

“An idiosyncratic voice all his own.”

—Michiko Kakutani, *The New York Times*

TO AMERICA  
WITH LOVE  
A. A. GILL



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# TO AMERICA WITH LOVE

A. A. Gill

Simon & Schuster

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To Wendy Ewald, the American cousin

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# Acknowledgments

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First and last I must thank Amy Turner, who wrote every word of this book and researched a great deal of it; also my editors Alan Samson and Celia Hayley, who plied their necessary craft, sometimes like Chinese embroiderers, sometimes like abattoir janitors; my minder agents Charlie Campbell and E. Victor; and those who offered lodging, advice and occasionally derision along the way: Dave Macmillan and Bella Pollen, Christoph and Katrin Henkel in Colorado; Luke Janklow, Christiane Amanpour, Jamie Rubin, Graydon Carter and Dana Brown in New York.

*Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!*

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—Emma Lazarus, 1849–1887

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## Cuttings

My father told me about the family buffalo over breakfast. He was writing the autobiography, rifling through the attic of his life. The words were mostly accounting, settling up and settling down, exhuming and laying to rest. He'd stop like a man climbing a spiral staircase, and turn to whoever was behind him and hold a memory up. Most often it would be from the war—that was always going to be the biggest thing in any life that lived through it. The buffalo made its bucolic and brief appearance as an aside, a hoofnote, and ambled over the toast and marmalade, a ghostly ruminant. Apparently someone had killed the thing—an uncle, removed and some way back—on the great grasslands of the Wild West, had the head flayed and refilled, and donated it to a museum in West Yorkshire—the town where he'd grown up. The uncle, not the buffalo. Dad said I should go and see it: "You like that sort of thing," and that was it. The headless buffalo departed without leaving a track in the butter.

We don't go in for ancestors in our family, we're not hereditary folk. It's not that we don't have them, it's just that we don't think they're what's interesting about us. You are what you achieve, what you do, not what some blokes you never met did in the back of behind. The whole ancestor business comes with the sort of baggage we would feel embarrassed carrying through life. All of us have exactly the same number of antecedents. We all of us go back to the *Mayflower*, the conquests, the pharaohs, the Flood. Birth and death ought to be utterly egalitarian, unexceptional. The one thing every human on earth shares is predecessors. Sifting an unearned social advantage out of the ossuary is ridiculous and demeaning. The autobiography writing in itself was odd, cut against the grain. My dad didn't even go in for monograms. We were the tomorrow people, all our best bits were to come. Life stories were only reflections in achievement, certainly not retrospective diaries of self-justification. So he was the first of our scattered, anonymously unresurrected tribe ever to write a memoir. I excused it by thinking of it as the hobby of old age, although we didn't go in for hobbies much, either. And then he died, and left a volume of an early life that finished before I arrived. It was published just as he departed.

He left me two other books. Although he was a lifelong atheist of unshakable conviction and faith, there was a toe-breaking family Bible. On its flyleaves, exuberant with a reverential, barely legible copperplate, were lists of births, deaths and marriages stretching hand to hand back to the 1700s. And then a scrapbook, a blue hard-backed thing sold specifically for the purpose, with a royal coat of arms on its opening page, and the instructions "A ready reference receptacle for scraps of print from our chief sources of knowledge: the newspapers. With patent, alphabetical index and spaces for marginal notes made by Marcus Ward and Co," who had offices in London, Belfast and New York. At the end of the nineteenth century someone had collated and pasted random errata in the thick, wrinkled volume that displayed its rigor-mortisly brittle pages, which contained a sepia collection of obituaries, alderman reports, murders long past their salacious pleasure, whimsical asides and the comic observations that might have been used by after-dinner speakers. There was news from abroad that mocked foreigners, invitations to weddings and municipal balls, there were birthday cards and cards of remembrance, cartoons of a leaden, comic seriousness, and photographs of awkward, middle-class Victorians trying to live up to their starch and lace. And although by its nature the book is serendipitous and aimless, over time it evolves a plot.

It revolved around two poles, two sets of lives: the probity of Batley and Dewsbury in We



Yorkshire, where my grandmother's people lived, and distant, staccato reports from America, mostly the form of press cuttings and cards that hoped they found you as they left us. There are photographs of cowboys, relaxed in their big-brimmed hats and waistcoats, and there are pages of pressed flowers sent from Colorado. They are poignant and fragile, now the color of old skin, the twigs and folded petals, and the crumbling leaves are caught in the split gutter. This book is a memento of a family drifting apart, a list of names. The good wishes, the weddings and funerals, the dead bouquets, hope and fondness, the concerns and rituals of a family are like ink dropped into water.

How quickly roots are separated. How fast new ones grow. The cuttings book is the paper chase of following disappearing runners, the view of a receding future collated by the people who stayed behind. For over 400 years, moved by brave and fearful reasons, Europeans were drawn to America, pushed out or pulled away by the eternal imperative spurs of hope and despair. The hardship and the terrors of the New World were monolithic and relentless, but then so were its promises. And whatever lay out there at least they knew it wasn't home. It wasn't the immovable, ancient, carping certainties of Europe. When asked if he thought that the French Revolution had been a good thing, Zhou Enlai famously answered that it was too early to tell, which is trite about the Terror, but it would be true about America. It's too early to tell. If you take a timeline from the first settlements in the 1600s to the present, and compare it with the foundation of modern Europe from the end of the Roman Empire, the same point in *our* history the Vikings are attacking Orkney, and Alfred is the first king of what will one day be England.

I have often thought that Europe's view of America has been formed and deformed by the truth that we are the ones who stayed behind, for all those good, bad and lazy reasons: because of caution, for comfort, for conformity and obligation, but mostly I suspect because of habit and fear. We didn't take the risky road. This book is the next volume to the ancestor cuttings. It is the view of the New World from the Old. It is a look back at the people who went forward and the country they made out of millions of cuttings taken from the roots of millions of families. They formed an America that grew to become the best and finest creation of Europe, the culmination of all its deepest aspirations, the fruit of rue, of wisdom and experience, but a creation that Europe can take no credit for.

My father's family were farmers and mill owners, working water-and-steam-driven woolen mills in the early Industrial Revolution. They made shoddy, taking old yarn, unpicking and reweaving it, and they made a jangle of change in their day. Particularly out of the Crimean War—all those cheap balaclavas. A pair of brothers and their cousin left the farm and the business for America. There wasn't enough work or worth left in the old place after some uncle drank most of it before he was thirty and then crawled, yellow and shaking, to the chapel where he signed a pledge and lived for the rest of his life in a gritted, grim and guilty sobriety. The cousins took what they could and went to test what was left of their luck out in the Rockies at a place called Arickaree, where they bred horses and kept live stables. They weren't the first to come, they followed a man who'd gone out for the '45 to pan for Californian gold, who then stayed to run a general store, and someone else who'd made some sort of fortune. There are family anecdotes that sound like the script for a silent cowboy movie—Buffalo Bill is said to have lived next door. The Yorkshire boys—the Batley Cowboys—were plagued by rustlers, shysters and grifters, and unreliable help, all probably as keenly desperate as they were. And then one of them got gutshot over a poker game, and the next day his siblings found him left for dead on a rubbish heap, but he didn't die—he was from Yorkshire—and they moved to Detroit instead.

They did well in Detroit, though there was a scandal pasted into the scrapbook. There's the unmistakable pursed disapproval in the cuttings. Despite that, you can sense between the lines the unspoken shadows of the immigrant sun rising, as the old home family genteelly and stiffly subsid

The New World failures may have been greater, the disasters more excessive, the consequences more brutal, but there's a bounce in every fall, a spit on the palm's new start for every setback. In Yorkshire there is only the impetus of decline; the farms, the woolen mills, the dairy rounds wither, unravel and turn sour. The family wears out, stumbles politely, tripping over drink and ennui and a genteel surrender to the momentum of underachievement. The scrapbook comes to an end midsentence, a handful of pages left blank as if they can no longer be bothered. Maybe whoever was responsible died or moved on, or married. I always imagine it was a woman who kept and collated it: it's women who unpick and reweave the shoddy of families. Maybe they were just so sad they couldn't bear it. The unintentional narrative arc is a log of profit and loss, the transfer of hope and luck from an old account to a new, from Europe to America. My grandparents left Yorkshire for Kent. My grandmother's brother followed the train west to Detroit, returning only to leave a leg, postbellum. My dad wrote in his autobiography that his uncle had invited him to America with a view to emigration. He was a young man with little to keep him in a battered and exhausted postwar Europe. Everything about America was the place to be, but he didn't stay. He too was both pushed and pulled—pushed out and pulled back. I expect, contrarily, it will have been the comfort and the cornucopia that repelled him, the prospect of the rubble and the pity that called him. He never mentioned this encounter to me—perhaps he did and I wasn't interested. But now I try to imagine what it would have been like if he had gone. What our life would have been, what I'd have been like if I'd grown up in Grosse Pointe, where the family were now selling Chevrolets.

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I'm writing this in Colorado. In front of me on the table is a glass jar with a fistful of wildflowers wilting in the inky water. The little, elegant, hardy blooms of high meadows. Beyond the vase, through a window, a valley falls away. Fields of purple, yellow and white, thick and fetlock-deep, rest like plump salads between hanging red-stone walls, flocked in aspen and fir whose leaves flicker like pale sequoias in the wind. A dirt road marks a circuitous river that races past cabins, corrals and grazing horses, and then dies into the overlapping fan of herringboned hills that steeples the middle distance. Behind them, riding above the tree line, are the stacks of sawtoothed mountains; still, in this hot and heady July, they are flecked with slivers of snow. And above it all, that histrionic sky of the West, building the dreaming temples of freedom out of clouds, elevated in the summer heat, boiling up late-afternoon thunderstorms. Buzzards curl on their thermals. This view is familiar before you ever see it. It is the frontier. It is the wilderness, and I feel no particular connection with this place other than being here with my children on holiday. The Batley Cowboys haven't lent or marked it with a sense of belonging for me.

What with the book, the Bible and Dad dying, I'd been scratching the ancestors, and the buffalo returned to haunt me, as the Indians always say it does—Tatanka, the ghost of the prairies. Death lends everything a metaphoric imperative. Mundane objects become fetishes when the departed no longer need them, and breakfast conversations grow runic and wise from behind the shadows. The buffalo returned, a dream totem, my father's familiar, and my quest.

The Bagshaw Museum sits like an ornate and squat toad amid the tight and unattractive little curde-sacs of Batley. This is a place that has always grown out of industry and parsimony rather than aesthetics and exuberance. The museum was originally a mill owner's house, erected as the stubborn monument to his money and the twelve-hour days and six-day weeks of his child laborers. The memorial to their amputated fingers, broken heads and deafening exploitation. It is a Gothic brass bar

of boastful brick, and despite its thumbs-in-waistcoat-pocket, portly, mercantile intentions, it turned out to be the embodiment of that Yorkshire cautionary *schadenfreude*: clogs to clogs in three generations.

The mill boss spent the staggering figure of 25,000 mid-Victorian pounds on his house, and his grandchildren sold it back to the council for five quid. Some years later a local aristocrat donated the land for a public park, and the council turned this empty temple into a museum. Its first and most eclectically vigorous curator was Mr. Bagshaw, a local philanthropist who, in the Edwardian way of things, collected indiscriminately and rigorously, with the global kleptomania of empire and the desire to own, calibrate, measure and stuff everything possible, to put all of creation into its place, and place as much of it as possible in glass cases. The house had briefly done for the ambition of one man what the museum did for Batley. There was an entire Egyptian tomb displayed here in the old drawing room. There were cases of ethnographic flotsam and jetsam and novelty. Added to this municipal treasury, the pillage of imperialism, a great-aunt of mine donated the buffalo.

But museums as indiscriminate collections of ethnic curiosity and snobbery have had their day. The sun has finally set on their patronage. They are academically useless, morally dubious. So when I called to ask if there was any trace of my buffalo, the district administrator told me that the museum was closed for refurbishment and would open at some later date, “exhibiting collections that were more in tune with the educational and cultural needs of the local community.” All the old stuff had been put in storage, and she would call me back. And then, the damnedest thing happened. She did. They’d found a reference to the buffalo. It had been donated with a decorative calabash of South American origin and an eagle’s foot. The talon had gone to a school’s nature table, but the buffalo was apparently still there somewhere, along with the other embarrassments, locked in the attic. “It may take some time to find,” she said. But then the next damnedest thing happened, and they found it, and they told me, and I asked if I’d like to see it.

Batley is just off the M1, part of that municipal sprawl that was once the West Riding and is now called Kirklees. The agricultural and craftsman communities have blended into each other. Dewsbury, Heckmondwike, Cleckheaton, Gomersal, Birstall, Soothill, Kinsley, Ossett, Crackenedge, names that sound like what they were, that mimic the bash and grind of industry, that sound like pub jokes. Now you’d only know that you’d arrived in any of them because the road sign tells you to drive carefully, and that they’re twinned with some other postindustrial stain on the Ruhr.

The museum was surrounded by what must have once been an impressive garden, but now the decorative herbaceous border has been stuffed with variegated laurel—the gardening version of a nylon dust sheet. I looked out over the soft landscape, the park, the old mill chimneys, the brick warehouses, terrace streets, the hedges and fields that my family must have husbanded, called in the cows for milking, and tried to wish a connection, a retrospective belonging, some dusty chime of homecoming. But there was nothing. I felt no more connection to this place than I did to the high country of Colorado. Inside the museum, the succession of corpulently, darkly self-satisfied empty rooms swaggered their fancy plaster and paneling, and showed off exuberant, varied marbled mantels with surprisingly mean little fireplaces. That really is the spirit of the West Riding—showy on your mantelpiece, parsimonious with the coal. At the top of the building, in the old servants’ quarters, the mad attic is crammed to the eaves with the Edwardian museum, a staggering jumble of tat and curiosity, shelves of ethnic craft and gimped taxidermy. Escaping from under plastic sheeting, piled on sagging shelves, are handles and feet, beaks and ormolu casters, rattan and lacquer, bamboo, china, mud, bone and teak all lying hugger-mugger with a dingy disregard. The curators look at this Tourette’s collection of brac-and-bicker with a wearied irritation. These things will never be shown again. Museums appear to have an air of permanence, of being the repositories of immortality, but they are just as prone to the whims of fashion and the sliding

eye of public interest as a Harrods window. The Bagshaw collection displays another truth about these corrals of culture: more often than not, an exhibition is merely a misplaced object. These things would be mundane and unremarkable in the places that created them. They were exhibited first of all for being curious in this context, and then discarded because the curiosity waned. They now hang in the administrative Hades, a shadow Kafka-world beyond help or home. They can't be sold because they belong to the people of Kirkstall who don't know about them, or want them, and they can't be thrown away because this is a museum, and for a museum to discard anything would be an act of philistine fascist vandalism. But then, to exhibit them would be insensitive, colonially imperious, so they languish here like the old, ugly, deranged children in an orphanage.

I was led upstairs and down corridors to the last room, and there on the table was the Batley Cowboys' buffalo. Correctly, their bison. His face points to the sky. His dark eye stares straight at me with that stoical peevishness that is the species' resting expression. No one has ever been able to surmise what a buffalo was thinking, their faces held low, pulled back into the protection of their massive shoulders, an impassive minotaur head with just this gimlet eye. He is huge—far bigger than expected. I suppose because I am most used to his most distant English cousin, the domestic cow. His great, woolly head implies a hidden, woolly body behind it, galloping up through the floor, about to heave him through the roof. The head is attached to an ornate and embossed yoke, a brass shield that makes him more decorative than zoological. He lies amid stacks of spears, arrows, knobkerries and clubs, and a pensive pheasant and a rather fine great bustard, like heraldic supporters. The prosaic bird of English copse and heath.

The buffalo has lost his other eye and the sheath of one horn. The injuries make him look more majestic, with a patient dignity. Taxidermy inhabits a half-life, an underpass between life and death. He is oddly vital, still possessed of an animating force, not as defunct as a corpse yet still nowhere near living. A talisman trapped between escape and dust. Where I have felt no particular tug or connection to Batley and these family-familiar dales, or to the pines and meadows of Colorado, I do feel something akin to this dark head, trapped in flight, held in these airless, silent eaves, shrouded in the dust and decrepitude of uninterest. I imagine him spending years on the wall in a modest but sturdy farmhouse, inglorious and oversized, a talking point, an anchor for paper chains and mistletoe above a sideboard in a dining room, with brown furniture smelling of beeswax and ham and vinegar and folded linen, with hunting prints on each side, a beveled mirror on a chain, the bone-handled carving set in its blue velvet-lined box, the slow tick of a grandfather clock, the sticking drawers lined with the yellowing pages of the *Yorkshire Post*, neat with saved candle ends, comic bottle openers, plated silver pickle forks, a box of England's Best matches, a stained recipe for Guards pudding, a china anchovy paste pot containing the charmed and silver three-pences for Christmas puddings. Perhaps they gave him a name, a Yankee name from a penny dreadful Wild West story: Tex, or Doc. Perhaps an Indian name: Sitting Bull or Geronimo. More likely, with ponderous Yorkshire humor, the name of someone he reminded the family of—Uncle Alfred, Witless Wilf. And back before that, when his name was of his own bellowing, I imagine him being picked out by a man from this valley in Yorkshire, their threads converging as the man stepped out on his long journey to the West. First the dogcart to the station, then the train to Liverpool or Southampton, the ship to New York—in comfort, I imagine, not in a stateroom, but not steerage—then a long, slow, rocking journey out west on that astonishing marathon of civil engineering and endurance, a transcontinental railway, to get off in some lone, blown and gritty rural town beneath the mountains, picked up by his cousins, who now look quite different, taller in the slope-heeled work boots, darker, rangier, broader, chest-out confident, with broad hats and bandannas, and I expect they suggested a trip to hunt buffalo, to spend a night out on the prairie, sleep under the

stars, eat pork and beans, drink whiskey, talk about home and the new life out here in this new soon-to-be state.

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It won't have been difficult to kill the buffalo. Over 100 years, from 1800 to 1900, around 75 million were slaughtered, mostly by hunters hired by the railway to feed laborers, or by skinners for their hides. Little else was used. And shooting buffalo was the attrition to move on and assimilate the Indians. The naked corpses of the great herds were left on the plains. There were not enough carrion eaters to tidy them away. It was a glut, unexpected and unknown to nature. They leached slowly back into the poor thin earth, their white bones visible for years as a warning and a threat. Our buffalo won't have been hard to find as he trundled in the diminished herd. They cut off his head and maybe took a few steaks just to say they tasted it, "a bit like beef, but tougher." And then, months after the man's return to Batley, when he'd all but forgotten, the station master must have rung to say there was a packing case standing on the platform: a pine box with a painted address, the chalk marks of customs and shipper's fragile labels and papers. And they got it back and searched for a chisel and a hammer, and pried off the lid, and there, wreathed in hessian and sweet woodchips, with a faint smell of rot and perhaps the turpentine of wild sage, the buffalo would have looked up at him.

And so it hung: a totem in this museum, not just to the open territorial West, the vanished herds and the tribes, but also this departed and dispersed family. To the vanished millworkers and extinct family farms of the West Riding. The totem head that has outlived the museum. This town is now Asian Punjabis who came here in the sixties to work the end of the wool, and have stayed to make their own communities. There is a faint and smiling punning irony that in the great urban flow of migration the buffalo from the lost herds has contrarily found himself at long, long last once again at home among the Indians.

Outside the shuttered Bagshaw Museum there is a rhododendron-and-azalea walk that has unlandscaped itself and is evolving back into woodland, its rockery paths barely traceable. The ornamental bridges collapse over the poetically meandering rills, choked with bramble and briar, bluebells and banks of pungent wild garlic. A local boy was beaten to death here a few months back. A small dog zigzags past, snorting the tilth, followed by a fat jogging woman in all-day sweatpants. This would all have been planted as a romantic allegory, a setting that would have mimicked Byron and Scott, and late-Victorian paintings and Gothic doggerel. It is a parody of the real, boundless and unwritten wilderness that the Batley Cowboys went to find. Here it hides a defunct place, has grown over the people and things and ways of life that have long gone west. In the oak and beech dappled clarion of spring birds sing of nests and mates and living room, and mock the earth.

The story of my family, the forgettable, episodic saga of moving on, is not uncommon. Many—maybe most—European families can tell something similar. Cousins, brothers, uncles, aunts, sisters, daughters, sons waving goodbye, promising to write, to send back for others when they'd made the bridgehead, to return money when it was made, to return themselves when they'd made it. There will be photographs and diaries in most attics, stories and fading memories in every household. Emigration is perhaps the most familiar plot in the Old World. In 400 years a trickle became a stream, then a torrent of immigration to America. From 1800 to 1914 more than 30 million Europeans immigrated to the New World: one in four Irishmen, one in five Swedes, 3 million Germans, 5 million Poles, 1 million Italians. There is not a country, a community, a village or household that wasn't affected by the lure of the West, but we don't talk about it much. We're far more familiar, more comfortable with the returning echo from the other side, the view from the New World looking back. Americans are the ones who tell the creation story of a nation. In Europe it's an exodus told as the historical and statistical footnote to the much older and slower-plotted saga whose cast is beyond reckoning. Emigration as pa-

of the Highland clearances, the potato famine, the persecution of Huguenots, ergot blight, the collapse of the southern Italian rural economy, Polish military conscription.

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In America, immigration is the story of hope and achievement, of youth, of freedom, of creation. But all entrances on one stage are exits elsewhere. In Europe it is loss. Every one a farewell, a failure, sadness, a defeat. It must have been such a relentless woe, such an awful repetition of rending, the gut-clenching finality of separation, the absence of love. In the decade preceding it, more Europeans left for America than the 16 million who died in the Great War. Though these are not comparable—these aren't the dead. Occasionally, like my cousins, they brought over their relatives. Some did return, rich and replete, to retire and complete the circle, but most didn't. They hugged their mothers, drank a toast with friends, promised to write, took a last look at the old house, patted the counterpane on the childhood bed, patted the dog, picked up a parcel with a favorite lunch—cheese from the pasture, ham from the chimney, apple from the orchard, the pie with that particular scent of hearth—and they pulled the door shut with a sound that was familiar and final and would stay with them a lifetime, and they walked out and down the street through a thousand-year landscape, and their brothers and sisters would walk with them until they could go no further, and on they'd go, individually, in pairs, in groups, and clans, whole villages, classes from schools, congregations.

And mostly, the people who left were the ones who could be spared least. Like a biblical curse, the biblical land called the young and the strong from Europe: the adventurous, the clever, and the skilled. The story of emigration told from America is a moving toward freedom and land and riches, toward opportunity, a clean sheet, a new start. Sweden and Norway, Finland and Iceland lost 14 percent of their population—most of them young. They took with them their stern religion and an astonishing capacity for Sisyphean toil. Also self-absorption that absorbed loneliness. On their backs they carried bags of their homeland's hardy wheat, and with all of that they made something astonishing and memorable. The Irish would attend their own wakes at home, so their families could keep over them departing. Emigration was a death to avoid death; the Atlantic, a Styx.

## “Stupid”

“Stupid, stupid. Americans are stupid. America is stupid. A stupid, stupid country made stupid by stupid stupid people.” I particularly remember that because of the nine stupid in one paragraph. It was said over a dinner table by a professional woman, a clever, clever, clever woman. Hardback-educated, bespokely traveled, liberally humane, worked in the arts. A clever woman who cared for things. She gave money for their relief, shed tears for people she’d never met and would have been unable to speak to if she had. I can’t remember specifically why she said it, what evidence of New World idiocy triggered the trope. Neither do I remember what the reaction was, but I don’t need to remember. It would have been a nodded and muttered agreement. Even from me. I’ve heard this cock crow so often I don’t even feel guilt for not wringing its neck. Among the educated, enlightened, expensive middle classes of Europe, this is a received wisdom. A given. Stronger in some countries like France, less so somewhere like Germany, but overall, the Old World patronizes America for being a big, dumb, fat, belligerent child. The intellectuals, the movers and the makers and the creators, the dinner-party establishments of people who count, are united in the belief—no, the knowledge—that Americans are stupid, crass, ignorant, soulless, naive oafs without attention, irony or intellect. These same people will use every comforting, clever and ingenious American invention, will demand its medicine, wear American clothes, eat its food, drink its drink, go to its cinema, love its music, thank God for its expertise in a hundred disciplines, and will all adore New York. More than that, more shaming and hypocritical than that, these are people who collectively owe their nations’ and their personal freedoms to American intervention and protection in wars, both hot and cold. Who whether they credit it or not, also owe their concepts of freedom, equality and civil rights in no small part to America. Of course, they will also sign collective letters accusing America of being a fascist, totalitarian, racist state.

Enough. Enough, enough, enough of this convivial rant, this collectively confirming bigotry. The nasty laugh of little togetherness, or Euro-liberal insecurity. It’s not just another lazy, thoughtless prejudice. It’s embarrassing, infectious and belittling. I once asked a lawyer who specialized in hate crime, racism and intolerance if he had come across a case of an American claiming discrimination. He looked askance. No. Would he prosecute a case on behalf of an American, or America? “I can’t imagine a circumstance where we’d bring a case on behalf of America. The law is there to protect the weak and vulnerable,” he replied with the smile of political and social virtue that I’ve seen over so many plates of ham and melon. Funny, and I thought it was for everyone.

Look at that European snapshot of America. It is so unlike the country I have known for thirty years. Not just a caricature but a travesty, an invention. Even on the most cursory observation, the intellectual European view of the New World is a homemade, Old World effigy that suits some international purpose. The belittling, the discounting, the mocking of the States is not about them at all. It’s about us back here in the ancient, classical, civilized continent. Well, how stupid can America actually be? On the international list of the world’s best universities, thirteen of the top twenty are American. Four are British. Of the top 100, only one is French, and Heidelberg creeps in for the Germans. America has won 320 Nobel Prizes. The UK 117. France 57. America has more Nobel Prizes than Britain, France, Germany, Japan and Russia combined. Of course, Nobel Prizes aren’t everything, and America’s aren’t all for inventing Prozac or refining oil. They have eighteen peace prizes, six for literature (they share

Eliot with the Brits). And are they emotionally dim, naive, irony free? Do you imagine the society that produced Dorothy Parker and Lenny Bruce doesn't understand irony? It was an American who said that satire died when they awarded the Nobel Peace Prize to Henry Kissinger. It's not irony that America lacks, it's cynicism. In Europe, that arid sneer out of which nothing is grown or made is often mistaken for the creative scalpel of irony. And what about vulgarity? Americans are innately sniggerably vulgar. What, vulgar like Henry James or Eleanor Roosevelt or Cole Porter, or the Mormons? Again, it's a question of definitions. What Americans value and strive for is straight talking plain saying. They don't go in for ambiguity or dissembling, the etiquette of hidden meaning, the skill of the socially polite lie. The French in particular confuse unadorned direct language with a lack of culture or intellectual elegance. It was Camus who sniffily said that only in America could you be a novelist without being an intellectual. There is a belief that America has no cultural depth or critical seriousness. Well, you only have to walk into an American bookshop to realize that is wildly wrong and willfully blind. What about Mark Twain, or jazz, or abstract expressionism?

What is so contrary about Europe's liberal antipathy to America is that any visiting Venusian anthropologist would see with the merest cursory glance that America and Europe are far more similar than they are different, not just similar but plainly related, and not simply on one or two cultural or political levels, as colonies are to their colonizers. The threads of the Old World are woven into the New. America is Europe's greatest invention. That's not to exclude the contribution to America that has come from around the globe, but it is built out of Europe's ideas, Europe's understanding, aesthetic morality, assumptions and laws. From the way it sets a table to the chairs it sits on, to the rhythms of its poetry and the scales of its music, the meter of its aspirations and its laws, its markets, its prejudices and neuroses. The conventions and the breadth of America's reason are European.

This isn't a claim for ownership, or for credit. America's robust construction, its filigree of sensibilities, its essential genius belong to no one but itself. But America didn't arrive by chance. It wasn't a ship that lost its way. It wasn't coincidence or happenstance. America grew tall out of the cramping ache of old Europe.

When I was a child, there was a lot of talk of a "brain drain"—commentators, professors, directors and politicians would worry at the seeping of gray matter across the Atlantic. Brains were being lured to California by mere money. Mere money and space, and sun, and steak, and Hollywood, and more money and opportunity and optimism and openness. All the *O's* but without one-upmanship. And there was ownership, and friendship, and a future. All inconsequential fripperies, according to the Old World: beads and mirrors. People who took the dollar in exchange for their brains were unpatriotic in much the same way that tax exiles were. The unfair luring of indigenous British thoughts would, it was darkly said, lead to Britain falling behind, ceasing to be the preeminently brilliant and inventive nation that had produced the Morris Minor and the hovercraft. You may have little idea how lauded and revered Sir Christopher Cockerell, the inventor of the hovercraft, was, and you may well not be aware of what a noisy, unstable waste of effort the hovercraft turned out to be, but we were very proud of it for a moment.

The underlying motif of the brain drain was that while America might have wealth, performance production, advertising and consumption, for real cleverness you needed years of careful breeding. Colonial bedrooms, tinned tomatoes on toast, a temperament and a heritage that led to invention and discovery. And that was only really available in Europe and, to the greatest extent, in Britain. At the same time as the establishment was getting purple-faced about the brain drain, they were encouraging working-class families and single, young, skilled men to become "ten-pound Poms"—take assisted passage to Australia. Nobody seemed to notice that these were exactly the people who had once left for America.



the country that could now afford to buy brains. The brain drain was symbolic of a postwar self-pity. ~~The handing back of empire, the slow, Kiplingesque watch as the things you gave your life to are~~ broken, and you have to stoop to build them up with worn-out tools. There was resentment and envy that, while the first half of the twentieth century had spent the last of Grandfather's inherited capital, had left Britain exhausted and depressed, whereas the war had been the engine that geared up industry and pulled America out of the Depression, and capitalized it for a half century of plenty. It seemed so unfair. All that sangfroid on all those stiff lips, all of Nanny's virtues, were, after all, going to be the only chilly, speechless reward.

The real brain drain was already 300 years old. The idea of America attracted the brightest and most idealistic, and the best from all over Europe. European civilization had reached a stasis. By its own accounting it had grown from classical Greece to be an identifiable, homogeneous place, thanks to the Roman Empire and the spread of Christianity, and then through the Dark Ages there was the Renaissance and the Reformation, and then the Age of Reason, which grew a series of ideas and discoveries, philosophies and visions that became preeminent. But at the moment of their creation there also came the United States. Europe was reaching a point where the ideas that moved it were outgrowing the conventions and the hierarchies that governed it. So democracy, free economy, trade, speech and social mobility were stifled by the vested interests and competing stresses of a crowded and class-bound nation. Migration to America may have been primarily economic but it equally created the space where the ideas that in Europe had grown too root-bound to flourish might be transplanted. Over 200 years the flame that had been lit in Athens and fanned in Rome, Paris, London, Edinburgh, Berlin, Stockholm, Prague and Vienna was passed, a spark at a time, to the New World.

In 1776 the white and indentured population of America was 2.5 million. A hundred years later it was 50 million. In 1890 America overtook Britain in manufacturing output to become the biggest industrial economy in the world. That is an astounding, beggaring achievement. No economy in the history of commerce has grown that precipitously, and this was thirty-five years after the most murderous and expensive, desperate civil war. Indeed, America may have reached parity with Britain as early as 1830. Right from its inception it had faster growth than old Europe. It also had a very efficient modern banking system—another new idea from the Old World—that sold securities and government bonds, a lot of them to English investors. America was, from the very start, seen as the coming nation. In 1900 its per capita GDP was \$5,000. In 2009 it was \$46,400, and America accounted for a quarter of the world's economy. It wasn't individual brains that made this worth. It isn't a man with a better mousetrap. It's a million families who want a better mousetrap and are willing to work making mousetraps. It's banks that will finance the manufacture of better mousetraps, and it's a big nation with lots of mice.

Why America? There are other places that Europeans traveled to and set up new nations: Brazil and in particular Argentina, always promised to be the powerhouses of South America. Both got enormous waves of immigration, had great natural resources, but neither, despite the constant promises, evolved to be anything remotely like the country America became. And there was South Africa and East Africa, North Africa, the archipelago Indonesia, Australia, all the focus of empires and nation building. But none quite transcended their geography, their climate, or the little snobberies and prejudices of their colonizers. America did have the advantage of a very early independence, and in creating a constitution that was peculiarly inspired. So, brain-drained Europeans will swiftly tell you most of it came via Locke, and it may have, but it was applied not in England or in Europe, but in America. The construction of the new country wasn't a replication of eighteenth-century England, although some wished it to be so. It was a testing of many, many European ideas of nationhood and

liberty. Alexander Hamilton didn't want a democracy at all, fearing mob rule, the dictatorship of the majority. Instead, he called for a president and a legislature elected for life—essentially the House of Lords. He demanded strong central government that could veto states. It was all very patrician and paternalistic. He even mentioned getting rid of the states altogether. George Washington loathed the idea of political parties, seeing factions as being the cause for strife that would stop men voting with their consciences or in the best interest of their state. He came this close to being George I of America although he was personally against an elected monarchy. The thirteen individual states didn't want the interference of a central government, but they did want its protection. It was Madison who, with a stroke of genius that would be the benchmark for so much American politics, saw that conflict of interests and faction were not in fact the problem but the solution; that tension would make the strength of the structure. Like the guy ropes holding up the big top, they would sustain and restrain government. He set up the Congress not in competition with the states, but as the protector of individual rights, regardless of state.

The arguments and the heartfelt convictions that would boil down to make the Constitution are fascinating. They set the tone for what has been the mantra and motto of American legislation ever since. The new Constitution barely got ratified. Virginia initially rejected both it and the new nation. It was all meant to be a wide, rural republic, made up for the most part of gentleman farmers with some light industry: Anglophone and well read, reasonable, liberal, fiercely self-reliant. But within two generations it grew to be a nation that not one of its original legislators could possibly have foreseen. And that says a lot for the Constitution's spirit and practicality and grandeur. It expanded without ever losing its shape or its clarity. There is not a stupid word or thought in it.

Soon after it was written, James Madison, insisting that a Bill of Rights be attached, presented ten constitutional amendments that laid down the rights of individuals in relation to the state. Many of the legislators thought this was unnecessary, but they passed them anyway. They include the familiar Fifth that you take because you can't be forced to incriminate yourself. The Ninth Amendment, which is not often mentioned, was perfectly foresighted. It says the enumeration of the Constitution, of certain rights shall not be construed to deny or disparage others retained by the people. So no future law could be made that would deny or trespass on rights already given to Americans. Finally, the founding legislators sitting in Philadelphia came up with the most farsighted institution, one that in its concept and principle is plainly European, but had never been instigated in Europe. Indeed it was impossible to imagine in eighteenth-century Europe that a Supreme Court could sit above all. No ancient government would willingly have created an untouchable board of wise men to ratify its own judgments, but the founding fathers of America did, and it has regularly passed that judgment on how laws and individual dilemmas reflect on the meaning and the spirit of the Constitution. It has at one time handed down that the Constitution demanded white and black be segregated, and again that their segregation was unconstitutional. Americans don't see this as a weakness in their founding document, only a proof of its magisterial profundity, and its ability to adapt.

There is one other uniquely American difference in the enlightened version of government in the new United States. In Europe, in the Old World, democracy, parliamentary civilian government, a free and impartial judiciary, are seen as being central ornaments of nationhood. They are evidence of the brilliance of culture and the civility of the people. But thanks not least to a smelly, awkward, contrarian pamphleteer and eternally revolutionary Englishman, Americans understand that all government of any sort is a symbol not of their greatness, but of weakness. Tom Paine wrote in *Common Sense*, the most widely read political pamphlet until *The Communist Manifesto*, that all that is good and noble about humanity is settled amicably between people. It is a sign of their failure of trust and empathy that

they need to retain governments. Many Americans still believe that while the presidency is a noble office, ~~government is a shame and a reprimand~~, government is a necessary caution. You take pride not in the collective, in the work of others, but in the individual. In what you have built yourself.

Still, none of that explains why intellectual professional Europeans are so silkily dismissive and abusive of America. There is, among the great similarities, the tangle of fraternity and cultures, one of the great things. A defining thing that separates contemporary America and Europe. In the Old World it is a tenet, a continually agreed truth, that the greatest heights of our civilization have already been scaled. That the most beautiful piece of music has already been written, that no contemporary artist will create a work as great as that which already exists in our museums, that no modern architect will design a building that could fittingly replace the great landmarks of our cities. The most moving poem is already uttered, the most profound thought long ago cogitated. In America this concept, this belief, is incomprehensible. Absurd. Defeatist. Visiting Americans like all that glass-case culture stuff, that ancient, static, curiosity-cabinet sense of place. It is enchanting. What they mostly like about it is something that Europeans don't notice. It's the sight and the sense of time running backward, so that you can stand in a place and see the clock revolve widdershins, the calendar regain lost days. But the idea that this might also apply back home in America is shuddery. Who could possibly believe that the best film has already won its Oscar, or that the greatest rock song or photograph has already been sung and snapped? It would not just be deeply depressing, it would be fundamentally un-American. This is the nation of constant expansion, always new, always improved, always better.

On some unremarked day in the nineteenth century, Europe passed, without noticing, a tipping point. It felt, through a collective pheromone, a synchronicity of loss of nerve. A faint breeze of ennui that now it had more to lose than to gain. The journey had been all uphill, now they stood on the crest and looked at the gentle slope down. Europe is a place that conserves. It maintains, it curates its civilization, protects it against the ravages and rust of other cultures, and the rot of time and intellectual theft. We are a continent where fear of losing what we have is greater than the ambition to make it anew. No one will ever rebuild Paris again, no new Renaissance will come to reinvent Rome. No heroic age will tear up the center of London to put an idol on a column surrounded by lions.

But in America, the future can't come fast enough. Despite all the mad, didactic and infuriatingly competing voices and visions of what that future should look like, there is one agreed patriotic consensus: it won't look like the past. America took Europe's great enthusiasm, its big ideas, its invention, its young, and with that it also took the idea and the belief in a better tomorrow, and this is the most fundamental and profound division between the Old World and the New.

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## Harvest

Walking slowly along the glaucous, shaggy banks of a trout stream through the high meadows of the San Juans in the Colorado Rockies, I am looking for wildflowers, because they take me back to the cousins' book, preserved botany. But I'm also here because there's a woman who does guided field tours of vegetation for city folk and those who feel nature is a stranger who speaks a wild, pidgin dialect they don't understand. She gently but relentlessly repeats the historic, medicinal and culinary uses of shrubby shards of green that are competing in this bad-mannered traffic jam of herbage. She's slight and purposeful, and comes with a slight and purposeful seedling—a child of about ten, with shoulder-length hair, bilberry eyes and a trout-freckled complexion.

As the mother identifies grasses, I try to identify whether this kid is a boy or a girl. It's called something androgynous and windblown, like Aspen, or Lichen. The stands of aspen up here are the biggest living thing on the planet—who'd have thought? Acres of aspen share the same underground artery and vein system, their DNA identical. Branches of this lollygagging übervegetable are all rooted as one. Every time the mother finds a plant, she asks the child what it is. The child answers with bored nonchalance. The mother is keen to pass on knowledge.

This is the sort of stuff that is supposed to be rote learned: the wisdom of Gaia, the ancient mysteries of the mountain, the folklore of the forest is given a gravitas and a veracity because it's spoken out loud. The learning is handmade. Knowledge acquired outdoors always seems to have a greater, hardier wisdom than the stuff you find at a desk on a computer. I like this runic information, the slow pace of the picking, the shreds and spikes of greenery, the rubbing and sniffing, the tentative tasting, the emphatic imparting of my new points of difference, the rhythmic repetition of names, Latin, English, native. It all has the somnambulant effect of nursery rhymes, ancient sagas, the singsong of pleasant words, none of which catch. All of them evaporate from the memory like aftershave, leaving a whiff of blossom and cut grass. This shy leaf will apparently relieve period pains and stave off nightmares. This moss will make bile-yellow dye, and was used to line moccasins. This twig, if boiled, will make an infusion that cures cystitis and depression.

I'm holding a posy of mad fronds, feeling like a backcountry Ophelia. Every plant comes with a homily, an anecdote. This one was given by bear to squirrel when he fell in the gopher's hole, this saved the life of a hiker who broke a leg up on Bald Elk Ridge, this was in Pocahontas's nuptial bouquet. The effect of this stream of nature consciousness feeds into the coarse, survivalist fear of "What would I do if I were marooned out here? Could I build a log cabin, roast a beaver, make a ha find vegetable Valium in sufficient quantities to calm the hysterical fear and apocalyptic fatalism. These lists and names make an order out of the terrifying, overwhelming chaos. It is no accident that the first thing Adam did was name the wild: tame it on the tongue. Vowel and consonant award some sort of ownership—at least you could shout at the thing that was eating you.

If you do begin to bring a sense of order to the vast, disordered energy of all this random life, it is so difficult to imagine what awe must have permanently accompanied the first European explorers of this place. The monstrous dimensions of America, the thought of being lost forever in it. There is, in one of James Fenimore Cooper's Leatherstocking novels, a long and mesmerizing description of the forests of the Northeast. He calls them a great sea, an ocean of wood, undulating, rising and falling, relentless

and endless, stretching across the horizon. He gives us the sense of men adrift, lost in this alien element, vanishing into its depths, swept away by the huge waves, drowned in its dark, silent deep. It is an eerie and profound description.

Cooper was no woodsman himself; his fieldcraft is all bogus and theatrical, but he had been a sailor and he knew something of the great expanse of nature, the implacable loneliness of the unmade world. *The Last of the Mohicans* was the most widely read nineteenth-century New World novel, loved by Victor Hugo; Schubert asked to be read it on his deathbed. Wilkie Collins said that Cooper was the greatest romantic American novelist, who deserved to be known—pause here for eulogistic effect—the American Scott. The comparison now sounds comically like faint praise—like being known as the Belgian Starbucks. The *Waverley* novels are now probably as seldom opened as *The Pathfinder*. Cooper owes the decline and fall of his reputation as much to Mark Twain as to a change in taste. Twain wrote the most perfectly swingeing and malevolently witty disemboweling of Cooper's whole outdoor pioneers-and-Indians genre. But Cooper does have a particularly romantic and evocative ability to conjure a scene, to fill a space, like a brass band heard in the distance. It was his vision that most children and most Europeans first came to experience, and see in the great, unending mind's eye what America might look like. To shiver at what it might feel like to be lost in the fathomless green.

As we walk through the Colorado high meadows, the most obvious and lyrical plants are the daisies, all oxeyes: about the only plant I actually recognize. They elegantly punctuate the greensward with touches of eggy jollity. "Aren't these oxeye daisies?" I ask tentatively, and the Green Lady tenses like someone catching a sensitive tooth on ice. "They're not supposed to be here, they're interlopers. An old guy I know remembers when there were no daisies in these mountains, now they're everywhere, more every year. Best thing you could do for America is kill every single one of them." She is looking at the picture and ignoring, with willful censorship, the most obvious living thing in it. Refusing to acknowledge the graffiti on a mausoleum. The daisies are weeds. The definition of a weed is a flower in the wrong place. "They were brought here by Europeans." She says the word flat, like a clerk at the court naming the accused, presumably to spare my European feelings, and not exacerbate the innate pain and guilt I must be experiencing. "As decoration," she adds. To my European eyes, they are decorative. Decorative—such a European foible: so close to decadent—but perhaps I like them because they're from home. Maybe their familiarity in this alien space is what I cleave to. They weren't brought here for decoration, they were the Old World cure for homesickness. And here at my feet are dandelions. The Back Woods Woman says they were also imported by the pioneers as food. Dandelion salad, a precious side dish in France—they call it *pissenlit* because it's a mild diuretic. The lady doesn't tell us that; perhaps she doesn't know. Perhaps it doesn't fit with the Arcadian pharmacy of her pre-Columbian Eden that she wants to pass on to the omnisexual child.

Plants were the first great gift of the New World to Europe. The Spanish and the Portuguese may have come for gold and silver but it was vegetables that made their fortune. The first Europeans to find America were the Icelanders. Leif Eriksson bumped into Newfoundland by accident. Actually it is difficult to tell how much of Norse discovery was serendipity—running to or running away. Norse society was galvanized by a population explosion that put a strain on inherited farmland and caused a boom in feuds, revenge and vendetta. Everybody was avoiding somebody, and probably hunting somebody else. They had a stoically belligerent attitude to the sea. While the rest of the world was loathe to lose sight of the shore, the Vikings regularly lost sight of everything except their greed and anger. They would set out on the steeping hills of unnavigated water. They were supreme sailors—not least because they were willing to accept the exceedingly long odds on never being seen again. On top of all the practical climatic terrors of the ocean they added their own sea monsters, witches, trolls, sprites and

kelpies, while living in daily dread of the solid roof of the sky falling in on their heads. If Eriksson called the bit of America he landed on “Vinland” because he thought there were profusions of grapes there, he was dead wrong. Vikings may have been past masters at viciousness, democracy and inventing the narrative arc, but they were crap at botany. Iceland is largely covered with some oddly spongy moss, no trees, but Vinland was a solid sea of forest. Nothing but trees, with barely any space between them. To the Vikings, this free wood was astonishing treasure. They stayed for a season to fell trees and fill the longboats, then returned home. Occasionally they came across natives and killed them out of hand without much consideration that there might be anything else to do with strangers in a strange land. The natives seem to have felt much the same about the uninvited Vikings.

The Icelanders could never have undertaken the open-ended voyages if it weren't for a single essential commodity. Salt cod. Preserved and easily stored rations that meant a ship could travel huge distances, cod turned out to be the first bounty of North America. Among other things it was a tax on salt cod that precipitated the War of Independence. It has been claimed that in the interregnum between the Icelandic lumberjacks' visits and Columbus's mistaken landing in the West Indies, the Portuguese had already sidled up and begun fishing the Grand Banks. They were the greatest navigators of their age—cod is their national dish, and fishermen are secretive about where they catch their nets. The grab for the riches of Central America began with gold and silver, pirates and privateers on the Spanish Main, gold doubloons, yo ho ho and the search for El Dorado, but when the adventures of the awkward monomaniacs, the explorers, the buccaneers and conquistadors had departed at the end of ropes or poison arrows or some blackened swelling and hallucinatory new disease, it was the merchants who came to realize that the value of the New World was in the earth, and brought back baskets of potatoes, corn, peppers, squashes, pumpkins, avocados, strawberries, tomatoes, sunflowers, vanilla, chocolate, tobacco and turkeys.

The discoveries of the New World didn't just add a few exotic dishes to Europe's menu: it was a whole group of ingredients that changed the way the Old World ate, and how its society was organized. It caused the greatest upheaval in European life that didn't involve armies or plague. The food included two staple carbohydrates. There are only half a dozen eaten in the whole world. To come up with two new ones is astonishing. But today it's difficult to imagine the African diet without mealy meal, the porridge of ground corn, northern Italy without polenta. Try and taste the Italian kitchen without tomatoes, or the Asian market without chilies. Before the discovery of America there is no hot spice—apart from pepper. What were curries like? But nothing transformed the politics, the economy and the table of Europe like the potato. The tuber from Peru.

None of this stuff was taken to immediately. Working people resist foreign food—particularly working people who are mostly agrarian. What you eat is so intimately tied up with where you live and what you grow, and who you are. Food is national identity. So potatoes were initially grown as flowers, and there was a reticence about tomatoes, because they were thought to be related to poison berries. It was the Italians who ate them first. The French fed corn to livestock until the wheat harvest failed, but it was the potato that changed everything. Most notoriously in Ireland, where potatoes became a monocrop, replacing wheat. Not only did the tuber do well in Europe, coming from the variable climate of the Andes, but it had the particularly added benefit of thriving in marginal land.

The smallholdings of Irish farmers were leased from landowners and split between all the sons. They got to be very small—usually between one and six acres. If he grew wheat or barley, a man could feed an average family for, say, nine months. He would then have to work for the landlord for three months to pay the rent. It was bonded labor—close to slavery. Many Irish farmed part-time or, by tradition, joined the English army. In the nineteenth century, one in three British soldiers was a

Irishman. But an acre of potatoes would feed the average family for twelve months. So farms that were below subsistence became sustainable if they grew potatoes. With the addition of a little buttermilk and some bacon, this was not a hearty diet, or a very interesting one, but it was serviceable. You'd live. The great thing about potatoes is that they don't need much maintenance—they're sow and forget. Children could tend potatoes, so a man could go off and sell his labor for a profit.

Potatoes were a blessing and then a curse for Ireland. As they turned out to be for the peasants of Scotland, Scandinavia, Holland and Germany. It is a miserable irony that the potato came from America and sent these people back to America as desperate economic refugees. The Gorta Mor, the Great Hunger, the potato famine, lasted from 1845 to 1851. The crop had been failing sporadically for two decades. The blight—*Phytophthora infestans*—probably came from the east coast of America or Peru, in shiploads of guano. First of all it affected England and the Low Countries, but when it got to Ireland there was no respite or alternative. A million died of starvation, and two million emigrated. A quarter of the country was buried or disappeared. Food is the bottom line of everything. There is no compromise or negotiation with a bare cupboard. Most journeys in all of the world start not with bright expectations, a sense of adventure or a bucket and spade, but an empty stomach. It was the belief in America as the land of plenty, of full stomach and endless fields, or fruit and pastures, that drew so many Europeans.

And still when Europeans visit American supermarkets they are surprised by the gluttonous volume of produce. The edible mountains, the sticky, bright rivers, the sugary pools, the model landscape made of sweet and sour, salt and bitter. Back in the Old World, an exclusive food shop may have a single ingredient in the window. An Italian butcher's will often display a rabbit or a veal chop. For Americans food is about volume: it is largesse and generosity. In Europe we find the uneatable quantities confusing and distasteful. An American health food chain opened in London and presented shoppers with a typically CinemaScope spread of choice, and the reaction of the ecologically parsimonious and waste-sensitive London women was a sort of anaphylactic shock. The meat undulating in sinewy, bloody fields, the shiny, dewy goodness of the mountains and forests of salad, the fifteen sorts of rice, the dozens of ice creams. It is the same feeling that Europeans experience when confronted by American portions—the gargantuan steaks, the jaw-disengaging thickness and leaking fecundity of sandwiches. The necropolises of wings and legs, breasts and buttocks, the relentless, tyrannical labyrinth of choice like a child constantly whining "why?" All the condiments of freedom: Thousand Island, Ranch, blue cheese, Italian, French, steak sauce, chili sauce, gravy, mayonnaise, mustard, salsa, chili butter, nondairy creamer. The breads, the chips, the cakes and buns, the bagels and tacos, the fajitas and mushroom cloud muffins. The magma avalanche of Eat Me. The unquaffable spigot of Drink Me. The tubs and lakes of cola and coffee, the cultural heritage.

This landscape of food triggers feelings quite, quite different in Europeans and Americans. We are deeply uncomfortable with it. Many would call it sinful. It mocks the famine and rationing, hardship and hunger that are just outside the peripheral vision of our collective memory. Oh, the waste, the ostentation, the lack of self-control. But in America, in America this view is the promise and the reward. It is the proof of the essential goodness and ripeness, the blessedness of the nation. Born from hard work and ingenuity, it is harvest festival, it's God's benison. In the shop in London it was shocking and intimidating and immoral. When we were all supposed to be frugal and husband scarce resources we were confronted with this profligacy. Shoppers would emerge clutching a loaf, muttering, "When will it all go? Who's going to eat it?" In America this is the bounty of a healthy, free and welcoming country. It is hospitality and generosity. They are the descendants of immigrants, this is the promise of the blinding covenant of America. A whole new world in a full stomach. Freedom from want. In 183

Edwin Kershaw, an immigrant from Yorkshire to Massachusetts, wrote home to his wife, "I never sat me down to a meal but I think of the starving weavers of Rochdale."

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The food that came back to Europe from America embodies many of those aspirations and qualities that came to be associated with the New World. Food and nationality are constant features of foreignness and belonging. People become what they eat. Or rather they eat what they become. There is a particular Americanness to American food. And when it travels it takes that with it. The potato is the egalitarian: honest, without ostentation or pretension, plain in form, reliable in function, it'll make the most of hard land and it carries with it an intrinsic decency. A bland, trusty dependency. A potato will feed all classes, treats monarch and pauper alike without etiquette or manners. It is cheap and plentiful, and universal. And chili, the pepper; loudmouthed and a pain in the arse. Corn, the largest grass in the world. And not just corn on the cob, the pup and pootoo of Africa, but also popcorn, an invention that is, by every association, American. A peculiar invention of the nation: a food that was created to have no gastronomic or dietary value. No one has ever set a table to eat popcorn. It is consumed while slouched semidressed, hogged without manners. No utensil is used. It is there to sustain some bovine pleasure while you do something else. Something pleurably passive—watch a movie, a game. So much of American promise, its leisure, its release, its freedom, is embodied in popcorn. So blissfully, irreverently un-European.

Travelers from the Old World didn't arrive empty-handed of course, although the first attempts to grow cereals were a sorry disaster. The Elizabethan colonists probably weren't much good as farmers back home, but later, good—indeed, miraculous—farmers arrived from Scandinavia and Germany, immigrants who carried bags of hardy, Nordic wheat. And they made one of the greatest agricultural transformations ever. Within seventy years they had turned the great northern prairies into the breadbasket of the world. In 1846 the English parliament, after twenty years of arguing, passed the corn law that repealed the tax on imported grain that protected home farmers and the interests of the old, landed families. Britain and Belgium were the only European countries not to have imposed tariffs against the great cornucopia of American grain.

The early explorers also brought a host of exciting new diseases—almost all of them fatal if you hadn't grown up living with livestock, which of course Americans hadn't. Smallpox and measles, influenza, all sorts of diarrhea. In return, it seems likely that Columbus's crew took back with them the billet-doux of syphilis to Genoa and Naples, from where it spread through Europe, carried mostly by soldiers in nasty little wars, where it got called the French Plague, or the Italian Disease, depending on who gave it to you.

The irony of European life was that it was unsanitary and sickly, but if you made it through the first five years you were probably immune to everything. It is the received truth that Europeans brought a great malaise with them. Ill people suffering not just physically but mentally—sickened by their guilt, their prescriptive religions, their appalling class structures, their entitled arrogance. What they found were two continents—North and South America—barely able to feed themselves. The great mystery of America is not how much food it had, but how very little.

No one can say with any certainty how many pre-Columbian Indians there were, but they most likely implied an existence that hadn't been followed in the rest of the world for three millennia. Hunter-gatherers and marginal cultivators, they were already anomalies, alone on the edge of the world. When the conquistadors of central America marched over the hill and saw beneath them Mexico City



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