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America Wasn't a Democracy, Until Black Americans Made It One

Nikole Hannah-Jones

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America Wasn’t a Democracy, Until Black Americans Made It One

Nikole Hannah-Jones

My dad always flew an American flag in our front yard. The blue paint on our two-story house was perennially chipping; the fence, or the rail by the stairs, or the front door, existed in a perpetual state of disrepair, but that flag always flew pristine. Our corner lot, which had been redlined by the federal government, was along the river that divided the black side from the white side of our Iowa town. At the edge of our lawn, high on an aluminum pole, soared the flag, which my dad would replace as soon as it showed the slightest tatter.

My dad was born into a family of sharecroppers on a white plantation in Greenwood, Miss., where black people bent over cotton from can’t-see-in-the-morning to can’t-see-at-night, just as their enslaved ancestors had done not long before. The Mississippi of my dad’s youth was an apartheid state that subjugated its near-majority black population through breathtaking acts of violence. White residents in Mississippi lynched more black people than those in any other state in the country, and the white people in my dad’s home county lynched more black residents than those in any other county in Mississippi, often for such “crimes” as entering a room occupied by white women, bumping into a white girl or trying to start a sharecroppers union. My dad’s mother, like all the black people in Greenwood, could not vote, use the public library or find work other than toiling in the cotton fields or toiling in white people’s houses. So in the 1940s, she packed up her few belongings and her three small children and joined the flood of black Southerners fleeing North. She got off the Illinois Central Railroad in Waterloo, Iowa, only to have her hopes of the mythical Promised Land shattered when she learned that Jim Crow did not end at the Mason-Dixon line.

Grandmama, as we called her, found a house in a segregated black neighborhood on the city’s east side and then found the work that was considered black women’s work no matter where black women lived — cleaning white people’s houses. Dad, too, struggled to find promise in this land. In 1962, at age 17, he signed up for the Army. Like many young men, he joined in hopes of escaping poverty. But he went into the military for another reason as well, a reason common to black men: Dad hoped that if he served his country, his country might finally treat him as an American.

The Army did not end up being his way out. He was passed over for opportunities, his ambition stunted. He would be discharged under murky circumstances and then labor in a series of service jobs for the rest of his life. Like all the black men and women in my family, he believed in hard work, but like all the black men and women in my family, no matter how hard he worked, he never got ahead.

So when I was young, that flag outside our home never made sense to me. How could this black man, having seen firsthand the way his country abused black Americans, how it refused to treat us as full citizens, proudly fly its banner? I didn’t understand his patriotism. It deeply embarrassed me.

I had been taught, in school, through cultural osmosis, that the flag wasn’t really ours, that our history as a people began with enslavement and that we had contributed little to this great nation. It seemed that the closest thing black Americans could have to cultural pride was to be found in our vague

connection to Africa, a place we had never been. That my dad felt so much honor in being an American felt like a marker of his degradation, his acceptance of our subordination.

Like most young people, I thought I understood so much, when in fact I understood so little. My father knew exactly what he was doing when he raised that flag. He knew that our people's contributions to building the richest and most powerful nation in the world were indelible, that the United States simply would not exist without us.

In August 1619, just 12 years after the English settled Jamestown, Va., one year before the Puritans landed at Plymouth Rock and some 157 years before the English colonists even decided they wanted to form their own country, the Jamestown colonists bought 20 to 30 enslaved Africans from English pirates. The pirates had stolen them from a Portuguese slave ship that had forcibly taken them from what is now the country of Angola. Those men and women who came ashore on that August day were the beginning of American slavery. They were among the 12.5 million Africans who would be kidnapped from their homes and brought in chains across the Atlantic Ocean in the largest forced migration in human history until the Second World War. Almost two million did not survive the grueling journey, known as the Middle Passage.

Before the abolishment of the international slave trade, 400,000 enslaved Africans would be sold into America. Those individuals and their descendants transformed the lands to which they'd been brought into some of the most successful colonies in the British Empire. Through backbreaking labor, they cleared the land across the Southeast. They taught the colonists to grow rice. They grew and picked the cotton that at the height of slavery was the nation's most valuable commodity, accounting for half of all American exports and 66 percent of the world's supply. They built the plantations of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, sprawling properties that today attract thousands of visitors from across the globe captivated by the history of the world's greatest democracy. They laid the foundations of the White House and the Capitol, even placing with their unfree hands the Statue of Freedom atop the Capitol dome. They lugged the heavy wooden tracks of the railroads that crisscrossed the South and that helped take the cotton they picked to the Northern textile mills, fueling the Industrial Revolution. They built vast fortunes for white people North and South — at one time, the second-richest man in the nation was a Rhode Island "slave trader." Profits from black people's stolen labor helped the young nation pay off its war debts and financed some of our most prestigious universities. It was the relentless buying, selling, insuring and financing of their bodies and the products of their labor that made Wall Street a thriving banking, insurance and trading sector and New York City the financial capital of the world.

But it would be historically inaccurate to reduce the contributions of black people to the vast material wealth created by our bondage. Black Americans have also been, and continue to be, foundational to the idea of American freedom. More than any other group in this country's history, we have served, generation after generation, in an overlooked but vital role: It is we who have been the perfecters of this democracy.

The United States is a nation founded on both an ideal and a lie. Our Declaration of Independence, approved on July 4, 1776, proclaims that "all men are created equal" and "endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights." But the white men who drafted those words did not believe them to be true for the hundreds of thousands of black people in their midst. "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of

Happiness” did not apply to fully one-fifth of the country. Yet despite being violently denied the freedom and justice promised to all, black Americans believed fervently in the American creed. Through centuries of black resistance and protest, we have helped the country live up to its founding ideals. And not only for ourselves — black rights struggles paved the way for every other rights struggle, including women’s and gay rights, immigrant and disability rights.

Without the idealistic, strenuous and patriotic efforts of black Americans, our democracy today would most likely look very different — it might not be a democracy at all.

The very first person to die for this country in the American Revolution was a black man who himself was not free. Crispus Attucks was a fugitive from slavery, yet he gave his life for a new nation in which his own people would not enjoy the liberties laid out in the Declaration for another century. In every war this nation has waged since that first one, black Americans have fought — today we are the most likely of all racial groups to serve in the United States military.

My father, one of those many black Americans who answered the call, knew what it would take me years to understand: that the year 1619 is as important to the American story as 1776. That black Americans, as much as those men cast in alabaster in the nation’s capital, are this nation’s true “founding fathers.” And that no people has a greater claim to that flag than us.

In June 1776, Thomas Jefferson sat at his portable writing desk in a rented room in Philadelphia and penned these words: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” For the last 243 years, this fierce assertion of the fundamental and natural rights of humankind to freedom and self-governance has defined our global reputation as a land of liberty. As Jefferson composed his inspiring words, however, a teenage boy who would enjoy none of those rights and liberties waited nearby to serve at his master’s beck and call. His name was Robert Hemings, and he was the half brother of Jefferson’s wife, born to Martha Jefferson’s father and a woman he owned. It was common for white enslavers to keep their half-black children in slavery. Jefferson had chosen Hemings, from among about 130 enslaved people that worked on the forced-labor camp he called Monticello, to accompany him to Philadelphia and ensure his every comfort as he drafted the text making the case for a new democratic republic based on the individual rights of men.

At the time, one-fifth of the population within the 13 colonies struggled under a brutal system of slavery unlike anything that had existed in the world before. Chattel slavery was not conditional but racial. It was heritable and permanent, not temporary, meaning generations of black people were born into it and passed their enslaved status onto their children. Enslaved people were not recognized as human beings but as property that could be mortgaged, traded, bought, sold, used as collateral, given as a gift and disposed of violently. Jefferson’s fellow white colonists knew that black people were human beings, but they created a network of laws and customs, astounding for both their precision and cruelty, that ensured that enslaved people would never be treated as such. As the abolitionist William Goodell wrote in 1853, “If any thing founded on falsehood might be called a science, we might add the system of American slavery to the list of the strict sciences.”

Enslaved people could not legally marry. They were barred from learning to read and restricted from meeting privately in groups. They had no claim to their own children, who could be bought, sold and traded away from them on auction blocks alongside furniture and cattle or behind storefronts that advertised “Negroes for Sale.” Enslavers and the courts did not honor kinship ties to mothers, siblings, cousins. In most courts, they had no legal standing. Enslavers could rape or murder their property without legal consequence. Enslaved people could own nothing, will nothing and inherit nothing. They were legally tortured, including by those working for Jefferson himself. They could be worked to death, and often were, in order to produce the highest profits for the white people who owned them.

Yet in making the argument against Britain’s tyranny, one of the colonists’ favorite rhetorical devices was to claim that *they* were the slaves — to Britain. For this duplicity, they faced burning criticism both at home and abroad. As Samuel Johnson, an English writer and Tory opposed to American independence, quipped, “How is it that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty among the drivers of Negroes?”

Conveniently left out of our founding mythology is the fact that one of the primary reasons some of the colonists decided to declare their independence from Britain was because they wanted to protect the institution of slavery. By 1776, Britain had grown deeply conflicted over its role in the barbaric institution that had reshaped the Western Hemisphere. In London, there were growing calls to abolish the slave trade. This would have upended the economy of the colonies, in both the North and the South. The wealth and prominence that allowed Jefferson, at just 33, and the other founding fathers to believe they could successfully break off from one of the mightiest empires in the world came from the dizzying profits generated by chattel slavery. In other words, we may never have revolted against Britain if some of the founders had not understood that slavery empowered them to do so; nor if they had not believed that independence was required in order to ensure that slavery would continue. It is not incidental that 10 of this nation’s first 12 presidents were enslavers, and some might argue that this nation was founded not as a democracy but as a slavocracy.

Jefferson and the other founders were keenly aware of this hypocrisy. And so in Jefferson’s original draft of the Declaration of Independence, he tried to argue that it wasn’t the colonists’ fault. Instead, he blamed the king of England for forcing the institution of slavery on the unwilling colonists and called the trafficking in human beings a crime. Yet neither Jefferson nor most of the founders intended to abolish slavery, and in the end, they struck the passage.

There is no mention of slavery in the final Declaration of Independence. Similarly, 11 years later, when it came time to draft the Constitution, the framers carefully constructed a document that preserved and protected slavery without ever using the word. In the texts in which they were making the case for freedom to the world, they did not want to explicitly enshrine their hypocrisy, so they sought to hide it. The Constitution contains 84 clauses. Six deal directly with the enslaved and their enslavement, as the historian David Waldstreicher has written, and five more hold implications for slavery. The Constitution protected the “property” of those who enslaved black people, prohibited the federal government from intervening to end the importation of enslaved Africans for a term of 20 years, allowed Congress to mobilize the militia to put down insurrections by the enslaved and forced states that had outlawed slavery to turn over enslaved people who had run away seeking refuge. Like many others, the writer and abolitionist Samuel Bryan called out the deceit, saying of the Constitution, “The

words are dark and ambiguous; such as no plain man of common sense would have used, [and] are evidently chosen to conceal from Europe, that in this enlightened country, the practice of slavery has its advocates among men in the highest stations."

With independence, the founding fathers could no longer blame slavery on Britain. The sin became this nation's own, and so, too, the need to cleanse it. The shameful paradox of continuing chattel slavery in a nation founded on individual freedom, scholars today assert, led to a hardening of the racial caste system. This ideology, reinforced not just by laws but by racist science and literature, maintained that black people were subhuman, a belief that allowed white Americans to live with their betrayal. By the early 1800s, according to the legal historians Leland B. Ware, Robert J. Cottrol and Raymond T. Diamond, white Americans, whether they engaged in slavery or not, "had a considerable psychological as well as economic investment in the doctrine of black inferiority." While liberty was the inalienable right of the people who would be considered white, enslavement and subjugation became the natural station of people who had any discernible drop of "black" blood.

The Supreme Court enshrined this thinking in the law in its 1857 Dred Scott decision, ruling that black people, whether enslaved or free, came from a "slave" race. This made them inferior to white people and, therefore, incompatible with American democracy. Democracy was for citizens, and the "Negro race," the court ruled, was "a separate class of persons," which the founders had "not regarded as a portion of the people or citizens of the Government" and had "no rights which a white man was bound to respect." This belief, that black people were not merely enslaved but were a slave race, became the root of the endemic racism that we still cannot purge from this nation to this day. If black people could not ever be citizens, if they were a caste apart from all other humans, then they did not require the rights bestowed by the Constitution, and the "we" in the "We the People" was not a lie.

On Aug. 14, 1862, a mere five years after the nation's highest courts declared that no black person could be an American citizen, President Abraham Lincoln called a group of five esteemed free black men to the White House for a meeting. It was one of the few times that black people had ever been invited to the White House as guests. The Civil War had been raging for more than a year, and black abolitionists, who had been increasingly pressuring Lincoln to end slavery, must have felt a sense of great anticipation and pride.

The war was not going well for Lincoln. Britain was contemplating whether to intervene on the Confederacy's behalf, and Lincoln, unable to draw enough new white volunteers for the war, was forced to reconsider his opposition to allowing black Americans to fight for their own liberation. The president was weighing a proclamation that threatened to emancipate all enslaved people in the states that had seceded from the Union if the states did not end the rebellion. The proclamation would also allow the formerly enslaved to join the Union army and fight against their former "masters." But Lincoln worried about what the consequences of this radical step would be. Like many white Americans, he opposed slavery as a cruel system at odds with American ideals, but he also opposed black equality. He believed that free black people were a "troublesome presence" incompatible with a democracy intended only for white people. "Free them, and make them politically and socially our equals?" he had said four years earlier. "My own feelings will not admit of this; and if mine would, we well know that those of the great mass of white people will not."

That August day, as the men arrived at the White House, they were greeted by the towering Lincoln and a man named James Mitchell, who eight days before had been given the title of a newly created

position called the commissioner of emigration. This was to be his first assignment. After exchanging a few niceties, Lincoln got right to it. He informed his guests that he had gotten Congress to appropriate funds to ship black people, once freed, to another country.

“Why should they leave this country? This is, perhaps, the first question for proper consideration,” Lincoln told them. “You and we are different races. ... Your race suffer very greatly, many of them, by living among us, while ours suffer from your presence. In a word, we suffer on each side.”

You can imagine the heavy silence in that room, as the weight of what the president said momentarily stole the breath of these five black men. It was 243 years to the month since the first of their ancestors had arrived on these shores, before Lincoln’s family, long before most of the white people insisting that this was not their country. The Union had not entered the war to end slavery but to keep the South from splitting off, yet black men had signed up to fight. Enslaved people were fleeing their forced-labor camps, which we like to call plantations, trying to join the effort, serving as spies, sabotaging confederates, taking up arms for his cause as well as their own. And now Lincoln was blaming them for the war. “Although many men engaged on either side do not care for you one way or the other ... without the institution of slavery and the colored race as a basis, the war could not have an existence,” the president told them. “It is better for us both, therefore, to be separated.”

As Lincoln closed the remarks, Edward Thomas, the delegation’s chairman, informed the president, perhaps curtly, that they would consult on his proposition. “Take your full time,” Lincoln said. “No hurry at all.”

Nearly three years after that White House meeting, Gen. Robert E. Lee surrendered at Appomattox. By summer, the Civil War was over, and four million black Americans were suddenly free. Contrary to Lincoln’s view, most were not inclined to leave, agreeing with the sentiment of a resolution against black colonization put forward at a convention of black leaders in New York some decades before: “This is our home, and this our country. Beneath its sod lie the bones of our fathers. ... Here we were born, and here we will die.”

That the formerly enslaved did not take up Lincoln’s offer to abandon these lands is an astounding testament to their belief in this nation’s founding ideals. As W.E.B. Du Bois wrote, “Few men ever worshiped Freedom with half such unquestioning faith as did the American Negro for two centuries.” Black Americans had long called for universal equality and believed, as the abolitionist Martin Delany said, “that God has made of one blood all the nations that dwell on the face of the earth.” Liberated by war, then, they did not seek vengeance on their oppressors as Lincoln and so many other white Americans feared. They did the opposite. During this nation’s brief period of Reconstruction, from 1865 to 1877, formerly enslaved people zealously engaged with the democratic process. With federal troops tempering widespread white violence, black Southerners started branches of the Equal Rights League — one of the nation’s first human rights organizations — to fight discrimination and organize voters; they headed in droves to the polls, where they placed other formerly enslaved people into seats that their enslavers had once held. The South, for the first time in the history of this country, began to resemble a democracy, with black Americans elected to local, state and federal offices. Some 16 black men served in Congress — including Hiram Revels of Mississippi, who became the first black man elected to the Senate. (Demonstrating just how brief this period would be, Revels, along with Blanche Bruce, would go from being the first black man elected to the last for nearly a

hundred years, until Edward Brooke of Massachusetts took office in 1967.) More than 600 black men served in Southern state legislatures and hundreds more in local positions.

These black officials joined with white Republicans, some of whom came down from the North, to write the most egalitarian state constitutions the South had ever seen. They helped pass more equitable tax legislation and laws that prohibited discrimination in public transportation, accommodation and housing. Perhaps their biggest achievement was the establishment of that most democratic of American institutions: the public school. Public education effectively did not exist in the South before Reconstruction. The white elite sent their children to private schools, while poor white children went without an education. But newly freed black people, who had been prohibited from learning to read and write during slavery, were desperate for an education. So black legislators successfully pushed for a universal, state-funded system of schools — not just for their own children but for white children, too. Black legislators also helped pass the first compulsory education laws in the region. Southern children, black and white, were now required to attend schools like their Northern counterparts. Just five years into Reconstruction, every Southern state had enshrined the right to a public education for all children into its constitution. In some states, like Louisiana and South Carolina, small numbers of black and white children, briefly, attended schools together.

Led by black activists and a Republican Party pushed left by the blatant recalcitrance of white Southerners, the years directly after slavery saw the greatest expansion of human and civil rights this nation would ever see. In 1865, Congress passed the 13th Amendment, making the United States one of the last nations in the Americas to outlaw slavery. The following year, black Americans, exerting their new political power, pushed white legislators to pass the Civil Rights Act, the nation's first such law and one of the most expansive pieces of civil rights legislation Congress has ever passed. It codified black American citizenship for the first time, prohibited housing discrimination and gave all Americans the right to buy and inherit property, make and enforce contracts and seek redress from courts. In 1868, Congress ratified the 14th Amendment, ensuring citizenship to any person born in the United States. Today, thanks to this amendment, every child born here to a European, Asian, African, Latin American or Middle Eastern immigrant gains automatic citizenship. The 14th Amendment also, for the first time, constitutionally guaranteed equal protection under the law. Ever since, nearly all other marginalized groups have used the 14th Amendment in their fights for equality (including the recent successful arguments before the Supreme Court on behalf of same-sex marriage). Finally, in 1870, Congress passed the 15th Amendment, guaranteeing the most critical aspect of democracy and citizenship — the right to vote — to all men regardless of "race, color, or previous condition of servitude."

For this fleeting moment known as Reconstruction, the majority in Congress seemed to embrace the idea that out of the ashes of the Civil War, we could create the multiracial democracy that black Americans envisioned even if our founding fathers did not.

But it would not last.

Anti-black racism runs in the very DNA of this country, as does the belief, so well articulated by Lincoln, that black people are the obstacle to national unity. The many gains of Reconstruction were met with fierce white resistance throughout the South, including unthinkable violence against the formerly enslaved, wide-scale voter suppression, electoral fraud and even, in some extreme cases, the overthrow of democratically elected biracial governments. Faced with this unrest, the federal

government decided that black people were the cause of the problem and that for unity's sake, it would leave the white South to its own devices. In 1877, President Rutherford B. Hayes, in order to secure a compromise with Southern Democrats that would grant him the presidency in a contested election, agreed to pull federal troops from the South. With the troops gone, white Southerners quickly went about eradicating the gains of Reconstruction. The systemic white suppression of black life was so severe that this period between the 1880s and the 1920 and '30s became known as the Great Nadir, or the second slavery. Democracy would not return to the South for nearly a century.

White Southerners of all economic classes, on the other hand, thanks in significant part to the progressive policies and laws black people had championed, experienced substantial improvement in their lives even as they forced black people back into a quasi slavery. As Waters McIntosh, who had been enslaved in South Carolina, lamented, "It was the poor white man who was freed by the war, not the Negroes."

Georgia pines flew past the windows of the Greyhound bus carrying Isaac Woodard home to Winnsboro, S.C. After serving four years in the Army in World War II, where Woodard had earned a battle star, he was given an honorable discharge earlier that day at Camp Gordon and was headed home to meet his wife. When the bus stopped at a small drugstore an hour outside Atlanta, Woodard got into a brief argument with the white driver after asking if he could use the restroom. About half an hour later, the driver stopped again and told Woodard to get off the bus. Crisp in his uniform, Woodard stepped from the stairs and saw the police waiting for him. Before he could speak, one of the officers struck him in his head with a billy club, beating him so badly that he fell unconscious. The blows to Woodard's head were so severe that when he woke in a jail cell the next day, he could not see. The beating occurred just 4½ hours after his military discharge. At 26, Woodard would never see again.

There was nothing unusual about Woodard's horrific maiming. It was part of a wave of systemic violence deployed against black Americans after Reconstruction, in both the North and the South. As the egalitarian spirit of post-Civil War America evaporated under the desire for national reunification, black Americans, simply by existing, served as a problematic reminder of this nation's failings. White America dealt with this inconvenience by constructing a savagely enforced system of racial apartheid that excluded black people almost entirely from mainstream American life — a system so grotesque that Nazi Germany would later take inspiration from it for its own racist policies.

Despite the guarantees of equality in the 14th Amendment, the Supreme Court's landmark Plessy v. Ferguson decision in 1896 declared that the racial segregation of black Americans was constitutional. With the blessing of the nation's highest court and no federal will to vindicate black rights, starting in the late 1800s, Southern states passed a series of laws and codes meant to make slavery's racial caste system permanent by denying black people political power, social equality and basic dignity. They passed literacy tests to keep black people from voting and created all-white primaries for elections. Black people were prohibited from serving on juries or testifying in court against a white person. South Carolina prohibited white and black textile workers from using the same doors. Oklahoma forced phone companies to segregate phone booths. Memphis had separate parking spaces for black and white drivers. Baltimore passed an ordinance outlawing black people from moving onto a block more than half white and white people from moving onto a block more than half

black. Georgia made it illegal for black and white people to be buried next to one another in the same cemetery. Alabama barred black people from using public libraries that their own tax dollars were paying for. Black people were expected to jump off the sidewalk to let white people pass and call all white people by an honorific, though they received none no matter how old they were. In the North, white politicians implemented policies that segregated black people into slum neighborhoods and into inferior all-black schools, operated whites-only public pools and held white and “colored” days at the country fair, and white businesses regularly denied black people service, placing “Whites Only” signs in their windows. States like California joined Southern states in barring black people from marrying white people, while local school boards in Illinois and New Jersey mandated segregated schools for black and white children.

This caste system was maintained through wanton racial terrorism. And black veterans like Woodard, especially those with the audacity to wear their uniform, had since the Civil War been the target of a particular violence. This intensified during the two world wars because white people understood that once black men had gone abroad and experienced life outside the suffocating racial oppression of America, they were unlikely to quietly return to their subjugation at home. As Senator James K. Vardaman of Mississippi said on the Senate floor during World War I, black servicemen returning to the South would “inevitably lead to disaster.” Giving a black man “military airs” and sending him to defend the flag would bring him “to the conclusion that his political rights must be respected.”

Many white Americans saw black men in the uniforms of America’s armed services not as patriotic but as exhibiting a dangerous pride. Hundreds of black veterans were beaten, maimed, shot and lynched. We like to call those who lived during World War II the Greatest Generation, but that allows us to ignore the fact that many of this generation fought for democracy abroad while brutally suppressing democracy for millions of American citizens. During the height of racial terror in this country, black Americans were not merely killed but castrated, burned alive and dismembered with their body parts displayed in storefronts. This violence was meant to terrify and control black people, but perhaps just as important, it served as a psychological balm for white supremacy: You would not treat human beings this way. The extremity of the violence was a symptom of the psychological mechanism necessary to absolve white Americans of their country’s original sin. To answer the question of how they could prize liberty abroad while simultaneously denying liberty to an entire race back home, white Americans resorted to the same racist ideology that Jefferson and the framers had used at the nation’s founding.

This ideology — that black people belonged to an inferior, subhuman race — did not simply disappear once slavery ended. If the formerly enslaved and their descendants became educated, if we thrived in the jobs white people did, if we excelled in the sciences and arts, then the entire justification for how this nation allowed slavery would collapse. Free black people posed a danger to the country’s idea of itself as exceptional; we held up the mirror in which the nation preferred not to peer. And so the inhumanity visited on black people by every generation of white America justified the inhumanity of the past.

Just as white Americans feared, World War II ignited what became black Americans’ second sustained effort to make democracy real. As the editorial board of the black newspaper The Pittsburgh Courier wrote, “We wage a two-pronged attack against our enslavers at home and those abroad who will enslave us.” Woodard’s blinding is largely seen as one of the catalysts for the

decades-long rebellion we have come to call the civil rights movement. But it is useful to pause and remember that this was the second mass movement for black civil rights, the first being Reconstruction. As the centennial of slavery's end neared, black people were still seeking the rights they had fought for and won after the Civil War: the right to be treated equally by public institutions, which was guaranteed in 1866 with the Civil Rights Act; the right to be treated as full citizens before the law, which was guaranteed in 1868 by the 14th Amendment; and the right to vote, which was guaranteed in 1870 by the 15th Amendment. In response to black demands for these rights, white Americans strung them from trees, beat them and dumped their bodies in muddy rivers, assassinated them in their front yards, firebombed them on buses, mauled them with dogs, peeled back their skin with fire hoses and murdered their children with explosives set off inside a church.

For the most part, black Americans fought back alone. Yet we never fought only for ourselves. The bloody freedom struggles of the civil rights movement laid the foundation for every other modern rights struggle. This nation's white founders set up a decidedly undemocratic Constitution that excluded women, Native Americans and black people, and did not provide the vote or equality for most Americans. But the laws born out of black resistance guarantee the franchise for all and ban discrimination based not just on race but on gender, nationality, religion and ability. It was the civil rights movement that led to the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which upended the racist immigration quota system intended to keep this country white. Because of black Americans, black and brown immigrants from across the globe are able to come to the United States and live in a country in which legal discrimination is no longer allowed. It is a truly American irony that some Asian-Americans, among the groups able to immigrate to the United States because of the black civil rights struggle, are now suing universities to end programs designed to help the descendants of the enslaved.

No one cherishes freedom more than those who have not had it. And to this day, black Americans, more than any other group, embrace the democratic ideals of a common good. We are the most likely to support programs like universal health care and a higher minimum wage, and to oppose programs that harm the most vulnerable. For instance, black Americans suffer the most from violent crime, yet we are the most opposed to capital punishment. Our unemployment rate is nearly twice that of white Americans, yet we are still the most likely of all groups to say this nation should take in refugees.

The truth is that as much democracy as this nation has today, it has been borne on the backs of black resistance. Our founding fathers may not have actually believed in the ideals they espoused, but black people did. As one scholar, Joe R. Feagin, put it, "Enslaved African-Americans have been among the foremost freedom-fighters this country has produced." For generations, we have believed in this country with a faith it did not deserve. Black people have seen the worst of America, yet, somehow, we still believe in its best.

They say our people were born on the water.

When it occurred, no one can say for certain. Perhaps it was in the second week, or the third, but surely by the fourth, when they had not seen their land or any land for so many days that they lost count. It was after fear had turned to despair, and despair to resignation, and resignation to an abiding understanding. The teal eternity of the Atlantic Ocean had severed them so completely from what had once been their home that it was as if nothing had ever existed before, as if everything and everyone they cherished had simply vanished from the earth. They were no longer Mbundu or Akan

or Fulani. These men and women from many different nations, all shackled together in the suffocating hull of the ship, they were one people now.

Just a few months earlier, they had families, and farms, and lives and dreams. They were free. They had names, of course, but their enslavers did not bother to record them. They had been made black by those people who believed that they were white, and where they were heading, black equaled “slave,” and slavery in America required turning human beings into property by stripping them of every element that made them individuals. This process was called seasoning, in which people stolen from western and central Africa were forced, often through torture, to stop speaking their native tongues and practicing their native religions.

But as the sociologist Glenn Bracey wrote, “Out of the ashes of white denigration, we gave birth to ourselves.” For as much as white people tried to pretend, black people were not chattel. And so the process of seasoning, instead of erasing identity, served an opposite purpose: In the void, we forged a new culture all our own.

Today, our very manner of speaking recalls the Creole languages that enslaved people innovated in order to communicate both with Africans speaking various dialects and the English-speaking people who enslaved them. Our style of dress, the extra flair, stems back to the desires of enslaved people — shorn of all individuality — to exert their own identity. Enslaved people would wear their hat in a jaunty manner or knot their head scarves intricately. Today’s avant-garde nature of black hairstyles and fashion displays a vibrant reflection of enslaved people’s determination to feel fully human through self-expression. The improvisational quality of black art and music comes from a culture that because of constant disruption could not cling to convention. Black naming practices, so often impugned by mainstream society, are themselves an act of resistance. Our last names belong to the white people who once owned us. That is why the insistence of many black Americans, particularly those most marginalized, to give our children names that we create, that are neither European nor from Africa, a place we have never been, is an act of self-determination. When the world listens to quintessential American music, it is our voice they hear. The sorrow songs we sang in the fields to soothe our physical pain and find hope in a freedom we did not expect to know until we died became American gospel. Amid the devastating violence and poverty of the Mississippi Delta, we birthed jazz and blues. And it was in the deeply impoverished and segregated neighborhoods where white Americans forced the descendants of the enslaved to live that teenagers too poor to buy instruments used old records to create a new music known as hip-hop.

Our speech and fashion and the drum of our music echoes Africa but is not African. Out of our unique isolation, both from our native cultures and from white America, we forged this nation’s most significant original culture. In turn, “mainstream” society has coveted our style, our slang and our song, seeking to appropriate the one truly American culture as its own. As Langston Hughes wrote in 1926, “They’ll see how beautiful I am/And be ashamed —/I, too, am America.”

For centuries, white Americans have been trying to solve the “Negro problem.” They have dedicated thousands of pages to this endeavor. It is common, still, to point to rates of black poverty,

out-of-wedlock births, crime and college attendance, as if these conditions in a country built on a racial caste system are not utterly predictable. But crucially, you cannot view those statistics while ignoring another: that black people were enslaved here longer than we have been free.

At 43, I am part of the first generation of black Americans in the history of the United States to be born into a society in which black people had full rights of citizenship. Black people suffered under slavery for 250 years; we have been legally “free” for just 50. Yet in that briefest of spans, despite continuing to face rampant discrimination, and despite there never having been a genuine effort to redress the wrongs of slavery and the century of racial apartheid that followed, black Americans have made astounding progress, not only for ourselves but also for all Americans.

What if America understood, finally, in this 400th year, that we have never been the problem but the solution?

When I was a child — I must have been in fifth or sixth grade — a teacher gave our class an assignment intended to celebrate the diversity of the great American melting pot. She instructed each of us to write a short report on our ancestral land and then draw that nation’s flag. As she turned to write the assignment on the board, the other black girl in class locked eyes with me. Slavery had erased any connection we had to an African country, and even if we tried to claim the whole continent, there was no “African” flag. It was hard enough being one of two black kids in the class, and this assignment would just be another reminder of the distance between the white kids and us. In the end, I walked over to the globe near my teacher’s desk, picked a random African country and claimed it as my own.

I wish, now, that I could go back to the younger me and tell her that her people’s ancestry started here, on these lands, and to boldly, proudly, draw the stars and those stripes of the American flag.

We were told once, by virtue of our bondage, that we could never be American. But it was by virtue of our bondage that we became the most American of all.

In Praise of Shadows

An Excerpt by Jun'ichiro Tanizaki

I possess no specialized knowledge of architecture, but I understand that in the Gothic cathedral of the West, the roof is thrust up and up so as to place its pinnacle as high in the heavens as possible-and that herein is thought to lie its special beauty. In the temples of Japan, on the other hand, a roof of heavy tiles is first laid out, and in the deep, spacious shadows created by the eaves the rest of the structure is built. Nor is this true only of temples; in the palaces of the nobility and the houses of the common people, what first strikes the eye is the massive roof of tile or thatch and the heavy darkness that hangs beneath the eaves. Even at midday cavernous darkness spreads over all beneath the roof's edge, making entryway, doors, walls, and pillars all but invisible. The grand temples of Kyoto-Chion'in, Honganji-and the farmhouses of the remote countryside are alike in this respect: like most buildings of the past their roofs give the impression of possessing far greater weight, height, and surface than all that stands beneath the eaves.

In making for ourselves a place to live, we first spread a parasol to throw a shadow on the earth, and in the pale light of the shadow we put together a house. There are of course roofs on Western houses too, but they are less to keep off the sun than to keep off the wind and the dew; even from without it is apparent that they are built to create as few shadows as possible and to expose the interior to as much light as possible. If the roof of a Japanese house is a parasol, the roof of a Western house is no more than a cap, with as small a visor as possible so as to allow the sunlight to penetrate directly beneath the eaves. There are no doubt all sorts of reasons-climate, building materials-for the deep Japanese eaves. The fact that we did not use glass, concrete, and bricks, for instance, made a low roof necessary to keep off the driving wind and rain. A light room would no doubt have been more convenient for us, too, than a dark room. The quality that we call beauty, however, must always grow from the realities of life, and our ancestors, forced to live in dark rooms, presently came to discover beauty in shadows, ultimately to guide shadows towards beauty's ends.

And so it has come to be that the beauty of a Japanese room depends on a variation of shadows, heavy shadows against light shadows-it has nothing else. Westerners are amazed at the simplicity of Japanese rooms, perceiving in them no more than ashen walls bereft of ornament. Their reaction is understandable, but it betrays a failure to comprehend the mystery of shadows. Out beyond the sitting room, which the rays of the sun can at best but barely reach, we extend the eaves or build on a veranda, putting the sunlight at still greater a remove. The light from the garden steals in but dimly through paper-paneled doors, and it is precisely this indirect light that makes for us the charm of a room. We do our walls in neutral colors so that the sad, fragile, dying rays can sink into absolute repose. The storehouse, kitchen, hallways, and such may have a glossy finish, but the walls of the sitting room will almost always be of day textured with fine sand. A luster here would destroy the soft fragile beauty of the feeble light. We delight in the mere sight of the delicate glow of fading rays clinging to the surface of a dusky wall, there to live out what little life remains to them. We never tire of the sight, for to us this pale glow and these dim shadows far surpass any ornament. And so, as we must if we are not to disturb the glow, we finish the walls with sand in a single neutral color. The hue may differ from room to room, but the degree of difference will be ever so slight; not so much a difference in color as in shade, a difference that will seem to exist only in the mood of the viewer. And from these delicate differences in the hue of the walls, the shadows in each room take on a tinge peculiarly their own.

Of course the Japanese room does have its picture alcove, and in it a hanging scroll and a flower arrangement. But the scroll and the flowers serve not as ornament but rather to give depth to the shadows. We value a scroll above all for the way it blends with the walls of the alcove, and thus we consider the mounting quite as important as the calligraphy or painting. Even the greatest masterpiece will lose its worth as a scroll if it fails to blend with the alcove, while a work of no particular distinction may blend beautifully with the room and set off to unexpected advantage both itself and its surroundings. Wherein lies the power of an otherwise ordinary work to produce such an effect? Most often the paper, the ink, the fabric of the mounting will possess a certain look of antiquity, and this look of antiquity will strike just the right balance with the darkness of the alcove and room.

We have all had the experience, on a visit to one of the great temples of Kyoto or Nara, of being shown a scroll, one of the temple's treasures, hanging in a large, deeply recessed alcove. So dark are these alcoves, even in bright daylight, that we can hardly discern the outlines of the work; all we can do is listen to the explanation of the guide, follow as best we can the all-but invisible brush strokes, and tell ourselves how magnificent a painting it must be. Yet the combination of that blurred old painting and the dark alcove is one of absolute harmony. The lack of clarity, far from disturbing us, seems rather to suit the painting perfectly.

For the painting here is nothing more than another delicate surface upon which the faint, frail light can play; it performs precisely the same function as the sand-textured wall. This is why we attach such importance to age and patina. A new painting, even one done in ink monochrome or subtle pastels, can quite destroy the shadows of an alcove, unless it is selected with the greatest care.

A Japanese room might be likened to an inkwash painting, the paper-paneled shoji being the expanse where the ink is thinnest, and the alcove where it is darkest. Whenever I see the alcove of a tastefully built Japanese room, I marvel at our comprehension of the secrets of shadows, our

sensitive use of shadow and light. For the beauty of the alcove is not the work of some clever device. An empty space is marked off with plain wood and plain walls, so that the light drawn into it forms dim shadows within emptiness. There is nothing more. And yet, when we gaze into the darkness that gathers behind the crossbeam, around the flower vase, beneath the shelves, though we know perfectly well it is mere shadow, we are overcome with the feeling that in this small corner of the atmosphere there reigns complete and utter silence; that here in the darkness immutable tranquility holds sway. The "mysterious Orient" of which Westerners speak probably refers to the uncanny silence of these dark places. And even we as children would feel an inexpressible chill as we peered into the depths of an alcove to which the sunlight had never penetrated. Where lies the key to this mystery? illtimately it is the magic of shadows. Were the shadows to be banished from its comers, the alcove would in that instant revert to mere void.

This was the genius of our ancestors, that by cutting off the light from this empty space they imparted to the world of shadows that formed there a quality of mystery and depth superior to that of any wall painting or ornament. The technique seems simple, but was by no means so simply achieved. We can imagine with little difficulty what extraordinary pains were taken with each invisible detail-the placement of the window in the shelving recess, the depth of the crossbeam, the height of the threshold. But for me the most exquisite touch is-the pale white glow of the shoji in the study bay; I need only pause before it and I forget the passage of time.

The study bay, as the name suggests, was originally a projecting window built to provide a place for reading. Over the years it came to be regarded as no more than a source of light for the alcove; but most often it serves not so much to illuminate the alcove as to soften the sidelong rays from without, to filter them through paper panels. There is a cold and desolate tinge to the light by the time it reaches these panels. The little sunlight from the garden that manages to make its way beneath the eaves and through the corridors has by then lost its power to illuminate, seems drained of the complexion of life. It can do no more than accentuate the whiteness of the paper. I sometimes linger before these panels and study the surface of the paper, bright, but giving no impression of brilliance.

In temple architecture the main room stands at a considerable distance from the garden; so dilute is the light there that no matter what the season, on fair days or cloudy, morning, midday, or evening, the pale, white glow scarcely varies. And the shadows at the interstices of the ribs seem strangely immobile, as if dust collected in the corners had become a part of the paper itself. I blink in uncertainty at this dreamlike luminescence, feeling as though some misty film were blunting my vision. The light from the pale white paper, powerless to dispel the heavy darkness of the alcove, is instead repelled by the darkness, creating a world of confusion where dark and light are indistinguishable. Have not you yourselves sensed a difference in the light that suffuses such a room, a rare tranquility not found in ordinary light? Have you never felt a sort of fear in the face of the ageless, a fear that in that room you might lose all consciousness of the passage of time, that untold years might pass and upon emerging you should find you had grown old and gray?

And surely you have seen, in the darkness of the innermost rooms of these huge buildings, to which sunlight never penetrates, how the gold leaf of a sliding door or screen will pick up a distant glimmer from the garden, then suddenly send forth an ethereal glow, a faint golden light cast into the enveloping darkness, like the glow upon the horizon at sunset. In no other setting is gold quite so

exquisitely beautiful. You walk past, turning to look again, and yet again; and as you move away the golden surface of the paper glows ever more deeply, changing not in a flash, but growing slowly, steadily brighter, like color rising in the face of a giant. Or again you may find that the gold dust of the background, which until that moment had only a dull, sleepy luster, will, as you move past, suddenly gleam forth as if it had burst into flame.

How, in such a dark place, gold draws so much light to itself is a mystery to me. But I see why in ancient times statues of the Buddha were gilt with gold and why gold leaf covered the walls of the homes of the nobility. Modem man, in his well-lit house, knows nothing of the beauty of gold; but those who lived in the dark houses of the past were not merely captivated by its beauty, they also knew its practical value; for gold, in these dim rooms, must have served the function of a reflector. Their use of gold leaf and gold dust was not mere extravagance. Its reflective properties were put to use as a source of illumination. Silver and other metals quickly lose their gloss, but gold retains its brilliance indefinitely to light the darkness of the room. This is why gold was held in such incredibly high esteem.

Going with the Flow

Eleanor Morgan

In the rush-hour train one evening last summer, I looked around at all the women in the carriage. Middle-aged women hurtling towards the suburbs. Pregnant women holding their lower backs. Teenage girls slick with sebum. Elderly women standing stoically by the doors. I realised every one of them will have some story about how their reproductive systems have affected their lives. And I thought: how much have you kept secret?

Because one day in our early lives as women, everything changes. We start bleeding. And in an instant we're no longer a child. I was on a crazy golf course overlooking Cromer pier when I experienced period pain for the first time. My lower body rippled with a new sensation. It was a pain that didn't fit inside my body, burning through my thighs. I explained to Dad that I didn't feel well. I was aware of the shift in his gaze towards me in a way that I absolutely did not have the language for. That British coastal perfume, thick with sun-roasted kelp and old deep-fat-fryer oil, took the nausea that came with these sharp churns to another level. I had to sit down on the grass. The pain spoke to me. It told me my human fabric had changed. As evidence of the encoding that happened, now when I hear seagulls, I still have flash visions of lying down holding my belly.

I'm in my mid-30s now and my periods have always been a physical and mental slog. It is thought that 90% of women experience some premenstrual changes, even if mildly. There are more than 150 clinically identified symptoms of PMS, including irritability, anxiety, depression and headaches. A laugh riot, in other words.

I have spent years trying to gain autonomy over the way my hormones seem to make my mind and body behave. Around five years ago, prompted by a breakdown-of-sorts, I sought help for the anxiety I had done my very best to conceal from everyone, including myself, for well over a decade. After talking to my GP, I tried all sorts of interventions in my quest for emotional stability. I was referred to (almost exclusively male) gynaecologists whose conversations and hormonal prescriptions made me feel either a) madder or b) ever so slightly less mad for a short amount of time. I tried acupuncture, vitamin supplements and diet changes. I realised this precise, reliable emotional state I sought was elusive at best.

Instead, I was surprised by a growing sense of peace. Addressing the patterns of my mood with a therapist, we looked closely at the shame I attached to being sensitive, sad or scared in the second half of my cycle and asked where it came from. After researching anxiety, I started training to become a psychologist and began researching hormones. I started to see things in a way I never thought I would. I had a new question, and that was: what am I seeking relief from?

I've come to believe that greater awareness of our hormonal processes can help us not only to manage our corresponding moods, but also to conceptualise what a mood actually is: a state of being that is, by its nature, temporary, and rarely directly attributable to one thing. It's an interesting dichotomy, that we can be quite disconnected from what's actually going on when our hormones are

fluctuating – when oestrogen dramatically rises, for example, during ovulation – and yet be so ready to self-police when we feel anything other than sanguine and pain-free.

We blame so much on being “hormonal”: irrationality, “bad” decision-making, angry outbursts, low self-esteem. That wasn’t the real me, we might think, agonising over a knee-jerk decision we made at work, or taking offence at a throwaway comment in the pub. It was my hormones. The same phrase could cover everything from wanting to kill your partner at the dinner table to having frantic sex with them on it.

In some ways, “hormonal” is the modern-day “hysterical” – a word most women will have their own associations with. Mine are profuse. Years and years of secretly believing that I am just on the cusp of losing control: of my emotions, my appetite, my sexuality. Sometimes, I think I’m a hair-trigger away from exploding. Because I’ve quietly believed I’m… well, too much. Almost every woman I have known well has spoken of this belief; one they mostly keep tucked up, because admitting the fear means facing the idea that maybe we don’t have inherent autonomy; that our woman-ness will always “get” us in the end. What if there was a different way of looking at things? What if we could work towards dismantling the self-blame and, therefore, stop othering this fundamental part of who we are? Acknowledging that the stigma surrounding female reproductive processes is still alive and well is the first rung, I think, on the ladder towards self-acceptance. Most women know the crack of relief when someone dares to start talking about periods, the reality of birth, miscarriage or menopause, and other women say, oh thank God. This stigma is like an iceberg. The tip above the surface is women’s day-to-day suffering with whatever process they’re going through; a suffering they feel unable to fully express, perhaps through fear of embarrassment, of disgusting others or that they’ll be dismissed. Underneath the surface is the way women’s health and pain has been, still is, viewed and treated in society.

It is sweet fantasy to say that all the myths, misinformation and ickiness surrounding female reproductive processes have been – finally – banished into the fusty past. It’s silly, really, because the word “hormonal” applies as much to a testosterone-charged City banker as it does to a woman about to have her period. The metabolic processes of all organisms can only take place in very specific chemical environments and, in the human body, hormones are special chemical messengers that, as part of the endocrine system, help to control most major bodily functions. Male, female, or anywhere on the spectrum of gender, hormones keep us alive. Yet “hormonal” is still a tool for explaining away a woman’s experience of her changing biochemistry. And so we try and keep schtum, lest we be slapped with such a historically damaging label: hysterical.

When I effectively ran out of PMS treatment options, it made me realise how entrenched my analysis of my own thoughts and behaviour was in more general ideas of how I “should” or “shouldn’t” be as a woman. In therapy and in my psychological study, I realised how the workings of my inner world are often in collision with the outer world and all the expectations I perceive it to have of me. A better understanding of what goes on inside us, of the connection between our bodies and minds, is an important part of reclaiming meaning. We are not post-biology. We are protecting no one by pretending that we don’t bleed. We are not protecting ourselves by ignoring the external factors that may affect our bodily experiences, including the way modern medicine still doesn’t take the variance of women’s pain – or the voice describing that pain – seriously.

Women can wait between four and 10 years after first seeing a doctor with symptoms of endometriosis and a diagnosis. The average is seven-and-a-half years. In 2017, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence released guidelines urging GPs not to overlook symptoms of the disorder, because for it to be repeatedly inferred that you are overreacting to your pain, your experience of that pain is going to become stained with confusion, fear and guilt. It is difficult to argue that medicine does not have an inherent bias against women. Women presenting at hospitals with pain are not only given fewer painkillers than men, but are often offered sedatives instead. Treatment for women with coronary heart disease is delayed compared to men. All these facts are corroborated by robust data. When a woman says how she feels, what she wants or what she needs, someone always knows better.

Knowing ourselves better gives us the power to ask for better. For example, I used to panic sometimes at the pain I can have with ovulation. I knew I always felt it, but didn't know why. Learning that mittelschmerz (the German words for "middle" and "pain") is thought to be caused by one of our eggs rupturing through a sac (follicle) on an ovary, releasing fluid and a small amount of blood that can travel through the ovary wall and irritate nerves in the lining of the abdominal cavity, was a strange comfort. So, too, was learning from a prominent gynaecologist that he has seen women presenting in A&E in tears with acute pelvic pain, whose only clinically significant finding turns out to be recent ovulation. This shit is real and it hurts. What's sad is that my private experience alone didn't feel like good enough evidence to finally ask for pain relief.

On some level, a focus on a woman's changing biochemistry throughout her cycle – or any other reproductive process – might be seen to remove some of the stigma. It's just my hormones. That there could be a clear, chemical "reason" for a certain type of behaviour or way of feeling is, on the surface, legitimising and reassuring. Although, if any woman is able to ride out days of feeling low each month by being aware of her cycle patterns; or finds that telling herself that the way she's feeling is "just chemical" is a strategy that stops her going up into that second gear of self-analysis and existential woe, I absolutely lift my hat to her. Personally, given what I now know about the imprecision of the science of how our hormones can affect our mood, I try to resist thinking that I am a chemically controlled robot. I try to see my distress as part of a mini-ecosystem that includes my changing hormones, asking myself: what else is going on to upset my mind? How physically well am I right now? What helps?

Research tells us that our hormonal fluctuations do seem to affect how chemical signals pass through our brain – as any neuroscientist would tell you, we just don't know exactly how or why. In all fields of brain study it is accepted that mental distress is not caused by one thing in isolation. The electrical, chemical brain is not extricable from the subjective mind. What we talk about is multi-causality: a fancy word for the concept that lots of different factors contribute to how we feel mentally. Therefore, when we talk about processes happening in a woman's body that place us at "increased risk" of depression or anxiety, it seems not just blindingly logical, but respectful to consider that body in the wider scheme of things.

Perhaps, then, a more realistic phrase than, "It's just my hormones," would be, "My hormones might predispose me to feeling terrible sometimes."

Our fluctuating biology is not the whole story but a significant part of our emotional lives. The hormonal changes and symptoms of menopause are very real and can be very hard. When my hormone levels change, notably at ovulation (soaring oestrogen) and in the week before I get my period (soaring progestogen, high oestrogen), it really can feel like I've stepped inside the skin of a different person – that I am not myself. But what is "myself" if not a sensitive-by-design brain and body that is always changing and responding to the world it inhabits and the people around it? From what fixed, ideal state do I feel I am slipping when I am more emotional for the second half of the month?

As human beings, rhythm is part of our deep core. Breathing, pumping, contracting: these are all actions of the body that keep us alive and keep our species going. Menstruation is another rhythm unique to women. But while our biology and what is happening inside us is important, we cannot act as if the body is an anatomical drawing floating in space; that it is nowhere. Clearly, if a woman's premenstrual distress is such that she feels unable to function, she should, in an ideal world, be receiving dedicated healthcare and support. Is there something wider we should be asking about how, as a society, we frame what women say and do when they are anything other than sanguine, nurturing and polite?

Are we saving up anger, our base need for affection, and our tears for three weeks of the month? As our hormonal levels shift, could they be acting as a kind of "truth serum", lubricating the passage of what we really want to say or do? It's a radical idea and I quite like it. What if what we feel during those times of the month when we are so quick to say we are being irrational is the most "real" we are? The science surrounding whatever signalling changes happen in the emotion-processing parts of our brain during the menstrual cycle is too fuzzy to definitively say otherwise. Could it be that, when the mantle of self-censorship drops and we are less caught up with fearing how we'll be seen, we're accessing all that historical oppression and, in short bursts, letting it go? All that so-called "excess", the stuff that makes a woman "hysterical" could just be… truth.

On Punctuation

By Gertrude Stein

There are some punctuations that are interesting and there are some punctuations that are not. Let us begin with the punctuations that are not. Of these the one but the first and the most the completely most uninteresting is the question mark. The question mark is alright when it is all alone when it is used as a brand on cattle or when it could be used in decoration but connected with writing it is completely entirely completely uninteresting. It is evident that is you ask a question you ask a question but anybody who can read at all knows when a question is a question as it is written in writing. Therefore I ask you therefore wherefore should one use the question mark. Beside it does not in its form go with ordinary printing and so it pleases neither the eye nor the ear and it is therefore like a noun, just an unnecessary name of something. A question is a question, anybody can know that a question is a question and so why add to it the question mark when it is already there when the question is already there in the writing. Therefore I never could bring myself to use a question mark, I always found it positively revolting, and now very few do use it. Exclamation marks have the same difficulty and also quotation marks, they are unnecessary, they are ugly, they spoil the line of the writing or the printing and anyway what is the use, if you do not know that a question is a question what is the use of its being a question. The same thing is true of a quotation. When I first began writing I found it simply impossible to use question marks and quotation marks and exclamation points and now anybody sees it that way. Perhaps some day they will see it some other way but not at any rate anybody can and does see it that way.

So there are the uninteresting things in punctuation uninteresting in a way that is perfectly obvious, and so we do not have to go any farther into that. There are besides dashes and dots, and these might be interesting spaces might be interesting. They might if one felt that way about them.

One other little punctuation mark one can have feelings about and that is the apostrophe for possession. Well feel as you like about that, I can see and I do see that for many that for some the possessive case apostrophe has a gentle tender insinuation that makes it very difficult to definitely decide to do without it. One does do without it, I do, I mostly always do, but I cannot deny that from time to time I feel myself having regrets and from time to time I put it in to make the possessive case. I absolutely do not like it and leaving it out I feel no regret, there it is unnecessary and not ornamental but inside a word and its s well perhaps, perhaps it does appeal by its weakness to your weakness. At least at any rate from time to time I do find myself letting it alone if it has come in and sometimes it has come in. I cannot positively deny but that I do from time to time let it come in.

So now to come to the real question of punctuation, periods, commas, colons, semi-colons and capitals and small letters.

I have had a long and complicated life with all these.

Let us begin with these I use the least first and these are colons and semi-colons, one might add to these commas.

When I first began writing, I felt that writing should go on, I still do feel that it should go on but when I first began writing I was completely possessed by the necessity that writing should go on and on and if writing should go on what had colons and commas to do with it, what had periods to do with it what had small letters and capitals to do with it to do with writing going on which was at that time the most profound need I had in connection with writing. What had colons and semi-colons to do with it what had commas to do with it what had periods to do with it.

What had periods to do with it. Inevitably no matter how completely I had to have writing go on, physically one had to again and again stop sometime and if one had to again and again stop sometime and if one had to again and again stop some time then periods had to exist. Beside I had always like the look of periods and I liked what they did. Stopping sometime did not really keep one from going on, it was nothing that interfered, it was only something that happened, and as it happened as a perfectly natural happening, I did not believe in periods and I used them. I really never stopped using them.

Beside that periods might later come to have a life of their own to commence breaking up things in arbitrary ways, that has happened lately with me in a poem I have written called Winning His Way, later I will read you a little of it. By the time I had written this poem about three years ago periods had come to have for me completely a life of their own. They could begin to act as they thought best and one might interrupt one's writing with them that is not really interrupt one's writing with them but one could come to stop arbitrarily stop at times in one's writing and so they could be used and you could use them Periods could come to exist in this way and they could come in this way to have a life of their own. They did not serve you in any servile way as commas and colons and semi-colons do. Yes you do feel what I mean.

Periods have a life of their own a necessity of their own a feeling of their own a time of their own. And that feeling that life that necessity that time can express itself in an infinite variety that is the reason that I have always remained true to periods so much so that as I say recently I have felt that one could need them more than one had ever needed them.

You can see what an entirely different thing a period is from a comma, a colon or a semi-colon.

There are two different way of thinking about colons and semicolons you can think of them as commas and as such they are purely servile or you can think of them as periods and then using them can make you feel adventurous I can see that one might feel about them as periods but I myself never have, I began unfortunately to feel them as a comma and commas are servile they have no life of their own they are dependent upon use and convenience and they are put there just for practical purposes. Semi-colons and colons had for me from the first completely this character the character that a comma has and not the character that a period has and therefore and definitely I have never used them. But now dimly and definitely I do see that they might well possibly they might have in them something of the character of the period and so it might have been an adventure to use them. I really do not think so. I think however lively they are or disguised they are they are definitely more comma than period and so really I cannot regret not having used them. They are more powerful more imposing more pretentious than a comma but they are a comma all the same. They really have within

them deeply within them fundamentally within them the comma nature. And now what does a comma do and what has it to do and why do I feel as I do about them.

What does a comma do.

I have refused them so often and left them out so much and did without them so continually that I have come finally to be indifferent to them. I do not now care whether you put them in or not but for a long time I felt very definitely about them and would have nothing to do with them.

As I say commas are servile and they have no life of their own, and their use is not a use, it is a way of replacing one's own interest and I do decidedly like to like my own interest my own interest in what I am doing. A comma by helping you along holding your coat for you and putting on your shoes keeps you from living your life as actively as you should lead it and to me for many years and I still do feel that way about it only now I do not pay as much attention to them, the use of them was positively degrading. Let me tell you what I feel and what I mean and what I felt and what I meant.

When I was writing those long sentences of The Making of Americans, verbs active present verbs with long dependent adverbial clauses became a passion with me. I have told you that I recognize verbs and adverbs aided by prepositions and conjunctions with pronouns as possessing the whole of the active life of writing.

Complications make eventually for simplicity and therefore I have always liked dependent adverbial clauses. I have like dependent adverbial clauses because of their variety of dependence and independence. You can see how loving the intensity of complication of these things that commas would be degrading. Why if you want the pleasure of concentrating on the final simplicity of excessive complication would you want any artificial aid to bring about that simplicity. Do you see now why I feel about that simplicity. Do you see now why I feel about
the comma as I did and as I do.

Think about anything you really like to do and you will see what I mean.

When it gets really difficult you want to disentangle rather than to cut the knot, at least of anybody feels who is working with any thread, so anybody feels who is working with any tool so anybody feels who is writing any sentence or reading it after it has been written. And what does a comma do, a comma does nothing but make easy a thing that if you like it enough is easy enough without the comma. A long complicated sentence should force itself upon you, make you know yourself knowing it and the comma, well at the most a comma is a poor period that lets you stop and take a breath but if you want to take a breath you ought to know yourself that you want to take a breath. It is not like stopping altogether has something to do with going on, but taking a breath well you are always taking a breath and why emphasize one breath rather than another breath. Anyway that is the way I felt about it and I felt that about it very very strongly. And so I almost never used a comma. The longer, the more complicated the sentence the greater the number of the same kinds of words I had following one after another, the more the very more I had of them the more I felt the passionate need of their taking care of themselves by themselves and not helping them, and thereby enfeebling them by putting in a comma.

So that is the way I felt about punctuation in prose, in poetry it is a little different but more so and later I will go into that. But that is the way I felt about punctuation in prose.

The Disturbances of the Garden

By Jamaica Kincaid

My obsession with the garden and the events that take place in it began before I was familiar with that entity called consciousness. My mother taught me to read when I was very young, and she did this without telling me that there was something called the alphabet. I became familiar with words as if

they were all wholly themselves, each one a world by itself, intact and self-contained, and able to be joined to other words if they wished to or if someone like me wanted them to. The book she taught me to read from was a biography of Louis Pasteur, the person she told me was responsible for her boiling the milk I drank daily, making sure that it would not infect me with something called tuberculosis. I never got tuberculosis, but I did get typhoid fever, whooping cough, measles, and persistent cases of hookworm and long worms. I was a “sickly child.” Much of the love I remember receiving from my mother came during the times I was sick. I have such a lovely memory of her hovering over me with cups of barley water (that was for the measles) and giving me cups of tea made from herbs (bush) that she had gone out and gathered and steeped slowly (that was for the whooping cough). For the typhoid fever, she took me to the hospital, the children’s ward, but she visited me twice a day and brought me fresh juice that she had squeezed or grated from fruits or vegetables, because she was certain that the hospital would not provide me with proper nourishment. And so there I was, a sickly child who could read but had no sense of consciousness, had no idea of how to understand and so make sense of the world into which she was born, a world that was always full of a yellow sun, green trees, a blue sea, and black people.

My mother was a gardener, and in her garden it was as if Vertumnus and Pomona had become one: she would find something growing in the wilds of her native island (Dominica) or the island on which she lived and gave birth to me (Antigua), and if it pleased her, or if it was in fruit and the taste of the fruit delighted her, she took a cutting of it (really she just broke off a shoot with her bare hands) or the seed (separating it from its pulpy substance and collecting it in her beautiful pink mouth) and brought it into her own garden and tended to it in a careless, everyday way, as if it were in the wild forest, or in the garden of a regal palace. The woods: The garden. For her, the wild and the cultivated were equal and yet separate, together and apart. This wasn’t as clear to me then as I am stating it here. I had only just learned to read and the world outside a book I did not yet know how to reconcile.
The only book available to me, a book I was allowed to read all by myself without anyone paying attention to me, was the King James Version of the Bible. There’s no need for me to go into the troubles with the King James Version of the Bible here, but when I encountered the first book, the Book of Genesis, I immediately understood it to be a book for children. A person, I came to understand much later, exists in the kingdom of children no matter how old the person is; even Methuselah, I came to see, was a child. But never mind that, it was the creation story that was so compelling to me, especially the constant refrain “And God saw that it was good.” The God in the Book of Genesis made things, and at the end of each day he saw that they were good. But, I wondered, for something to be good would there not have to be something that was not good, or not as good? That was a problem, though I didn’t bother myself with it at the time, mainly because I didn’t know how to, and also because the story had an inexorableness to it: rolling on from one thing to another without a pause until, by the end of six days, there were a man and a woman made in God’s image, there were fish in the sea and animals creeping on land and birds flying in the air and plants growing, and God found it all good, because here we are.

It was in the week after this creation, on the eighth day, that the trouble began: loneliness set in. And so God made a garden, dividing it into four quarters by running water through it (the classic quadrilinear style that is still a standard in garden design) and placing borders, the borders being the eternal good and evil: the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge. One tree was to be partaken of, the other forbidden. I have since come to see that in the garden itself, throughout human association

with it, the Edenic plan works in the same way: the Tree of Life is agriculture and the Tree of Knowledge is horticulture. We cultivate food, and when there is a surplus of it, producing wealth, we cultivate the spaces of contemplation, a garden of plants not necessary for physical survival. The awareness of that fact is what gives the garden its special, powerful place in our lives and our imaginations. The Tree of Knowledge holds unknown, and therefore dangerous possibilities; the Tree of Life is eternally necessary, and the Tree of Knowledge is deeply and divinely dependent on it. This is not a new thought for me. I could see it in my mother's relationship to the things she grew, the kind of godlike domination she would display over them. She, I remember, didn't make such fine distinctions, she only moved the plants around when they pleased her and destroyed them when they fell out of favor.

It is no surprise to me that my affection for the garden, including its most disturbing attributes, its most violent implications and associations, is intertwined with my mother. As a child, I did not know myself or the world I inhabited without her. She is the person who gave me and taught me the Word.
But where is the garden and where am I in it? This memory of growing things, anything, outside not inside, remained in my memory—or whatever we call that haunting, invisible wisp that is steadily part of our being—and wherever I lived in my young years, in New York City in particular, I planted: marigolds, portulaca, herbs for cooking, petunias, and other things that were familiar to me, all reminding me of my mother, the place I came from. Those first plants were in pots and lived on the roof of a diner that served only breakfast and lunch, in a dilapidated building at 284 Hudson Street, whose ownership was uncertain, which is the fate of us all. Ownership of ourselves and of the ground on which we walk, ownership of the other beings with whom we share this and see that it is good, and ownership of the vegetable kingdom are all uncertain, too. Nevertheless, in the garden, we perform the act of possessing. To name is to possess; possessing is the original violation bequeathed to Adam and his equal companion in creation, Eve, by their creator. It is their transgression in disregarding his command that leads him not only to cast them into the wilderness, the unknown, but also to cast out the other possession that he designed with great clarity and determination and purpose: the garden! For me, the story of the garden in Genesis is a way of understanding my garden obsession.

The appearance of the garden in our everyday life is so accepted that we embrace its presence as therapeutic. Some people say that weeding is a form of comfort and of settling into misery or happiness. The garden makes managing an excess of feelings—good feelings, bad feelings—rewarding in some way that I can never quite understand. The garden is a heap of disturbance, and it may be that my particular history, the history I share with millions of people, begins with our ancestors' violent removal from an Eden. The regions of Africa from which they came would have been Eden-like, and the horror that met them in that "New World" could certainly be seen as the Fall. Your home, the place you are from, is always Eden, the place where even imperfections were perfect, and everything that happened after that beginning interrupted your Paradise.
On August 3, 1492—the day that Christopher Columbus set sail from Spain, later having a fatal encounter with the indigenous people he met in the "West Indies"—the world of the garden changed. That endeavor, to me, anyway, is the way the world we now live in began; it not only affected the domestic life of Europeans (where did the people in a Rembrandt painting get all that stuff they are piling on?) but suddenly they were well-off enough to be interested in more than sustenance, or the

Tree of Life (agriculture); they could now be interested in cultivating the fruits of the Tree of Knowledge (horticulture).

Suddenly, the conquerors could do more than feed themselves; they could also see and desire things that were of no use apart from the pleasure that they produced. When Cortés saw Montezuma's garden, a garden that incorporated a lake on which the capital of Mexico now sits, he didn't mention the profusion of exotic flowers that we now grow with ease in our own gardens (dahlias, zinnias, marigolds).

The garden figures prominently in the era of conquest, starting with Captain Cook's voyage to regions that we now know as Australia, New Zealand, New Guinea, and Tahiti, its aim, ostensibly, to observe the rare event of the transit of Venus. On this trip, in 1768, the first of Cook's three voyages around the world, he brought with him the botanist Joseph Banks and also Daniel Charles Solander, a student of Carolus Linnaeus. The two took careful notes on everything they saw. Banks decided that the breadfruit of the Pacific isles would make a good food for slaves on British-owned islands in the West Indies; the slaveholders were concerned with the amount of time it took the enslaved people to grow food to sustain themselves, and breadfruit grew with little cultivation. And so the Pacific Islands came to the West Indies. Banks also introduced the cultivation of tea (Camellia sinensis) to India. Then there is Lewis and Clark's expedition from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Northwest. On that adventure, which was authorized by President Thomas Jefferson and was inspired by Cook's scientific and commercial interests, the explorers listed numerous plant species that were unknown to John Bartram, botanist to King George III, who ruled the United States when it was still a colony. Bartram's son, William, a fellow-botanist, later wrote a book about his own explorations, which is said to have influenced Wordsworth, Coleridge, and other English Romantic poets.

There now, look at that: I am meaning to show how I came to seek the garden in corners of the world far away from where I make one, and I have got lost in thickets of words. It was after I started to put seeds in the ground and noticed that sometimes nothing happened that I reached for a book. The first ones I read were about how to make a perennial border or how to get the best out of annuals—the kind of books for people who want to increase the value of their home—but these books were so boring. I found an old magazine meant to help white ladies manage their domestic lives in the nineteen-fifties much more interesting (that kind of magazine, along with a copy of "Mrs. Beeton's Book of Household Management," is worthy of a day spent in bed while the sun is shining its brightest outside). But where did plants, annual and perennial, pristinely set out in something called a border, and arranged sometimes according to color and sometimes according to height, come from? Those books had no answer for me. So one book led to another, and before long I had acquired (and read) so many books that it put a strain on my family's budget. Resentment, a not unfamiliar feeling relating to the garden, set in.

I began to refer to plants by their Latin names, and this so irritated my editor at this magazine (Veronica Geng) that she made me promise that I would never learn the Latin name of another plant. I loved her very much, and so I promised that I would never do such a thing, but I did continue to learn the Latin names of plants and never told her. Betrayal, another feature of any garden.

How did plants get their names? I looked to Linnaeus, who, it turned out, liked to name plants after people whose character they resembled. Mischievous, yes, but not too different from the doctrine of signatures, which attempted to cure diseases by using plants that resembled the diseased part of the body. I was thinking about this one day, stooped over and admiring a colony of Jeffersonia diphylla, whose common name is twinleaf. Jeffersonia diphylla is a short woodland herbaceous ephemeral whose leaf is perforated at the base so that it often looks like a luna moth, but the two leaflets are not identical at the margins, and each leaf is not evenly divided: the margins undulate, and one leaflet is a little bigger than the other. But isn't Thomas Jefferson, the gardener, the liberty lover and slaveowner, often described as divided, and isn't it appropriate that a plant such as the twinleaf is named for him? The name was bestowed by one of his contemporaries, Benjamin Smith Barton, who perhaps guessed at his true character. It was through this plant that I became interested in Thomas Jefferson. I have read much of what he wrote and have firm opinions about him, including that his book "Notes on the State of Virginia" is a creation story.

It was only a matter of time before I stumbled on the plant hunters, although this inevitability was not clear to me at all. Look at me: my historical reality, my ancestral memory, which is so deeply embedded that I think the whole world understands me before I even open my mouth. A big mistake, but a mistake not big enough for me to have learned anything from it. The plant hunters are the descendants of people and ideas that used to hunt people like me.

The first one I met, in a book, of course, was Frank Smythe. No one had ever made me think that finding a new primrose—or a new flower of any kind—was as special as finding a new island in the Caribbean Sea when I thought I was going to China to meet the Great Khan. A new primrose is more special than meeting any conqueror. But Smythe gave me more than that. I noticed, when reading his accounts, that he was always going off on little side journeys to climb some snow-covered protuberance not so far away, and then days later returning with a story of failure or success at reaching or not reaching the peak, and that by the way he had found some beauty of the vegetable kingdom on the banks of a hidden stream which would be new to every benighted soul in England. But his other gift to me was the pleasure to be had in going to see a plant that I might love or not, growing somewhere far away. It was in his writing that I found the distance between the garden I was looking at and the garden in the wilderness, the garden cast out of its Eden which created a longing in me, the notion of "to go and to see." Go see!

I end where I began: reading—learning to read and reading books, the words a form of food, a form of life, and then knowledge. But also my mother. I don't know exactly how old I was when she taught me to read, but I can say for certain that by the time I was three and a half I could read properly. This reading of mine so interfered with her own time to read that she enrolled me in school; but you could be enrolled in school only if you were five years old, and so she told me to remember to say, if asked, that I was five. My first performance as a writer of fiction? No, not that at all. Perhaps this: the first time I was asked who I was. And who am I? In an ideal world, a world in which the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge stand before me, before all of us, we ask, Who am I? Among the many of us not given a chance to answer is the woman in the library in St. John's, Antigua, two large rooms above the Treasury Department, a building that was steps away from the customs office and the wharf where things coming and going lay. On that wharf worked a stevedore who loaded onto ships bags of raw sugar en route to England, to be refined into white sugar, which was so expensive that

we, in my family, had it only on Sundays, as a special treat. I did not know of the stevedore, the lover of this woman who would not allow her children to have much white sugar because, somewhere in the world of Dr. Pasteur and his cohort, they had come to all sorts of conclusions about diseases and their relationships to food (beriberi was a disease my mother succeeded in saving me from suffering). Her name was Annie Victoria Richardson Drew, and she was born in a village in Dominica, British West Indies.

Braiding Sweetgrass (excerpt)

By Robin Wall Kimmerer

Skywoman Falling

In winter, when the green earth lies resting beneath a blanket of snow, this is the time for storytelling. The storytellers begin by calling upon those who came before who passed the stories down to us, for we are only messengers. In the beginning there was the Skyworld.

She fell like a maple seed, pirouetting on an autumn breeze.[1] A column of light streamed from a hole in the Skyworld, marking her path where only darkness had been before. It took her a long time to fall. In fear, or maybe hope, she clutched a bundle tightly in her hand.

Hurtling downward, she saw only dark water below. But in that emptiness there were many eyes gazing up at the sudden shaft of light. They saw there a small object, a mere dust mote in the beam. As it grew closer, they could see that it was a woman, arms outstretched, long blackhair billowing behind as she spiraled toward them.

The geese nodded at one another and rose together from the water in a wave of goose music. She felt the beat of their wings as they flew beneath to break her fall. Far from the only home she'd ever known,she caught her breath at the warm embrace of soft feathers as they gently carried her downward. And so it began.

The geese could not hold the woman above the water for much longer, so they called a council to decide what to do. Resting on their wings, she saw them all gather: loons, otters, swans, beavers, fish of all kinds. A great turtle floated in their midst and offered his back for her to rest upon. Gratefully, she stepped from the goose wings onto thedome of his shell. The others understood that she needed land for herhome and discussed how they might serve her need. The deep divers among them had heard of mud at the bottom of the water and agreedto go find some.

Loon dove first, but the distance was too far and after a long while he surfaced with nothing to show for his efforts. One by one, the other animals offered to help—Otter,Beaver, Sturgeon—butthe depth, the darkness, and the pressures were too great for even the strongest of swimmers. They returned gasping for air with their heads ringin.Some did not return at all. Soon only little Muskrat was left, the weakest driver of all. He volunteered to go while the others looked on doubtfully.His small legs flailed as he worked his way downward and he was gone a very long time.

They waited and waited for him to return, fearing the worst for their relative, and, before long, a stream of bubbles rose with the small,limp body of the muskrat. He had given his life to aid this helpless human. But then the others noticed that his paw was tightly clenched hand, when they opened it, there was a small handful of mud. Turtle said,"Here, put it on my back and I will hold it."

Skywoman bent and spread the mud with her hands across the shell of the turtle. Moved by the extraordinary gifts of the animals,she sang in thanksgiving and then began to dance, her feet caressing the earth. The land grew and grew as she danced her thanks, fromthe dab of mud on Turtle's back until the whole earth was made. Notby Skywoman alone, but from the alchemy of all the animals' gifts coupled with her deep gratitude. Together they formed what we know today as Turtle Island, our home.

Like any good guest, Skywoman had not come empty-handed.The bundle was still clutched in her hand. When she toppled from the hole in the Skyworld she had reached out to grab onto the Tree Of Life that grew there. In her grasp were branches—fruits and seeds of all kinds of plants. These she

[1] Adapted from oral tradition and Shenandoah and George, 1988.

scattered onto the new ground and carefully tended each one until the world turned from brown to green.Sunlight streamed through the hole from the Skyworld, allowing the seeds to flourish. Wild grasses, flowers, trees, and medicines spread everywhere. And now that the animals, too, had plenty to eat, many came to live with her on Turtle Island.

Our stories say that of all the plants, wiingaashk, or sweetgrass, was the very first to grow on the earth, its fragrance a sweet memory ofSkywoman's hand. Accordingly, it is honored as one of the four sacred plants of my people. Breathe in its scent and you start to remember things you didn't know you'd forgotten. Our elders say that ceremonies are the way we "remember to remember," and so sweetgrass is a powerful ceremonial plant cherished by many indigenous nations. It is also used to make beautiful baskets. Both medicine and a relative, its value is both material and spiritual.

There is such tenderness in braiding the hair of someone you love. Kindness and something more flow between the braider and the braided, the two connected by the cord of the plait. Wiingaashk waves at strands, long and shining like a woman's freshly washed hair. And So we say it is the flowing hair of Mother Earth. When we braid sweetgrass,we are braiding the hair of Mother Earth, showing her our loving attention, our care for her beauty and well-being,in gratitude for all shehas given us. Children hearing the Skywoman story from birth know in their bones the responsibility that flows between humans and the earth.

The story of Skywoman's journey is so rich and glittering it feels tome like a deep bowl of celestial blue from which I could drink again and again. It holds our beliefs, our history, our relationships. Looking Into that starry bowl, I see images swirling so fluidly that the past and present become as one. Images of Skywoman speak not just where we came from, but also of how we can go forward.

I have Bruce King's portrait of Skywoman, Moment in Flight, hanging in my lab. Floating to earth with her handful of seeds and flowers, she looks down on my microscopes and data loggers. It might seem an odd juxtaposition, but to me she belongs there. As a writer, a scientist,and a carrier of Skywoman's story, I sit at the feet of my elder teachers listening for their songs.

On Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays at 9:35 a.m., I am usually in a lecture hall at the university, expounding about botany and ecology—trying,in short, to explain to my students how Skywoman's Gardens, known by some as "global ecosystems," function. One otherwiseunremarkable morning I gave the students in my GeneralEcology class a survey. Among other things, they were asked to rate their understanding of the negative interactions between humans and the environment. Nearly every one of the two hundred students said confidently that humans and nature are a bad mix. These were third-year students who had selected a career in environmental protection,so the response was, in a way, not very surprising. They Were well schooled in the mechanics of climate change, toxins in the land and water, and the crisis of habitat loss. Later in the survey, they were asked to rate their knowledge of positive interactions between people and land. The median response was "none."

I was stunned. How is it possible that in twenty years of education they cannot think of any beneficial relationships between people and the environment? Perhaps the negative examples they see every day—brownfields,factory farms, suburban sprawl—truncated their ability to see some good between humans and the earth. As the land becomes impoverished, so too does the scope of their vision. When we talked about this after class, I realized that they could not even imagine what beneficial relations between their species and others might look like.How can we begin to move toward ecological and cultural sustainability if we cannot even imagine what the path feels like? If we can't imagine the generosity of geese? These students were not raised on the story of Skywoman. On one side of the world were people whose relationship with the living world was shaped by Skywoman, who created a garden for thewell-beingof all. On the other side was another woman with a garden and a tree. But for tasting its fruit, she was banished from the garden and the gates clanged shut behind her. That mother of men was made to wander in the wilderness and earn her bread by the sweat of herbrow, not by filling her mouth with the sweet juicy fruits that bend the branches low. In order to eat, she was instructed to subdue the wilderness into which she was cast.

Same species, same earth, different stories. Like Creation stories everywhere,cosmologies are a source of identity and orientation to the world. They tell us who we are. We are inevitably shaped by them no matter how distant they may be from our consciousness. One story leads to the generous embrace of the living world, the other to banishment.One woman is our ancestral gardener, a co creator of the goodgreen world that would be the home of her descendants. The other was an exile, just passing through an alien world on a rough road toher real home in heaven.

And then they met—the offspring of Skywoman and the children of Eve—and the land around us bears the scars of that meeting, the echoes of our stories. They say that hell hath no fury like a woman scorned, and I can only imagine the conversation between Eve andSkywoman: “Sister, you got the short end of the stick . . .”

The Skywoman story, shared by the original peoples throughout theGreat Lakes, is a constant star in the constellation of teachings we call the Original Instructions. These are not “instructions' ' like commandments,though, or rules; rather, they are like a compass: they provide an orientation but not a map. The work of living is creating that map for yourself. How to follow the Original Instructions will be different for each of us and different for every era.

In their time, Skywoman’s first people lived by their understanding of the Original Instructions, with ethical prescriptions for respectful hunting, family life, ceremonies that made sense for their world.Those measures for caring might not seem to fit in today’s urbanworld, where “green” means an advertising slogan, not a meadow. The Buffalo are gone and the world has moved on. I can’t return salmonto the river, and my neighbors would raise the alarm if I set fire to my yard to produce pasture for elk.

The earth was new then, when it welcomed the first human. It’s old now, and some suspect that we have worn out our welcome by casting the Original Instructions aside. From the very beginning of the world, the other species were a lifeboat for the people. Now, we must be theirs. But the stories that

might guide us, if they are told atall, grow dim in the memory. What meaning would they have today?How can we translate from the stories at the world's beginning to this hour so much closer to its end? The landscape has changed, but the story remains. And as I turn it over again and again, Skywoman seems to look me in the eye and ask, in return for this gift of a world onTurtle's back, what will I give in return?

It is good to remember that the original woman was herself an immigrant. She fell a long way from her home in the Skyworld, leaving behind all who knew her and who held her dear. She could never go back. Since 1492, most here are immigrants as well, perhaps arriving on Ellis Island without even knowing that Turtle Island rested beneath their feet. Some of my ancestors are Skywoman's people, andI belong to them. Some of my ancestors were the newer kind of immigrants,too: a French fur trader, an Irish carpenter, a Welsh farmer.And here we all are, on Turtle Island, trying to make a home. Their Stories, of arrivals with empty pockets and nothing but hope, resonate with Skywoman's. She came here with nothing but a handful of seeds and the slimmest of instructions to "use your gifts and dreams for good," the same instructions we all carry. She accepted the gifts from the other beings with open hands and used them honorably. She shared the gifts she brought from Skyworld as she set herself about the business of flourishing, of making a home.

Perhaps the Skywoman story endures because we too are always falling. Our lives, both personal and collective, share her trajectory.Whether we jump or are pushed, or the edge of the known world just crumbles at our feet, we fall, spinning into someplace new and unexpected. Despite our fears of falling, the gifts of the world stand by to catch us.

As we consider these instructions, it is also good to recall that, whenSkywoman arrived here, she did not come alone. She was pregnant.Knowing her grandchildren would inherit the world she left behind,she did not work for flourishing in her time only. It was through her actions of reciprocity, the give and take with the land, that the original immigrant became indigenous. For all of us, becoming indigenous toa place means living as if your children's future mattered, to take care of the land as if our lives, both material and spiritual, depended on it.

In the public arena, I've heard the Skywoman story told as a bauble of colorful "folklore." But, even when it is misunderstood, there is power in the telling. Most of my students have never heard the origin story of this land where they were born, but when I tell them, something begins to kindle behind their eyes. Can they, can we all, understand theSkywoman story not as an artifact from the past but as instructions for the future? Can a nation of immigrants once again follow her example to become native, to make a home?

Look at the legacy of poor Eve's exile from Eden: the land shows the bruises of an abusive relationship. It's not just land that is broken,but more importantly, our relationship to land. As Gary Nabhan has written, we can't meaningfully proceed with healing, with restoration,without "re-story-ation."In other words, our relationship with land cannot heal until we hear its stories. But who will tell them?

In the Western tradition there is a recognized hierarchy of beings,with, of course, the human being on top—the pinnacle of evolution,the darling of Creation—and the plants at the bottom. But in Negative

Ways of knowing, human people are often referred to as “the younger brothers of Creation.” We say that humans have the least experience with how to live and thus the most to learn—we must look to our teachers among the other species for guidance. Their wisdom is apparent in the way that they live. They teach us by example. They’ve been on the earth far longer than we have been, and have had time to figure things out. They live both above and below ground, joining Skyworld to the earth. Plants know how to make food and medicine from light and water, and then they give it away.

I like to imagine that when Skywoman scattered her handful of seeds across Turtle Island, she was sowing sustenance for the body andalso for the mind, emotion, and spirit: she was leaving us teachers. The Plants can tell us her story; we need to learn to listen.

The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction

By Ursula K. Leguin

In the temperate and tropical regions where it appears that hominids evolved into human beings, the principal food of the species was vegetable. Sixty-five to eighty percent of what human beings ate in those regions in Paleolithic, Neolithic, and prehistoric times was gathered; only in the extreme Arctic was meat the staple food. The mammoth hunters spectacularly occupy the cave wall and the mind, but what we actually did to stay alive and fat was gather seeds, roots, sprouts, shoots, leaves, nuts, berries, fruits, and grains, adding bugs and mollusks and netting or snaring birds, fish, rats, rabbits, and other tuskless small fry to up the protein. And we didn’t even work hard at it — much less hard than peasants slaving in somebody else’s field after agriculture was invented, much less hard than paid workers since civilization was invented. The average prehistoric person could make a nice living in about a fifteen-hour work week.

Fifteen hours a week for subsistence leaves a lot of time for other things. So much time that maybe the restless ones who didn’t have a baby around to enliven their life, or skill in making or cooking or singing, or very interesting thoughts to think, decided to slope off and hunt mammoths. The skillful hunters would come staggering back with a load of meat, a lot of ivory, and a story. It wasn’t the meat that made the difference. It was the story.

It is hard to tell a really gripping tale of how I wrestled a wild-oat seed from its husk, and then another, and then another, and then another, and then another, and then I scratched my gnat bites, and Ool said something funny, and we went to the creek and got a drink and watched newts for a while, and

then I found another patch of oats.... No, it does not compare, it cannot compete with how I thrust my spear deep into the titanic hairy flank while Oob, impaled on one huge sweeping tusk, writhed screaming, and blood sprouted everywhere in crimson torrents, and Boob was crushed to jelly when the mammoth fell on him as I shot my unerring arrow straight through eye to brain.

That story not only has Action, it has a Hero. Heroes are powerful. Before you know it, the men and women in the wild-oat patch and their kids and the skills of makers and the thoughts of the thoughtful and the songs of the singers are all part of it, have all been pressed into service in the tale of the Hero. But it isn't their story. It's his.

When she was planning the book that ended up as *Three Guineas*, Virginia Woolf wrote a heading in her notebook, "Glossary"; she had thought of reinventing English according to her new plan, in order to tell a different story. One of the entries in this glossary is *heroism*, defined as "botulism." And *hero*, in Woolf's dictionary, is "bottle." The hero as bottle, a stringent reevaluation. I now propose the bottle as hero.

Not just the bottle of gin or wine, but bottle in its older sense of container in general, a thing that holds something else.

If you haven't got something to put it in, food will escape you — even something as uncombative and unresourceful as an oat. You put as many as you can into your stomach while they are handy, that being the primary container; but what about tomorrow morning when you wake up and it's cold and raining and wouldn't it be good to have just a few handfuls of oats to chew on and give little Oom to make her shut up, but how do you get more than one stomachful and one handful home? So you get up and go to the damned soggy oat patch in the rain, and wouldn't it be a good thing if you had something to put Baby Oo Oo in so that you could pick the oats with both hands? A leaf a gourd shell a net a bag a sling a sack a bottle a pot a box a container. A holder. A recipient.

The first cultural device was probably a recipient.... Many theorizers feel that the earliest cultural inventions must have been a container to hold gathered products and some kind of sling or net carrier.

So says Elizabeth Fisher in *Women's Creation* (McGraw-Hill, 1975). But no, this cannot be. Where is that wonderful, big, long, hard thing, a bone, I believe, that the Ape Man first bashed somebody in the movie and then, grunting with ecstasy at having achieved the first proper murder, flung up into the sky, and whirling there it became a space ship thrusting its way into the cosmos to fertilize it and produce at the end of the movie a lovely fetus, a boy of course, drifting around the Milky Way without (oddly enough) any womb, any matrix at all? I don't know. I don't even care. I'm not telling that story. We've heard it, we've all heard about all the sticks and spears and swords, the things to bash and poke and hit with, the long, hard things, but we have not heard about the thing to put things in, the container for the thing contained. That is a new story. That is news.

And yet old. Before — once you think about it, surely long before — the weapon, a late, luxurious, superfluous tool; long before the useful knife and ax; right along with the indispensable whacker, grinder, and digger — for what's the use of digging up a lot of potatoes if you have nothing to lug the ones you can't eat home in — with or before the tool that forces energy outward, we made the tool that brings energy home. It makes sense to me. I am an adherent of what Fisher calls the Carrier Bag Theory of human evolution.

This theory not only explains large areas of theoretical obscurity and avoids large areas of theoretical nonsense (inhabited largely by tigers, foxes, and other highly territorial mammals); it also grounds me, personally, in human culture in a way I never felt grounded before. So long as culture was explained as originating from and elaborating upon the use of long, hard objects for sticking, bashing, and killing, I never thought that I had, or wanted, any particular share in it. ("What Freud mistook for her lack of civilization is woman's lack of *loyalty* to civilization," Lillian Smith observed.) The society, the civilization they were talking about, these theoreticians, was evidently theirs; they owned it, they liked it; they were human, fully human, bashing, sticking, thrusting, killing. Wanting to be human too, I sought for evidence that I was; but if that's what it took, to make a weapon and kill with it, then evidently I was either extremely defective as a human being, or not human at all.

That's right, they said. What you are is a woman. Possibly not human at all, certainly defective. Now be quiet while we go on telling the Story of the Ascent of Man the Hero.

Go on, say I, wandering off towards the wild oats, with Oo Oo in the sling and little Oom carrying the basket. You just go on telling how the mammoth fell on Boob and how Cain fell on Abel and how the bomb fell on Nagasaki and how the burning jelly fell on the villagers and how the missiles will fall on the Evil Empire, and all the other steps in the Ascent of Man.

If it is a human thing to do to put something you want, because it's useful, edible, or beautiful, into a bag, or a basket, or a bit of rolled bark or leaf, or a net woven of your own hair, or what have you, and then take it home with you, home being another, larger kind of pouch or bag, a container for people, and then later on you take it out and eat it or share it or store it up for winter in a solider container or put it in the medicine bundle or the shrine or the museum, the holy place, the area that contains what is sacred, and then next day you probably do much the same again — if to do that is human, if that's what it takes, then I am a human being after all. Fully, freely, gladly, for the first time.

Not, let it be said at once, an unaggressive or uncombative human being. I am an aging, angry woman laying mightily about me with my handbag, fighting hoodlums off. However I don't, nor does anybody else, consider myself heroic for doing so. It's just one of those damned things you have to do in order to be able to go on gathering wild oats and telling stories.

It is the story that makes the difference. It is the story that hid my humanity from me, the story the mammoth hunters told about bashing, thrusting, raping, killing, about the Hero. The wonderful, poisonous story of Botulism. The killer story.

It sometimes seems that the story is approaching its end. Lest there be no more telling of stories at all, some of us out here in the wild oats, amid the alien corn, think we'd better start telling another one, which maybe people can go on with when the old one's finished. Maybe. The trouble is, we've all let ourselves become part of the killer story, and so we may get finished along with it. Hence it is with a certain feeling of urgency that I seek the nature, subject, words of the other story, the untold one, the life story.

It's unfamiliar, it doesn't come easily, thoughtlessly, to the lips as the killer story does; but still, "untold" was an exaggeration. People have been telling the life story for ages, in all sorts of words and ways. Myths of creation and transformation, trickster stories, folktales, jokes, novels....

The novel is a fundamentally unheroic kind of story. Of course the Hero has frequently taken it over, that being his imperial nature and uncontrollable impulse, to take everything over and run it while

making stern decrees and laws to control his uncontrollable impulse to kill it. So the Hero has decreed through his mouthpieces the Lawgivers, first, that the proper shape of the narrative is that of the arrow or spear, starting *here* and going straight *there* and THOK! hitting its mark (which drops dead); second, that the central concern of narrative, including the novel, is conflict; and third, that the story isn't any good if he isn't in it.

I differ with all of this. I would go so far as to say that the natural, proper, fitting shape of the novel might be that of a sack, a bag. A book holds words. Words hold things. They bear meanings. A novel is a medicine bundle, holding things in a particular, powerful relation to one another and to us.

One relationship among elements in the novel may well be that of conflict, but the reduction of narrative to conflict is absurd. (I have read a how-to-write manual that said, "A story should be seen as a battle," and went on about strategies, attacks, victory, etc.) Conflict, competition, stress, struggle, etc., within the narrative conceived as carrier bag/belly/box/house/medicine bundle, may be seen as necessary elements of a whole which itself cannot be characterized either as conflict or as harmony, since its purpose is neither resolution nor stasis but continuing process.

Finally, it's clear that the Hero does not look well in this bag. He needs a stage or a pedestal or a pinnacle. You put him in a bag and he looks like a rabbit, like a potato.

That is why I like novels: instead of heroes they have people in them.

So, when I came to write science-fiction novels, I came lugging this great heavy sack of stuff, my carrier bag full of wimps and klutzes, and tiny grains of things smaller than a mustard seed, and intricately woven nets which when laboriously unknotted are seen to contain one blue pebble, an imperturbably functioning chronometer telling the time on another world, and a mouse's skull; full of beginnings without ends, of initiations, of losses, of transformations and translations, and far more tricks than conflicts, far fewer triumphs than snares and delusions; full of space ships that get stuck, missions that fail, and people who don't understand. I said it was hard to make a gripping tale of how we wrested the wild oats from their husks, I didn't say it was impossible. Who ever said writing a novel was easy?

If science fiction is the mythology of modern technology, then its myth is tragic. "Technology," or "modern science" (using the words as they are usually used, in an unexamined shorthand standing for the "hard" sciences and high technology founded upon continuous economic growth), is a heroic undertaking, Herculean, Promethean, conceived as triumph, hence ultimately as tragedy. The fiction embodying this myth will be, and has been, triumphant (Man conquers earth, space, aliens, death, the future, etc.) and tragic (apocalypse, holocaust, then or now).

If, however, one avoids the linear, progressive, Time's-(killing)-arrow mode of the Techno-Heroic, and redefines technology and science as primarily cultural carrier bag rather than weapon of domination, one pleasant side effect is that science fiction can be seen as a far less rigid, narrow field, not necessarily Promethean or apocalyptic at all, and in fact less a mythological genre than a realistic one.

It is a strange realism, but it is a strange reality.

Science fiction properly conceived, like all serious fiction, however funny, is a way of trying to describe what is in fact going on, what people actually do and feel, how people relate to everything

else in this vast stack, this belly of the universe, this womb of things to be and tomb of things that were, this unending story. In it, as in all fiction, there is room enough to keep even Man where he belongs, in his place in the scheme of things; there is time enough to gather plenty of wild oats and sow them too, and sing to little Oom, and listen to Ool's joke, and watch newts, and still the story isn't over. Still there are seeds to be gathered, and room in the bag of stars.

The Library of Babel

By Jorge Luis Borges

By this art you may contemplate the variations of the 23 letters...
The Anatomy of Melancholy, part 2, sect. II, mem. IV

The universe (which others call the Library) is composed of an indefinite and perhaps infinite number of hexagonal galleries, with vast air shafts between, surrounded by very low railings. From any of the hexagons one can see, interminably, the upper and lower floors. The distribution of the galleries is invariable. Twenty shelves, five long shelves per side, cover all the sides except two; their height, which is the distance from floor to ceiling, scarcely exceeds that of a normal bookcase. One of the free sides leads to a narrow hallway which opens onto another gallery, identical to the first and to all the rest. To the left and right of the hallway there are two very small closets. In the first, one may sleep standing up; in the other, satisfy one's fecal necessities. Also through here passes a spiral stairway, which sinks abysmally and soars upwards to remote distances. In the hallway there is a mirror which faithfully duplicates all appearances. Men usually infer from this mirror that the Library is not infinite (if it were, why this illusory duplication?); I prefer to dream that its polished surfaces represent and promise the infinite... Light is provided by some spherical fruit which bear the name of lamps. There are two, transversally placed, in each hexagon. The light they emit is insufficient, incessant.

Like all men of the Library, I have traveled in my youth; I have wandered in search of a book, perhaps the catalogue of catalogues; now that my eyes can hardly decipher what I write, I am preparing to die just a few leagues from the hexagon in which I was born. Once I am dead, there will be no lack of pious hands to throw me over the railing; my grave will be the fathomless air; my body will sink endlessly and decay and dissolve in the wind generated by the fall, which is infinite. I say that the Library is unending. The idealists argue that the hexagonal rooms are a necessary form of absolute space or, at least, of our intuition of space. They reason that a triangular or pentagonal room is inconceivable. (The mystics claim that their ecstasy reveals to them a circular chamber containing a great circular book, whose spine is continuous and which follows the complete circle of the walls; but their testimony is suspect; their words, obscure. This cyclical book is God.) Let it suffice now for me to

repeat the classic dictum: The Library is a sphere whose exact center is any one of its hexagons and whose circumference is inaccessible.

There are five shelves for each of the hexagon's walls; each shelf contains thirty-five books of uniform format; each book is of four hundred and ten pages; each page, of forty lines, each line, of some eighty letters which are black in color. There are also letters on the spine of each book; these letters do not indicate or prefigure what the pages will say. I know that this incoherence at one time seemed mysterious. Before summarizing the solution (whose discovery, in spite of its tragic projections, is perhaps the capital fact in history) I wish to recall a few axioms.

First: The Library exists ab aeterno. This truth, whose immediate corollary is the future eternity of the world, cannot be placed in doubt by any reasonable mind. Man, the imperfect librarian, may be the product of chance or of malevolent demiurgi; the universe, with its elegant endowment of shelves, of enigmatical volumes, of inexhaustible stairways for the traveler and latrines for the seated librarian, can only be the work of a god. To perceive the distance between the divine and the human, it is enough to compare these crude wavering symbols which my fallible hand scrawls on the cover of a book, with the organic letters inside: punctual, delicate, perfectly black, inimitably symmetrical.

Second: The orthographical symbols are twenty-five in number.^ This finding made it possible, three hundred years ago, to formulate a general theory of the Library and solve satisfactorily the problem which no conjecture had deciphered: the formless and chaotic nature of almost all the books. One which my father saw in a hexagon on circuit fifteen ninety-four was made up of the letters MCV, perversely repeated from the first line to the last. Another (very much consulted in this area) is a mere labyrinth of letters, but the next-to-last page says Oh time thy pyramids. This much is already known: for every sensible line of straightforward statement, there are leagues of senseless cacophonies, verbal jumbles and incoherences. (I know of an uncouth region whose librarians repudiate the vain and superstitious custom of finding a meaning in books and equate it with that of finding a meaning in dreams or in the chaotic lines of one's palm... They admit that the inventors of this writing imitated the twenty-five natural symbols, but maintain that this application is accidental and that the books signify nothing in themselves. This dictum, we shall see, is not entirely fallacious.)

For a long time it was believed that these impenetrable books corresponded to past or remote languages. It is true that the most ancient men, the first librarians, used a language quite different from the one we now speak; it is true that a few miles to the right the tongue is dialectical and that ninety floors farther up, it is incomprehensible. All this, I repeat, is true, but four hundred and ten pages of inalterable MCV's cannot correspond to any language, no matter how dialectical or rudimentary it may be. Some insinuated that each letter could influence the following one and that the value of MCV in the third line of page 71 was not the one the same series may have in another position on another page, but this vague thesis did not prevail. Others thought of cryptographs; generally, this conjecture has been accepted, though not in the sense in which it was formulated by its originators.

Five hundred years ago, the chief of an upper hexagon 2 came upon a book as confusing as the others, but which had nearly two pages of homogeneous lines. He showed his find to a wandering decoder who told him the lines were written in Portuguese; others said they were Yiddish. Within a

century, the language was established: a Samoyedic Lithuanian dialect of Guarani, with classical Arabian inflections. The content was also deciphered: some notions of combinative analysis, illustrated with examples of variations with unlimited repetition. These examples made it possible for a librarian of genius to discover the fundamental law of the Library. This thinker observed that all the books, no matter how diverse they might be, are made up of the same elements: the space, the period, the comma, the twenty-two letters of the alphabet. He also alleged a fact which travelers have confirmed: In the vast Library there are no two identical books. From these two incontrovertible premises he deduced that the Library is total and that its shelves register all the possible combinations of the twenty-odd orthographical symbols (a number which, though extremely vast, is not infinite): Everything: the minutely detailed history of the future, the archangels' autobiographies, the faithful catalogues of the Library, thousands and thousands of false catalogues, the demonstration of the fallacy of those catalogues, the demonstration of the fallacy of the true catalogue, the Gnostic gospel of Basilides, the commentary on that gospel, the commentary on the commentary on that gospel, the true story of your death, the translation of every book in all languages, the interpolations of every book in all books.

When it was proclaimed that the Library contained all books, the first impression was one of extravagant happiness. All men felt themselves to be the masters of an intact and secret treasure. There was no personal or world problem whose eloquent solution did not exist in some hexagon. The universe was justified, the universe suddenly usurped the unlimited dimensions of hope. At that time a great deal was said about the Vindications: books of apology and prophecy which vindicated for all time the acts of every man in the universe and retained prodigious arcana for his future. Thousands of the greedy abandoned their sweet native hexagons and rushed up the stairways, urged on by the vain intention of finding their Vindication. These pilgrims disputed in the narrow corridors, proferred dark curses, strangled each other on the divine stairways, flung the deceptive books into the air shafts, met their death cast down in a similar fashion by the inhabitants of remote regions. Others went mad... The Vindications exist (I have seen two which refer to persons of the future, to persons who are perhaps not imaginary) but the searchers did not remember that the possibility of a man's finding his Vindication, or some treacherous variation thereof, can be computed as zero.

At that time it was also hoped that a clarification of humanity's basic mysteries - the origin of the Library and of time - might be found. It is verisimilar that these grave mysteries could be explained in words: if the language of philosophers is not sufficient, the multiform Library will have produced the unprecedented language required, with its vocabularies and grammars. For four centuries now men have exhausted the hexagons... There are official searchers, inquisitors. I have seen them in the performance of their function: they always arrive extremely tired from their journeys; they speak of a broken stairway which almost killed them; they talk with the librarian of galleries and stairs; sometimes they pick up the nearest volume and leaf through it, looking for infamous words. Obviously, no one expects to discover anything.

As was natural, this inordinate hope was followed by an excessive depression. The certitude that some shelf in some hexagon held precious books and that these precious books were inaccessible, seemed almost intolerable. A blasphemous sect suggested that the searches should cease and that all men should juggle letters and symbols until they constructed, by an improbable gift of chance, these canonical books. The authorities were obliged to issue severe orders. The sect disappeared,

but in my childhood I have seen old men who, for long periods of time, would hide in the latrines with some metal disks in a forbidden dice cup and feebly mimic the divine disorder.

Others, inversely, believed that it was fundamental to eliminate useless works. They invaded the hexagons, showed credentials which were not always false, leafed through a volume with displeasure and condemned whole shelves: their hygienic, ascetic furor caused the senseless perdition of millions of books. Their name is execrated, but those who deplore the "treasures" destroyed by this frenzy neglect two notable facts. One: the Library is so enormous that any reduction of human origin is infinitesimal. The other: every copy is unique, irreplaceable, but (since the Library is total) there are always several hundred thousand imperfect facsimiles: works which differ only in a letter or a comma. Counter to general opinion, I venture to suppose that the consequences of the Purifiers' depredations have been exaggerated by the horror these fanatics produced. They were urged on by the delirium of trying to reach the books in the Crimson Hexagon: books whose format is smaller than usual, all-powerful, illustrated and magical.

We also know of another superstition of that time: that of the Man of the Book. On some shelf in some hexagon (men reasoned) there must exist a book which is the formula and perfect compendium of all the rest: some librarian has gone through it and he is analogous to a god. In the language of this zone vestiges of this remote functionary's cult still persist. Many wandered in search of Him. For a century they have exhausted in vain the most varied areas. How could one locate the venerated and secret hexagon which housed Him? Someone proposed a regressive method: To locate book A, consult first book B which indicates A's position; to locate book B, consult first a book C, and so on to infinity... In adventures such as these, I have squandered and wasted my years. It does not seem unlikely to me that there is a total book on some shelf of the universe 3 ; I pray to the unknown gods that a man - just one, even though it were thousands of years ago! - may have examined and read it. If honor and wisdom and happiness are not for me, let them be for others. Let heaven exist, though my place be in hell. Let me be outraged and annihilated, but for one instant, in one being, let Your enormous Library be justified. The impious maintain that nonsense is normal in the Library and that the reasonable (and even humble and pure coherence) is an almost miraculous exception. They speak (I know) of the "feverish Library whose chance volumes are constantly in danger of changing into others and affirm, negate and confuse everything like a delirious divinity." These words, which not only denounce the disorder but exemplify it as well, notoriously prove their authors' abominable taste and desperate ignorance. In truth, the Library includes all verbal structures, all variations permitted by the twenty-five orthographical symbols, but not a single example of absolute nonsense. It is useless to observe that the best volume of the many hexagons under my administration is entitled The Combed Thunderclap and another The Plaster Cramp and another Axaxaxas mlo. These phrases, at first glance incoherent, can no doubt be justified in a cryptographical or allegorical manner; such a justification is verbal and, ex hypothesi, already figures in the Library. I cannot combine some characters

dhcmrlchtdj

which the divine Library has not foreseen and which in one of its secret tongues do not contain a terrible meaning. No one can articulate a syllable which is not filled with tenderness and fear, which is not, in one of these languages, the powerful name of a god. To speak is to fall into tautology. This wordy and useless epistle already exists in one of the thirty volumes of the five shelves of one of the

innumerable hexagons - and its refutation as well. (An n number of possible languages use the same vocabulary; in some of them, the symbol library allows the correct definition a ubiquitous and lasting system of hexagonal galleries, but library is bread or pyramid or anything else, and these seven words which define it have another value. You who read me, are You sure of understanding my language?)

The methodical task of writing distracts me from the present state of men. The certitude that everything has been written negates us or turns us into phantoms. I know of districts in which the young men prostrate themselves before books and kiss their pages in a barbarous manner, but they do not know how to decipher a single letter. Epidemics, heretical conflicts, peregrinations which inevitably degenerate into banditry, have decimated the population. I believe I have mentioned suicides, more and more frequent with the years. Perhaps my old age and fearfulness deceive me, but I suspect that the human species - the unique species - is about to be extinguished, but the Library will endure: illuminated, solitary, infinite, perfectly motionless, equipped with precious volumes, useless, incorruptible, secret.

I have just written the word "infinite".' I have not interpolated this adjective out of rhetorical habit; I say that it is not illogical to think that the world is infinite. Those who judge it to be limited postulate that in remote places the corridors and stairways and hexagons can conceivably come to an end - which is absurd. Those who imagine it to be without limit forget that the possible number of books does have such a limit. I venture to suggest this solution to the ancient problem: The Library is unlimited and cyclical. If an eternal traveler were to cross it in any direction, after centuries he would see that the same volumes were repeated in the same disorder (which, thus repeated, would be an order: the Order). My solitude is gladdened by this elegant hope 4.

Translated by J. E. I.

The original manuscript does not contain digits or capital letters. The punctuation has been limited to the comma and the period. These two signs, the space and the twenty-two letters of the alphabet are the twenty-five symbols considered sufficient by this unknown author. (Editor's note.)

2

Before, there was a man for every three hexagons. Suicide and pulmonary diseases have destroyed that proportion. A memory of unspeakable melancholy: at times I have traveled for many nights through corridors and along polished stairways without finding a single librarian.

3

I repeat: it suffices that a book be possible for it to exist. Only the impossible is excluded. For example: no book can be a ladder, although no doubt there are books which discuss and negate and demonstrate this possibility and others whose structure corresponds to that of a ladder.

4

Letizia Alvarez de Toledo has observed that this vast Library is useless: rigorously speaking, a single volume would be sufficient, a volume of ordinary format, printed in nine or ten point type, containing an infinite number if infinitely thin leaves. (In the early seventeenth century, Cavalieri said that all solid bodies are the superimposition of an infinite number of planes.) The handling of this silky vade mecum would not be convenient: each apparent page would unfold into other analogous ones; the inconceivable middle page would have no reverse.