

## NEW BOOKS

By John Leonard



Rebekkah, who has fled her hateful family and the ferocious Christian sectarianism of seventeenth-century England for marriage to a stranger in the New World wilderness of Mary's Land, has reason to wonder after so much silence, absence, vacancy, and death: "I don't think God knows who we are. I think He would like us, if He knew us, but I don't think He knows about us." Maybe not. But Toni Morrison most certainly does. Her astonishing new novel, *A MERCY* (Knopf, \$23.95), has both X-ray eyes and telepathic powers, not to mention tree rings, ice caps, pottery clocks, carbon clouds, a long memory, and a short fuse. It dreams its way back to 1682 and a primeval America before racial hierarchies had been chiseled in stone, when "blacks, natives, whites, mulattoes—freedmen, slaves and indentured" still made common cause against the local gentry; when orphans, strays, "waifs and whelps" banded together in makeshift families against crows, wolves, weather, and cruelty; when ordinary men and women hoped that courage alone would prove enough to win dominion over their own rude lives.

mother, who must see something in Jacob's face: not mercy but "a mercy"; not grace but decency; not a miracle bestowed by God but a favor or indulgence volunteered by a fellow human being. What happens to "love-disabled" Florens on Jacob's farm—along with Lina, who caws with birds, chats with plants, sings to cows, and drinks rain; vixen-eyed, black-toothed, slow-witted Sorrow, rescued from opium sleep and the sea by mermaids and whales; the woodmen Willard and Scully, indentured into servitude forever; the freedman blacksmith who might save the farm from pox if Florens can find him in time; and Rebekkah, a pillar of grief—is not a sentimental education. Nevertheless, illegally literate, Florens will write it down for us to read aloud: "My telling can't hurt you in spite of what I have done," she says. But it does. Like Pecola, Sula, Sethe, Consolata, Violet, and so many other women we've met in Morrison's pages, Florens is a siren, pulling brave hearts overboard.

The Dutch-born farmer and trader Jacob Vaark, husband to Rebekkah, will take Florens, a little black girl in silly shoes, as partial payment of a debt owed to him by a despicable Portuguese trader in human flesh. He is beseeched to do so by Florens's enslaved

Mother love: always an absolute in Morrison's fiction, a terrible swift sword. Ancestors: a religion of owls and the African slave trade. The Middle Passage: commodities trading and shark bait. The world of work: caulking and tanneries, milking and manure, squash and chickens. Tables of food: wild plums, pecans, suet pudding, baskets of strawberries, haunches of venison, roast swan. Out-of-doors: "trees taller than a cathedral," "birds bigger than cows," "a sky vulgar with stars," "boneless bears in the valley," blood on the snow. The whiplash lyricism: widows and raisins, mugwort and periwinkle, pine sap and cornhusk dolls, "the horror of color, the roar of soundlessness and the menace of familiar objects lying still." Somehow all add up to a sensuous omniscience that is practically Elizabethan.

Helplessly lyrical till death did them part, Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell wrote so many wonderful letters and postcards to each other from 1947 through 1977 that it's amazing they ever found the time to publish their poetry. *WORDS IN AIR* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, \$40), edited by Thomas Travisano with Saskia Hamilton, is their complete correspondence, 800 pages of epigrams and gossip, anxieties and epiphanies, logrolling and backbiting. There are lapses, of course: Lowell, a manic-depressive, disappeared regularly into mental hospitals even after lithium had finally been prescribed for his bipolarity; Bishop, an alcoholic with an autoimmune disorder, was forever breaking her bones. But they clearly savored each other's joy in language, odd-angled perspectives on the world, and unbuttoned intimacies. Their poetry—negotiating



the tricky currents between public appearance and private self—profited from the cross-pollination. And just as Bishop, hiding out in Key West or Brazil, needed help in managing her career, Lowell in Boston or New York loved to network.

So there is as much here about artists' colonies, teaching jobs, prize-giving, and Library of Congress stipends as there is about foreign countries, newborn children, cast-off lovers, and books in progress. Ezra Pound and Randall Jarrell show up so often you'd think they were parents. So do Marianne Moore and *Partisan Review*, which was the magazine of choice until Lowell and his wife Elizabeth Hardwick helped launch *The New York Review of Books*. Generous remarks are made about William Butler Yeats and George Santayana. Unkind things are said about Mary McCarthy, Phyllis McGinley, Kenneth Rexroth, and the Richards Wilbur and Eberhart. Ambivalence is expressed about Dylan Thomas and Simone de Beauvoir. Lowell will compare psychotherapy to the stirring-up of the bottom of an aquarium. Bishop, studying German, is amused to note that "Freud" means "joy"—and sends Lowell a pair of lion's paws. In one of his last letters, before he dies of a heart attack in a taxicab in Manhattan, Lowell tells her, "The intoxicating thing about rhyme and meter is that they have nothing at all to do with truth, just as ballet steps are of no use on a hike." Her lovely poem "in memoriam" to him notes that he was always revising his work: "...And now—you've left/for good. You can't derange, or re-arrange,/your poems again. (But the Sparrows can their song.)/The words won't change again. Sad friend, you cannot change."



**“You cannot change”:** Patrick French's enthralling and depressing **THE WORLD IS WHAT IT IS: THE AUTHORIZED BIOGRAPHY OF V. S. NAIPAUL** (Knopf, \$30) is a monument to such fatefulness, such predetermination. Count on Vidyadhar Surajprasad Naipaul to feel worse about *everything* than most of us feel about *anything*. Everywhere he looks he sees decline, betrayal, cruelty, and chaos. Many great writers are pessimists, but Naipaul is downright contemptuous, especially of those “half-made societies” of the Third World, no longer traditional and never to be truly modern, from Trinidad to Argentina,

from Uruguay to Zaire, from Pakistan to Indonesia, on which he reports to the First World. In such novels as *Guerrillas* and such essay collections as *Among the Believers* and *The Return of Eva Perón*, he tells the imperialist West that our unseemly congress with dark continents, silent Indians, empty spaces, and jungle rot has spawned bad art, second-rate theater, corrupt politics, a shameful dependency, and a litter of centaurs and mimics.

From French, who has access to the entire archive of first drafts, angry correspondence, school exams, and theater tickets, including decades of diary-keeping by Naipaul's luckless wife, Patricia, we gather that he was a pessimist, a narcissist, and a misanthrope from his West Indian beginnings—disdainful of Trinidad, especially its “Negroes”; his own family, except for his ambitious failure of a journalist father; and those very teachers and politicians upon whom he depended for a scholarship to England. Once sprung from the provinces to Oxford and London, he expects to be indulged by everyone in his difficult apprenticeship, even as he finds everything around him mediocre. He will marry

Pat, a smart, socially insecure, masochistic young Englishwoman, to make himself comfortable. He will neglect her to look for dirtier sex in brothels, abandon her when he travels abroad with his

Argentine mistress to research his books on India and Islam, and then propose to a Pakistani journalist whom he marries within days of Pat's dying of breast cancer. Colleagues and friends are shamelessly exploited and suddenly shunned when they presume too much intimacy or even dare to express a contrary opinion. He has no interest in movies; detests music; refuses to sign a letter protesting the *fatwa* against Salman Rushdie, a “leftist” whose books he pretends not to have read; and scorns Gabriel García Márquez, whose Caribbean is more magical than V.S. has even fantasized. The only time he has ever voted was for Margaret Thatcher in 1983.

I admired *A House for Mr. Biswas* and *A Bend in the River*, but I fell off the

Naipaul wagon for good with *A Turn in the South*, in which he tramped around our very own Dixie unencumbered by much history, ignorant of Reconstruction, satisfied that all the important civil rights battles had already been won. Naipaul was impatient with political demonstrations of any kind, impressed by robots at the Nissan assembly plant but incapable of inferring from them anything significant about a New fast-buck South, unprepared with interesting questions to ask Eudora Welty, trusting to dumb luck for the lapidary anecdote among disobliging strangers at a crafts shop or hotel restaurant, buying into the Old Confederacy's sentimentalizing siege mentality—its idea of the past as a religion, the past as a wound—and patronizing rednecks as an Indian tribe of free spirits, a threatened species in their baseball caps, cowboy boots, and pickup trucks. After so much talk, he never even made it to Graceland.

**T**hink of David Grossman as the anti-Naipaul. His own son, Uri, dies on the last day before a truce in the Second Lebanon War, yet the author of *See Under: Love and The Book of Intimate Grammar* still resists bloody vengeance, still insists on humanity. **WRITING IN THE DARK** (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, \$18), his latest collection of essays, ranges from “Books That Have Read Me” (by Sholem Aleichem, Bruno Schulz, Franz Kafka, Thomas Mann) to “Contemplations on Peace” (necessitating what he calls “acquired naïveté”), with sidelong looks at language in politics and what might be learned from the Other. Still, the touchstone remains—if not optimism, which is now impossible, then an elemental decency. What appalls him, he says, is

Israel's remarkably rapid decline into coldness and real cruelty toward the weak, the poor, and the suffering. An indifference to the fate of the hungry, the elderly, the sick, and the handicapped; a national apathy toward the trade in women, for instance, or the exploitation and slave conditions of foreign workers; a deep-seated, institutionalized racism toward the Arab minority.

Just listen to him, going on as if social justice were anything more than a footnote to a nostalgia craze. ■

Painting of a sparrow, in the style of Huizong (detail)  
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