regularly hit each other on the head with quarterstaves while shouting, "Varlet! Have at thee!"—"Why, fat knave, think'st thou to cross this bridge?" Karl usually got to be Robin Hood because he was older, but at least I never had to be Maid Marian.

Next in my life was the branch of the Berkeley Library near Garfield Junior High, where my dearest memory is of my friend Shirley leading me to the *N* shelf and saying, "There's this writer called E. Nesbit and you HAVE to read the one called *Five Children and It*," and boy, was she right. By eighth grade I sort of oozed over into the adult room. The librarians pretended not to notice. But when I arrived at the adult checkout carrying a thick, obscure biography of Lord Dunsany like a holy relic, I remember the librarian's expression. It was very much like the expression of the U.S. customs inspector in Seattle, years later, when he opened my suitcase and found a Stilton cheese—not a decent whole cheese, but a ruin, a mouldy rind, a smelly remnant, which our friend Barbara in Berkshire had affectionately but unwisely sent to my husband. The customs man said, "What *is* it?"

"Well, it's an English cheese," I said.

He was a tall, black man with a deep voice. He shut the suitcase and said, "Lady, if you want it, you can have it."

And the librarian let me have Lord Dunsany, too.

After that came the Berkeley Public Library itself, which is blessedly placed just a block or two from Berkeley Public High School. I loved the one as deeply as I hated the other. In one I was an exile in the Siberia of adolescent social mores. In the other I was home free. Without the library I wouldn't have survived the school, not in my right mind, anyhow. But then, adolescents are all crazy.

I discovered that the foreign books were up on the third floor and nobody ever went there, so I moved in. I lived there, crouched in a spiderwebby window, with *Cyrano de Bergerac*, in French. I didn't know enough French yet to read *Cyrano*, but that didn't stop me. That's

when I learned you can read a language you don't know if you love it enough. You can do anything if you love it enough. I cried a lot up there, over Cyrano and other people. I discovered *Jean-Christophe*, and cried over him; and Baudelaire, and cried over him—only a fifteen-year-old can truly appreciate *The Flowers of Evil*, I think. Sometimes I raided the lower, English-speaking regions of the library and brought back writers such as Ernest Dowson—"I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion"—and cried some more. Ah, those were good years for crying, and a library is a good place to cry in. Quietly.

Next in my life was Radcliffe's small, endearing college library, and then—when they decided I could be permitted to enter it, even though I was a freshman, and what was far worse, a freshwoman—Widener Library at Harvard.

I will tell you my private definition of freedom. Freedom is stack privileges at Widener Library.

I remember the first time I came outside from those endless, incredible stacks I could barely walk because I was carrying about twenty-five books, but I was flying. I turned around and looked up the broad steps of the building, and I thought, That's heaven. That's the heaven for me. All the words in the world, and all for me to read. Free at last, Lord, free at last!

I hope you'll understand that I am not quoting those great words lightly. I do mean it. Knowledge sets us free, art sets us free. A great library is freedom.

So then, after a mad but brief Parisian affair with the Bibliothèque Nationale, I arrived in Portland. Our first years here we had two little babies, and I was at home with them. The great treat for me, the holiday I wanted, the event I looked forward to all week or month, was to get a sitter and come downtown with Charles and go to the Library. At night, of course; no way to do it in the daytime. A couple of hours, till the Library closed at nine. Plunging into the ocean of words, roaming in the broad fields of the mind, climbing the mountains of the imagi-

nation. Just like the kid in the Carnegie or the student in Widener, that was my freedom, that was my joy. And it still is.

That joy must not be sold. It must not be "privatised," made into another privilege for the privileged. A public library is a public trust.

And that freedom must not be compromised. It must be available to all who need it, and that's everyone, when they need it, and that's always.

MY ISLAND

Written for Islands *magazine.*

Invited to write about a favorite island, at first I couldn't think of a real one—only the unattained or the imaginary. Islands are by definition separated from the ordinary world, not part of it. Isolate . . .

So I thought first of the Farallons, those foggy rocks sometimes visible from San Francisco's Cliff House, dimly seen way out in the grey sea. When I was a child they were my image of the loneliest place, the farthest west you could go. And they have such a beautiful name. *Los farallones* means cliffs, crags; a lovely word, and in English it gathers echoes—far away and all alone. . . . But that's all I know about the Farallons, where I will never go.

So then I thought about islands I'd found in my own mind, the ones I called Earthsea, a whole archipelago occupied by wizards, housewives, dragons, and other fascinating people. I know those islands well; I have written books about them. I gave them fine names, Gont and Roke and Havnor, Selidor and Osskil and The Hands. I never expected to see Earthsea in the real world, but I did, once. I was on a ship that sailed right round the British Isles, up to the Orkneys and the Hebrides, out to Lewis and Harris, to Skye and down the western coast past Scotland and past Wales . . . and there they were, my islands, scattered before us in a golden sea, fantastic, unearthly, surely

full of dragons: the Scillies. Another lovely name. Why are you giggling? Because I saw the Scilly Isles!

But a real island, not a dream or a name or a glimpse?—I couldn't think of one I could write about. Until I remembered that not all islands are in the sea.

Big oceangoing freighters sail past it every day, sometimes cruise ships, often sailboats, but my island is some eighty miles inland. A faint lift and ebb of the tides is still in the water that flows past it, but it's not salt water. Sauvie Island lies just downstream from where Portland's river, the Willamette, enters the immense Columbia.

Sauvie is one of the biggest river islands in the country: fifteen miles long and three or four wide. Along the grey beaches of its outer side runs the broad, powerful current of the Columbia. On the inner side, a slow-flowing slough lets fishermen's rowboats drift along between the marshes, the clusters of houseboats, the landing stages of old farms. Canals intersect the island, irrigating the farms. Shallow lakes deepen and dry up with the seasons.

In the old days before the dikes were built, before the upriver Columbia was dammed and dammed again, Sauvie Island flooded every year. It was all dairy farms then. The farmers rounded up the cattle when the water rose and drove them onto the few bits of high ground (still called "islands" within the island). There they waited out the flood, some of them mooing and some of them chewing tobacco, I imagine. Then they came back down to the rich, silty pastures. They sent their milk and butter by boat to Portland, just upstream. There was no bridge from the mainland to Sauvie Island until 1950.

There used to be an old man who rowed his boat round the whole island, from farm to farm—every farm had a boat ramp—selling trinkets and buttons and thread and candy: a kind of one-man, two-oared dime store for the islanders. Hearing about those old days, you get the feeling it wasn't the islanders who wanted the bridge. They were quite content. It was the mainlanders who longed to get across the water.

But, racked by the huge trucks we use now, the bridge is threatening to break down, and the farmers of the island are getting a bit desperate, worrying that they won't be able to get their produce to the Portland markets.

Long before the pioneers, Sauvie was a home and a trading center for the peoples of the river, those marvelous canoe makers for whom the Columbia was not a barrier but a highway. Lewis and Clark called it Wappato Island for the food staple that still grows there, an underwater root with tall lance-shaped leaves. But epidemics brought by early white explorers devastated the Columbia River peoples, and a fur trader wrote of the island people in 1835 that "there is nothing to attest that they ever existed except . . . their graves." When the Oregon Trail led homesteaders to the island, they found it desolate. And it still keeps a deep quietness, which sometimes becomes uncanny.

These days, the downstream half of the island is a wildlife preserve—a dreamy silence of marshy woods, huge old oaks, vast flocks of ducks, geese, and trumpeter swans feeding and flying—until hunting season, when it gets noisy for a while. The upstream half is still farmed. I know no place in America that looks so *gardened,* the way old farmlands in England look; the care and thought with which it's planted and tended and cherished make it beautiful. But behind the thriving nurseries, berry farms, and pumpkin patches rise the great blue hills above the Columbia, still forested, still half wild. Turn around, and to the northeast see snow-crowned mountains: Hood, Adams, St. Helens looming low since her eruption, and farther north, Rainier. Then all at once, like a mirage, a huge Japanese freighter carrying cars floats quietly by between the pumpkins and the mountains.

Sauvie is only half an hour's drive from downtown Portland, a city of three-quarters of a million people. The highway to it passes the busy Port of Portland and an industrial district of warehouses, storage tanks, railway sidings, factories; then suddenly there's a turn to the little two-lane bridge, and you're deep in the country. Though it is so close, so easy to get to, and so many Portlanders love to go "over to

Sauvie's" to pick strawberries, raspberries, marionberries, blueberries in the summer, buy squash and onions in the autumn, play on the beaches, swim in the river, fish in the slough, hunt or hike the woodland trails, or bird-watch and picnic under the oaks—even so, it remains rural and peaceful, as if it were a piece of the past, timeless between its rivers.

How long can it keep that quietness? So far, it has defended itself against such fatal intrusions as a huge garbage dump and a Japanese-owned golf course for millionaires. So far, no ticky-tacky developments, no McMansions have been allowed on the farmlands or the fish and game preserve. But land-use laws are so easily tossed aside, silence is so easily broken. How long can an island in an ever-deepening sea of humanity remain far away and all alone?

ON THE FRONTIER

This brief meditation, written in 1996 for the journal Frontiers, *where it appeared as "Which Side Am I On, Anyway?" has been rewritten for this book.*

The Frontier

A frontier has two sides. It is an interface, a threshold, a liminal site, with all the danger and promise of liminality.

The front side, the yang side, the side that calls itself the frontier, that's where you boldly go where no one has gone before, rushing forward like a stormfront, like a battlefront. Nothing before you is real. It is empty space. My favorite quotation from the great frontiersman Julius Caesar: "It was not certain that Britannia existed, until I went there." It does not exist, it is empty, and therefore full of dream and promise, the seven shining cities. And so you go there. Seeking gold, seeking land, annexing all before you, you expand your world.

The other side of the frontier, the yin side: that's where you live. You always lived there. It's all around you, it's always been. It is the real world, the true and certain world, full of reality.

And it is where they come. You were not certain they existed, until they came.

Coming from another world, they take yours from you, changing it, draining it, shrinking it into a property, a commodity. And as your world is meaningless to them until they change it into theirs, so as you

live among them and adopt their meanings, you are in danger of losing your own meaning to yourself.

In the wake of the North American frontier is where my father the anthropologist did his fieldwork, among the wrecks of cultures, the ruins of languages, the broken or almost-broken continuities and communities, the shards of an infinite diversity smashed by a monoculture. A postfrontiersman, a white immigrant's son learning Indian cultures and languages in the first half of the twentieth century, he tried to save meaning. To learn and tell the stories that might otherwise be lost. The only means he had to do so was by translating, recording in his foreign language: the language of science, the language of the conqueror. An act of imperialism. An act of human solidarity.

My mother continued his work with her history of a survivor of the frontier, the native Californian Ishi. I admire her book as deeply as I admire its subject, but have always regretted the subtitle, *A Biography of the Last Wild Indian in North America,* for it contradicts the sense and spirit of the story she tells. Ishi was not wild. He did not come out of the wilderness, but out of a culture and tradition far more deeply rooted and soundly established than that of the frontiersmen who slaughtered his people to get their land. He did not live in a wilderness but in a dearly familiar world he and his people knew hill by hill, river by river, stone by stone. Who made those golden hills a wilderness of blood and mourning and ignorance?

If there are frontiers between the civilised and the barbaric, between the meaningful and the unmeaning, they are not lines on a map nor are they regions of the earth. They are boundaries of the mind alone.

My Frontiers

Innate or acquired, a delight in learning unfamiliar (foreign, alien, "wild") significances and an unwillingness to limit value or significance to a single side of the frontier have shaped my writing.

North Americans have looked at their future as they looked at

their Western lands: as an empty place (animals, Indians, aliens don't count) to be "conquered," "tamed," filled up with themselves and their doings: a meaningless blank on which to write their names. This is the same future one finds in much science fiction, but not in mine. In mine the future is already full; it is much older and larger than our present; and we are the aliens in it.

My fantasies explore the use of power as art and its misuse as domination; they play back and forth along the mysterious frontier between what we think is real and what we think is imaginary, exploring the borderlands.

Capitalism, which ceases to exist if it is not expanding its empire, establishes an ever-moving frontier, and its yang conquistadors forever pursue El Dorado. You cannot be too rich, they cry. My realistic fictions are mostly about people on the yin side of capitalism: housewives, waitresses, librarians, keepers of dismal little motels. The people who live, you might say, on the rez, in the broken world the conquistadors leave behind.

Living in a world that is valued only as gain, an ever-expanding world-as-frontier that has no worth of its own, no fullness of its own, you live in danger of losing your own worth to yourself. That's when you begin to listen to the voices from the other side, and to ask questions of failure and the dark.

I am a granddaughter of the American frontier. My mother's family moved and bought and farmed and failed and moved on, from Missouri to Wyoming to Colorado to Oregon to California and back. We followed yang; we found yin. I am grateful. My heritage is the wild oats the Spanish sowed on the hills of California, the cheatgrass the ranchers left in the counties of Harney and Malheur. Those are the crops my people planted, and I have reaped. There is my straw-spun gold.

READINGS