

Undiscovering America

Somewhere today, on some ethereal preserve, all the old explorers gather in Manhattan for one of those trendy group photo shoots, some meet-and-greet publicity tour for the History Channel. They clank onto a loading dock with their breastplates and swords, navigating among each other, bumptious, grumpy in their puffy pantaloons, their helmets curved like half-moons. They shake hands all around, gruffly, line up roughly alphabetically: Balboa pressing forward, Cabot saying cheese, Columbus, of course, Coronado, Cortez, dodgy DeSoto, Vasco da Gama and old Ponce de Leon, nervous Magellan in his Arrow shirt, black-hatted Father Marquette, his cellmate, Joliet, coon-skinned Zebulon Pike peeking out, Pocahontas holding hands with John Smith, Sacajawea, smiling, like the Land O'Lakes maiden, between Lewis and Clark, and lonely Vespucci at the end of the row, mumbling to himself his mother's regrets, *Amerigo, Amerigo*.

After the shoot is over, Francisco Pizarro, the group spokesperson, announces that they are leaving America, all of them, going back, going home, sailing backward down the Hudson for the Southeast Passage, in their tall ships, the Golden Hind, Nina, Pinta, Santa Maria, past the Port Authority, the Statue of Liberty, past the Hamptons, past the Fountain of Youth, the Seven Lost Cities of Gold, past the Pathfinders and Explorers backed up on their way to the mall, till their ships look like toy boats, toy boats, till their ships are so small, till they sit at the edge of the world, till they fall, saying this is not what we were looking for, this is not it at all.

Girl with Her Tongue Stuck Out

Made to stand for hours in the center of the living room,
sticking the small red plum of her tongue out, *out*,
to prove to her father that the cat hadn't gotten it,

knowing even then that she would repeat third grade,
would dummy up to the dust that collected in the corner,
would play right field, the others yelling *swing, batter, batter*,

would button her lip, misspell "dumbbell" in the spelling bee,
would never give anyone the raspberry, ever, *ever*,
not even Michael "Icky" Snay, knowing even then

that Speak-No-Evil was the monkey on her back,
that the best child, the best child, was seen, only seen,
and that someday she would speak in the whispers of the trees,

but not today, not just yet, not this minute,
not with him hissing in his chair, seething, seething,
the red cat perched straight up on his lap, licking its chops.

Just a Tranquil Darker

The old woman asks if she can have her sunglasses *just a tranquil darker*, and the optometrist, without blinking an eye, says he can do that, he'll take care of that for her. And I think for a moment that he is William Wordsworth listening to Dorothy, her spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings, her perfect tranquility. Or maybe he is God himself, the great optometrist, or at least that dim image we strain to see of the omniscient optician who mostly does not trifle with us. The occasional hat flung off our heads, perhaps, the tossed banana peel with the businessman's wingtip approaching, the hurtling safe heading down toward our heads, all of us so intensely looking elsewhere, as if our lives were God's *New Yorker* cartoons, all his back issues stacked up, the ones with the Elizabeth Bishop poems, teetering, in his waiting room.

Mostly He gives us our due, God, or Wordsworth for that matter, for the things we choose to believe in, the things we say we'll see if we can do, like loving each other, like being true, like the woman who accompanies her husband, the lawn-mowing man, and sits on the steps of the houses he goes to. (See her, by the daffodils?) She watches him moving from row to row, loves the ease with which he moves, sees the lawn changing right before her eyes, like some eye chart of I's and E's slowly coming into view, her love for him the one thing that is perfectly clear. It is as if they live in some peripheral light that is always glowing, that we can see sometimes, like a lark that flares up suddenly out of the corner of our eyes, somehow always lifting from this cockeyed part of the world, away from the glare, to some other place where everything is just the way we want it, just a tranquil darker.

When Dylan Left Hibbing, Minnesota, August 1959

Not even Dylan then, more like David the Blue-Eyed Shepherd Boy Giant Killer instead, the way he must have looked in those *Golden Book Illustrated Bible Stories* we never read, the ones with the pictures of the prophets, each with a gold record stuck to his head, or the Classic Comics *Crime and Punishment*, Raskolnikov rocking and rolling on his bed, heading on down the highway out of St. Petersburg, the landlord's axe still in the shed, throwing stones at all the stop signs a-bleeding in his head.

Wasn't he a singing terrorist then, slaying us in the aisles, knocking us dead, like some wild-eyed kid from Fallujah now, his machine gun guitar slipped over his head, his ass in a sling, his mind full of dynamite, his righteous streets turning red, his only song his heaven's door, toward which he runs, arms outspread.

Oh, Zimmerman, we never heard a single word you ever said, from Ararats to ziggurats, from alpha down to zed, our heads cut off, our tongues cut out, no words left to be said, all the things we've ever loved, dead, dead, dead, dead.