

V O I C E S
LOUDER
T H A N
WORDS

A S E C O N D C O L L E C T I O N

**TWENTY-THREE NEW WORKS DONATED BY THEIR AUTHORS TO
SHARE OUR STRENGTH TO HELP THE HUNGRY AND HOMELESS**

JONATHAN BAUMBACH • ROBERT BOSWELL • RON CARLSON

ANDRE DUBUS • HELEN EISENBACH • TESS GALLAGHER

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SCOTT RUSSELL SANDERS • ROBERTA SILMAN

JANE SMILEY • JILLA YOUNGBLOOD SMITH • ROBERT LOVE TAYLOR

MELANIE THERNSTROM • JOHN EDGAR WIDEMAN

EDITED BY WILLIAM SHORE

VOICES
LOUDER
THAN
WORDS

A SECOND COLLECTION



23 New Works
Donated by their Authors
to Share Our Strength
to Help the Hungry
and Homeless

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**VOICES
LOUDER THAN WORDS**

Edited and with an Introduction by
W I L L I A M S H O R E



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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Twenty-three excellent writers donated their work to this volume. Their role, of course, was the most difficult and most indispensable: putting pen to paper and creating something of value and beauty where once there was nothing at all. I am deeply grateful for their generosity. They have given us a fine book, and set an inspiring example.

Rarely has one person had so much support putting together a book. Much of that came from Robin Desser, who is my editor at Vintage Books, and Flip Brophy, my agent at Sterling Lord Literistic. Even if the need did not exist I would want to do a book like this just so I could work with, and learn from, each of them. I value their advice, experience, and especially their friendship.

The hardest work of all is not the work that goes into a single project like this, but the persevering, committed, day in and day out work that builds an organization such as Share Our Strength to make efforts like *Louder Than Words* possible. That work is done by a dedicated staff, which includes Brigit Dermott, who provided crucial assistance in organizing this anthology, Jennifer Hadley, Steven Kessel, Nathan Kreie, Karen Napoli, Marisa Nightingale, Harriet Robinson, and Joann Shepherd. Their work is inspired, organized, and overseen by two others: Debbie Shore, who has been at Share Our Strength from the very beginning, and Cathy Townsend, who followed not far behind. While I've done a pretty good job of keeping it a secret so far, I am in awe of both of them—their talent, energy, and commitment.

X • ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The most important names associated with this book are not included here. Indeed, they are unknown. But they belong to the people—poor, disadvantaged, left behind—that the contributors to this book intend to help. In that way this entire book is an acknowledgment of their plight.

INTRODUCTION

Charities have a bad habit of asking for money.

This is not a facetious complaint but rather an observation about the relatively narrow manner by which many worthy causes seek support for their efforts. Those who raise money—whether for the arts, the environment, or the poor—usually solicit the same people over and over again. They grow weary of asking for money and the contributors grow weary of being asked. Checks are written and all too frequently forgotten. Whether the hook is a fancy ballroom dinner or a slick direct-mail piece, there is sadly often little or no personal connection between the donor and the cause. There must be—and there are—other ways. *Voices Louder Than Words* is one of them.

The nonprofit organization with which I work, Share Our Strength (SOS), raises funds to fight hunger, homelessness, and illiteracy. First established in late 1984 as a vehicle for mobilizing chefs, restaurateurs, and food industry executives on behalf of hunger relief, SOS steadily expanded and is now the largest national private hunger relief foundation in the United States. Over the past twenty-four months more than \$3 million has been distributed to hundreds of food banks, homeless shelters, and training programs in virtually every city and town in America, and to relief and development projects in thirteen countries around the world. These funds are used for everything from buying refrigerated food transport vans in Charleston, South Carolina, to digging wells critical for agriculture in West African villages. Our goal in all of these diverse activities, however, is the same: making nutritious food

available to people, many of whom are homeless, who would otherwise have none at all.

Hunger continues to be a problem of epidemic proportions in the United States. It is estimated that as many as two to five million American children are now going hungry. According to a report issued by the mayors of America's largest cities, demand for emergency food assistance increased 22 percent just last year. The worst of the classic nutritional diseases—scurvy, pellegra, and beriberi—are now rare. But damaging nutritional deficiencies, particularly anemia due to iron depletion, have a substantial impact on growth, weight, attention span, concentration, and susceptibility to disease and infant mortality. Because the problem of hunger is a symptom of and closely connected to other issues that make up the web of poverty in America today, Share Our Strength also commits a portion of its funds to literacy and job training programs, as well as educational and advocacy activities. These dollars make a difference, and more are needed.

In 1987 unsolicited financial contributions from several best-selling writers encouraged us to try to raise funds through America's literary community. What we asked for, though, was not money, but literature, a previously unpublished work of theirs they would be willing to donate. The quick and generous response from both established writers and new voices suggested that writers were willing to do more than write checks for a cause they believed in—rather they were eager to contribute through their craft. The result was twenty-two short stories that composed the first volume of *Louder Than Words*.

We wanted *Louder Than Words* to sell so that it would raise money for our hunger relief efforts, and it did. The book went into a second printing, magazines and literary journals purchased first serial rights, and foreign rights were also sold. Equally important was the attention the project brought to the issues of hunger and homelessness. "Words That Nourish" headlined the *Washington Post* article that set the tone for

coverage of the book's publication. Authors participated in special readings held in bookstores from Los Angeles and Chicago to Albuquerque and Columbus. At the 1990 convention of the American Booksellers Association, seventeen independent booksellers who had been involved in promoting *Louder Than Words* met and decided to launch an organization called Booksellers for Social Responsibility so that they could continue—as an organized network—to give special treatment to publishing projects related to a social purpose. Looking back, it was as if our own small experience with this one book had affirmed Goethe's wise observation: "The moment one definitely commits oneself, then Providence moves too. All sorts of things occur to help one that would never have otherwise occurred. A whole stream of events issues from the decision—raising in one's favor all manner of unforeseen incidents and meetings and material assistance which no man could have dreamed would have come his way."

Looking ahead, *Voices Louder Than Words* creates a model for new ways of thinking about how one can contribute to one's community. This may turn out to be its most important contribution. In addition to this second volume of fiction we will soon be publishing other anthologies made up of donated original work from contributors as diverse as scientists, children's book authors and illustrators, and sportswriters.

Each of the contributors to *Voices Louder Than Words* has chosen to spend weeks if not months creating work that is ultimately far more valuable than any check he or she could write in a few short moments. As a result of this act of generosity they will be able to feel a personal connection to the cause they are supporting. This, of course, is the whole point, and is the underlying philosophy of SOS activities in many communities around the world.

In thinking about how these writers have connected their fiction to the moral imperatives of the real world in which they live, I'm reminded of the words of Dr. Robert Coles, the Pulitzer Prize-winning author and child psychiatrist, who de-

scribed the struggle to match one's conduct to one's intellect this way:

Dr. William Carlos Williams taught me that if we are going to be saved, in a sense, religiously and spiritually, it has to be by our conduct, not by the amount of reading we've done. In that sense he was struggling with what Tolstoy struggled with in the last half of his intellectual and personal life, mainly the question of not only an intellectual life and its nature but what we do with that intellectual life, namely the question of conduct, moral conduct. It's a great thing to have all kinds of ideas including moral thinking and moral ideas but what do we do once we put the book down? Does the book, for instance, the novel, the literature, does it inspire us some way in our everyday life? And if it doesn't, Dr. Williams said, then the response is aesthetic, which is fine, intellectual, which is fine, but there is no connection between that and the lived life, and that, of course, that lack of connection, can be very sad.

Voices Louder Than Words is just one way for both writers and readers to connect to the "lived life" that William Carlos Williams and Bob Coles are talking about. Like the volume that came before it, this book stands as a tribute to the idea that sharing one's strength can be one of the truest forms of self-expression.

—William H. Shore
Executive Director,
Share Our Strength

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THE PRODUCTS

OF LOVE

O

Robert Boswell

WHEN I WAS nineteen and first married, my wife said something I still think about today, twenty years later. "You believe love is beautiful like sunlight," she told me, "but it's more like the wind—you see only its consequences." On a grassy lawn at the center of the university, we sat with our legs intertwined, speaking seriously. We had married a month after meeting and treated our romance with solemn reverence. "You confuse love with the effects it produces," she said.

My marriage broke up a long time ago. I begin here because I'm convinced this story is as much about the products of love as it is about love.

Paula and Eugene Loroun moved into my neighborhood three years ago, a childless couple in their thirties. They rented a broken-down adobe house and avoided paying rent by doing repairs. I met them through a blunder. I asked their yardman

what he got paid for cutting the grass. "He" turned out to be Paula.

Wide-shouldered and small-breasted—superficially manly in appearance—Paula maneuvered the mower with the ease of long practice. Her hands were callused, nails bitten short. Hers is not the kind of beauty you recognize just by looking. You have to hold her in your arms and feel the muscles moving beneath her skin. Don't misunderstand, we were never lovers, but there were times when I held her and understood her beauty.

She shut the mower's engine in order to hear me. I saw my mistake then, but I pretended not to be surprised and calmly asked what she was paid.

"I get to sleep with the fella' who lives here," she told me—an old joke, but we both laughed. By way of apology, I asked her and Eugene to dinner, and we quickly became friends.

Paula and I were both chronic early risers. She fell into the habit of dropping by while Eugene slept. I couldn't explain to friends what it was about her that made me look forward to those mornings. I hesitate to describe it now. She was an intelligent woman who thought and acted in a manner unlike anyone else I'd known. Despite that, I felt, almost from the beginning, as if I'd spent my whole life with her—although her life was as different from mine as dust is from coffee.

Our first important talk came late that summer, a brilliant morning after a night of rain. She propped her bare feet against my drop-leaf table and rocked back in her chair, a cup of coffee held with both hands, balanced in her lap. Sunlight from the slatted window over the kitchen sink fell across her hair. I stood at the kitchen counter, filling my cup. The smell of coffee permeated the room.

"You're the same height as my father," she said abruptly. Saying this embarrassed her, and she continued, as if to justify having begun. "My father raised me by himself. We moved around a lot. He kept us moving."

I sat across from her and listened as a story emerged,

staring all the while at her feet rising above the oak plane of the table, the feminine curve of her soles. I recall wondering why I hadn't noticed before the incredible beauty of her naked feet. How was that possible?

Paula's father, an itinerant salesman, once managed a trailer court in Apache Junction, Arizona, and set traps for the women who lived there. He and Paula kept up the miniature yards and accepted midday ice teas or lemonades from women home alone. Often, as they were about to leave a trailer, Paula's father would drop his wallet on a chair or beneath the kitchen table. When a woman sought him out and returned the wallet without taking the crumpled twenty he'd left inside, his immense gratitude would somehow make her beholden to him and he would seduce her. The others, the thieves, he also courted, making use of their guilt.

"He thought the trap was a good test of character," Paula said. "Though I don't know whether he preferred the women who took the money or those who returned it."

"He seduced them all?" I asked her.

"It seemed that way," she said with a mixture of both shame and pride. "There was one who mailed the wallet to him in a Manila envelope. And another who had her husband return it. He didn't mess with them."

The intimacy of the story seemed to demand a reply. I shifted in my chair to avoid staring at her feet, reminding myself that Eugene slept just three houses away—the thick and dulling sleep of the unemployed. Thinking of him made me feel guilty. "Have I ever mentioned my ex-wife?" I asked her.

Paula said I hadn't.

I told her about how we'd met and what she'd said about love. "Sometimes I think she wanted children," I said, "although she always denied it. She was older than I was and a philosophy major, so I wanted to give her credit for deep thoughts. But all that about the products of love—kids are the obvious products of love, aren't they?"

Paula frowned at this. "Children are the product of