



JOURNAL OF ORDINARY THOUGHT

Whistle Talk

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JOT writers Where I'm From.

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poet and essayist

Introduction

I invite you to read with me through this issue of the *Journal of Ordinary Thought*, to share an absolutely extraordinary range of responses to that seemingly very ordinary question "Where are you from?"

To turn these pages, to savor these intimate essays, poems, stories, and tales from memory and imagination, is to give oneself permission to accompany these writers on dozens of personal journeys, each with unanticipated consequences. This is because the simple-seeming question "Where are you from?" is, of course, not so simple after all. Rather, this is one of those fundamental-to-human-life questions that evinces responses as widely diverse as the stars in the universe, from the most concrete to the most abstract, meanings and resonances with the power to shape or shift a life, no matter where one is from.

"Where I came from, I cannot go," says one writer. And yet, there is a going, not backwards in time to a place that cannot be completely recovered, but a return nonetheless, to a known place that we can name as "home." Home is, after all, a place where I'm from, and one approach to musing about this question brings us straight to geography. When I am asked that question, my answer will depend in part on where I am at the time. If I am in Chicago, I know that people will know what I mean when I say "I'm a Bronzeville native," or "I'm a South Sider." If I am on the East or West Coasts, I might say "My home is in Chicago" or "I'm from the Midwest." If I am wanting to be understood in terms of my cultural history, I might say "My parents were from Louisiana," or "I went to the University of Chicago." Or, if I want someone to understand the soul-character I hope I inherited, I might borrow a wonderful phrase from one or another of the writers in this collection and say that I am the daughter of "stubborn seeking people," or that my mother was "a no-frills woman." I am from all of that, and more.

I am from a community where men worked eight hours a day at hard and unrewarding labor, amid the shrieking of machines that transformed raw metals into whatever was needed for the war effort, their eyes strained by exposure to the raging flames of vast steel-making furnaces, their ears dulled by the pitiful bleats of cattle or hogs put to slaughter in this city's now obsolete stockyards. I am from women who cooked and cleaned for the men and for the many children they raised together, who were tired at day's end but not too tired to tell bedtime stories to the children, women who somehow stretched the thin pay envelopes the men brought home on Fridays, seeing to it that the landlord and the insurance man and the grocer were paid whatever was due, still leaving a few dollars in the men's pockets for the barber and a drink or two on the weekends. I am from these people and these places, and it is from their stories that I draw strength for my own journey.

I love the stories within these pages. I love their memories and their imaginings, their amazing abilities to convey where they are from, with stories of ritual celebrations and reverent litanies of foods and fragrances. These stories capture in words the complex aroma of sausages cooking or the rich firmness of one perfect tomato. Here are happy or tragic immigrant histories, and maps, literal or imagined, of neighborhoods “spilling over with stories.” Here are many differing tales of “where I’m from,” and here are writers, too, with imaginations bold enough to share a fantasy tale of “where I *wish* I were from.”

It is difficult to imagine a reader who will not be encouraged, or even inspired, to create his or her own answers to this question. The writers we meet on these pages have had the courage to explore and put on paper the shaping realities of their lives, seeking and sharing some story that might illuminate a way forward. Grateful readers all, we are invited into their stories, joining them in their journeys backwards and forwards, moving through time and space toward what James Baldwin has called “the center that will guide one aright.”

Ronne Hartfield

WHISTLE TALK

Phyllis E. Roker

My family’s origins are in the Caribbean Islands. We spoke English with an accent, as some people say, but what made us seem different was that we also communicated through what we called “Whistle Talk.” Other Caribbean families used this mode of communication as well. It seemed to me that it was a sort of secret language that was distinct to each family. Each whistle consisted of various tones, which translated into specific meanings, similar to the beats of the talking drum. To the outsider it would have sounded like a simple tune, but to us children it meant much more.

At that time we lived in a two-story walk-up with a balcony and a long courtyard. If we were outside or down the street playing, and that whistle called, our ears would perk up in recognition. Immediately all play would come to a halt and we would either whistle in response or haul it back to the house to find out what was needed. I always made it back quickly because my whistle never passed my lips.

Sometimes, if we were playing within the sight of grown-ups and were doing something mischievous like playing rough or scaring each other with lizards, a sharp whistle would scream out. If you thought that your act was undetected, that sound assured you that you had been discovered, and told you to stop whatever you were doing immediately.

Even my tough, hardheaded brothers responded quickly to the whistles. Their whistling skills were excellent, and they would often run errands on a whistle. I always envied their ability to whistle back and sometimes wished that I were a boy, because it seemed that only boys and grown-ups mastered the art of whistling. My brothers tried to teach me how, but they would always laugh at my unsuccessful attempts. I never gave up trying, though.

Later, still in my youth, I finally succeeded at the skill of whistling. It had always been a challenge in the back of my mind that I secretly wanted to accomplish. By then, we had moved north to a five-story walk-up building with a doorbell. Whistling for each other became less frequent and we used the doorbell as a replacement only to let each other know who was coming in. Somehow that doorbell took something away from our special style of communicating. Anyway, I was happy that I had learned how to whistle, even though it took me so long. I would show off my skills to my brothers, who still laughed but seemed proud about me finally getting it. Now that I knew how to whistle, I had

no one to whistle for and no one to answer its call. Determined to use this long-awaited, newly acquired skill, I decided that I would go outside on the corner and whistle for a taxi like I had seen it done on television. Taxis would stop, but I did it just for fun. I missed our special whistle talk.

A UNIQUE BLEND

J. P. Marsch

Pull out a ceramic mixing bowl from the cupboard
Add in a mouth-watering ear of Iowa sweet corn
A block of tangy Wisconsin cheddar
A handful of kernels of Indiana popcorn
Twelve ounces of Bell's Oberon
One juicy Jonathan apple plucked from a Michigan orchard
Several slices of satisfying Chicago Italian beef
Set the bowl aside.

In a separate cocktail glass, combine
One ounce of pure Icelandic glacial water
A spoonful of Loire Valley Merlot
A splash of spray off of a Gloucester whaling boat
One teaspoon of fiery Jakartan chili sauce
Three juniper berries from the mountainside of the Sandias
A dash of salt crystals from the floor of Death Valley
And a dropper full of tears from a lost love in the doorway of a San Diego hotel room.

Empty the cocktail glass into the bowl
Stir the contents slowly, until settled and relaxed
Place the bowl on a sun-splashed Lake Michigan beach
Bake for three decades, undisturbed
Add additional ingredients as time allows.

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