LOUDER THAN WORDS

TWENTY-TWO WRITERS DONATE NEW STORIES TO BENEFIT *SHARE OUR STRENGTH'S* FIGHT AGAINST HUNGER, HOMELESSNESS AND ILLITERACY

LEE K. ABBOTT · LISA ALTHER · RICHARD BAUSCH · CHARLES BAXTER · MADISON SMARTT BELL · FREDERICK BUSCH · ETHAN CANIN · MICHAEL DORRIS · MICHAEL DOWNING · LOUISE ERDRICH · AMY HEMPEL · ANN HOOD · JAY NEUGEBOREN · JOYCE CAROL OATES · ROBERT OLMSTEAD · FRANCINE PROSE · MICHAEL ROSEN · RICHARD RUSSO · CAROLYN SEE · MONA SIMPSON · SCOTT SPENCER · ANNE TYLER

EDITED BY WILLIAM SHORE

LOUDER THAN WORDS

22 Authors

New Stories to Benefit

Share Our Strength's

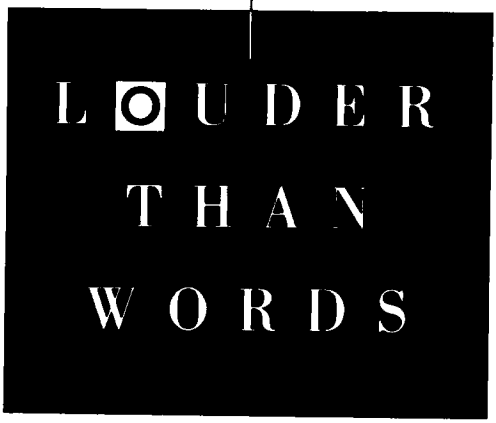
Fight Against Hunger,

Homelessness And Illiteracy

A VINTAGE ORIGINAL, DECEMBER 1989
FIRST EDITION

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Louder than words : 22 authors donate new stories to benefit Share Our Strength's fight against hunger, homelessness, and illiteracy / edited and with an introduction by William Shore.—1st ed.
p. cm.
ISBN 0-679-72157-6 : $8.95
1. Short stories, American. 2. American fiction—20th century.
I. Shore, William. II. Share Our Strength.
PS648.S5L68 1989
813'.0108—dc20 89-40138
CIP

Book design by Chris Welch
Manufactured in the United States of America
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1


LOUDER
THAN
WORDS

Edited and with an Introduction by

WILLIAM SHORE

Vintage Books

A Division of Random House, Inc. / New York

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

More than most books, an anthology, by definition, owes its existence to the talents of many people. In this case the twenty-two fine writers who donated their stories have first claim on my gratitude. What follows is their work. My own efforts to recruit, organize, correspond with, and review the final products of each fall more appropriately under the category of pleasure.

The enthusiasm and energy I sought to provide over the last eighteen months can take a project like this one just so far, and then no farther. There comes a point at which skill, judgment and experience are needed. Fortunately, Robin Desser, my editor at Vintage Books has all three in abundance. She has been a great friend whose advice and encouragement did much to shape the ultimate version of this book.

This book is just one of Share Our Strength's many endeavors to support the fight against hunger, homelessness and illiteracy. And while it happens to be associated with my name, the hardest work in that organization is done by an incredibly dedicated full-time staff to whom I am particularly grateful. Meghan Hays and Richard Wagner, as recent additions, share responsibility for our growth. Debbie Shore, Joann Shepherd, and Cathy Townsend have stuck with this effort from the very beginning and demonstrated a level of commitment that has made a profound impact. Together, the five of them are Share Our Strength and the principal reason it exists and thrives.

Finally, a special thanks to my wife, Bonnie, who in countless ways has enabled both Share Our Strength and me to become what we've become.

INTRODUCTION

Share Our Strength (SOS) was established in 1984 to raise funds for hunger relief through the American food and restaurant industry. It has since become a broad-based nonprofit vehicle for channeling creative talent and energy in a variety of fields toward those in need.

Over the past year SOS has provided more than one million dollars to food banks and homeless shelters in sixty cities, as well as to international famine relief and development overseas. The funds are most often used to improve kitchen equipment, transport excess food products, train volunteers, and to support agricultural enhancement projects in the developing world. In many American cities SOS funds ensure that literally thousands of pounds of healthful, nutritious, nonsalable food will be shared by soup kitchens and homeless shelters, instead of just being thrown away.

Financial contributions to our organization from several well-known writers inspired the idea that there ought to be a vehicle for writers to do more than simply contribute dollars to a cause they believe in. There ought to be a way for them to contribute *through their craft.*

We conceived and proposed a writers' committee on which participating writers would contribute one previously unpublished short story to an anthology from which profits would be donated to antipoverty organizations fighting hunger, homelessness, and illiteracy. I was surprised by the quick and generous responses: from those of Louise Erdrich and Anne Tyler, who immediately telephoned their support, to that of Lee K. Abbott, who enthusiastically replied: "Hell, yes, count me in

. . . If anything I do can end this national horror, then I will have accomplished more with this story, in practical terms, than any I have written before."

The contribution of these participating writers has been generous indeed. So that the maximum amount of funds could be raised, the stories donated to this anthology were also made available to magazines and literary journals and have appeared in *The New Yorker, Ladies' Home Journal, Mother Jones, Antaeus, Shenandoah, The Georgia Review,* and many others.

Ultimately the writers who have contributed to this anthology have given something of much greater value than money. They have given of themselves. Contributing author Michael Downing put it best when he wrote, confirming his participation: "I thank you for the privilege of giving away something of value. I typically find myself writing rather inconsequential checks which I try to inflate with good will and best wishes. It is a joy to know that my contribution's value will appreciate because of your work and the contribution of others."

This volume, which we hope will become the first of many, stands as a tribute to the idea that helping others can be one of the most eloquent forms of self-expression.

—William Shore
Executive Director, Share Our Strength

CONTENTS

A WOMAN LIKE A FIELDSTONE HOUSE

Anne Tyler

THAT WAS THE YEAR she turned squeamish—1936. Up till then she'd been a tough and gritty little girl, the kind of child who gleefully sprinkled salt on garden slugs and stuck firefly tails to her knuckles for rings. But during her twelfth birthday party, which was held out of doors, she was stung by something unseen and she carried on about it far longer than was reasonable (as all three of her brothers informed her) and afterward behaved timidly around insects, garter snakes and even her brother Peter's pretty orange salamander with the tiny, cool, humanlike hands who lived in a pie plate full of water under the front porch.

So imagine her distress when she discovered, later in May, a great number of mysterious round holes the size of snake holes scattered through the backyard. They were so precisely formed that they might have been made with the staff of a beach umbrella, but of course they couldn't have been. (The

beach umbrella still lay in its wintering place behind the coal furnace in the basement.) Her brothers said the holes must be, oh, something or other, gopher holes, maybe; who knew; who cared. But then her father told her they were exit doors for locusts. Cicadas, actually, he said, but here in Baltimore everyone called them locusts, seventeen-year locusts; and yes, this would be the year for them, as a matter of fact. He was surprised to see how quickly they had come around again. Last time, he told Corey, he had been in high school. He had not even kissed a girl yet, not even held hands with one. He looked at Corey's mother when he said this, in a wondering, slightly abstracted way, and Corey's mother laughed, but he did not. He was silent for a moment.

Then he went on to explain how the pupae crawled out of the dirt where they had lived for seventeen years and how they climbed the first available vertical object (your leg, if you stood still long enough) and wriggled free of their shells and turned into big black flying insects who mated and died in a matter of weeks, leaving their eggs to mature in turn seventeen years later. He presented this as a miracle of nature. He used the same tone of voice Corey's mother had used earlier in the spring when she was introducing the facts of life. But Corey was repelled by that description of their climbing the first available vertical object. She imagined how they would feel: burrlike, barnaclelike, clinging with their prickly feet to her bare leg.

That whole summer, therefore, she behaved in an edgy, old-maidish manner whenever she was outdoors. Sent to retrieve the morning paper, she stayed on the sidewalk and leaned far, far over to fish the paper from the grass. Waiting at the streetcar stop, she hopped up and down continually like someone who needed to go to the bathroom. She did this even after all the horny beige shells were emptied; she did this even after the locusts had started zooming through the air in their clumsy, barging fashion, slamming into the windshield of her

father's Hudson and buzzing like a million giant zippers. There was no question now of their choosing one of Corey's wiry white legs as a shedding station, and yet still she went on hopping. Her mother said, "Corey, what on earth . . . ?" and in public, looked around embarrassed and whispered, "Stand still, sweetie." But Corey couldn't stand still, not for the life of her.

Then one day—oh, it must have been June, mid-June or so—she realized the locusts were gone. There were a few black carcasses at the edges of the sidewalks, their bright red, mappin eyes filmed over now, and a few empty shells fastened to the tree trunks, but no more locusts. For a while, she went on hopping anyway. It was a kind of superstition. Then gradually she stopped. She began to allow her family to open the car windows again when they went for their Sunday drives. She no longer ran her fingers apprehensively through her straw-colored fan of hair after the briefest trip outdoors, or shook out her skirt, or examined the soles of her sandals. And by September (when Minella Smith had moved in across the alley and they'd started their secret club, the Jewels), Corey had forgotten that the locusts had ever existed.

She was hanging diapers out back when she noticed that one of the clothesline poles had collected some sort of clustery growths around its base, and when she bent for a closer look she said, "Why!" They were locust shells, or pupae, or whatever you want to call them. She recognized them instantly. The sight gave her a swooping sensation. The year was 1953, she was twenty-nine years old and she had a husband and three children, and yet here were these crisp little shrimpy things come all the way from her twelfth summer. She took a clothespin from her apron pocket and poked at one of the pupae and it fell to the ground, unresisting. She went over to the other pole—actually a maple tree—and found them even thicker there. Her youngest, Dudley, held one clenched in his chubby,

creased fist and his mouth was poised expectantly. "No, no, Dudley! Dirty!" she told him, and she slapped it out of his hand. She could see it was going to be a long summer.

Her husband was a New Englander, transplanted. (He'd been switched to the Baltimore branch of Northeastern Life back when Corey worked there as a secretary, and she had instantly fallen for his bright red hair and bashful smile.) When she told him about the locusts, he claimed he had never heard of such a thing. "Seventeen years?" he said. "They wait underground for seventeen years and then mate and die in just weeks? Isn't that kind of inefficient?"

"Well, maybe I've got it wrong," Corey said. "Maybe there's some in-between stage that I don't know about."

There wasn't, though. When her parents came over for Sunday dinner, she asked her father and he said it was just as she had remembered. They spent that whole long time underground.

The shells began to empty, and then the trees began to droop with what looked like heavy black fruit. "Ugly things!" her friend Marilyn said. (Marilyn was transplanted too, from someplace out west.) "This is like a horror movie," Marilyn said, but Corey—no longer so squeamish—merely laughed and continued trying to peel a lacy, iridescent wing from Dudley's tongue. She felt like an old-timer; she was almost showing off. "Wait a few days till they gather their strength," she told Marilyn. "Wait till they start dive-bombing you."

"Ooh! Do they bite?"

"No, but they're such poor fliers, they kind of stagger through the air and bang into people."

"Maybe I'll summer in Europe this year," Marilyn said languidly. But she was only joking; she was nothing but a beautician at the Princesse Beauty Shoppes.

As for Corey's two older children—Danny, who was six, and Virginia, who was eight—they thought the locusts were their own personal playthings. They collected seething mounds

of them in Mason jars. They tied threads to them and let them zoom in circles like domestic animals on leashes. Corey supposed she ought to put a stop to this (locusts were God's creatures too) but somehow she didn't. She had enough to do these days just chasing after Dudley. And she was so weary of locusts by now—their bitter, musky smell, which she had not remembered from last time; and the messy snippets of branches that littered the ground after they had slit the bark to lay their eggs; and above all, their ceaseless racket. Her friend Marilyn called them the Jug Band. "Oh, the Jug Band is hot tonight!" she'd say. "There's a guest soloist on the steel tub." Then she demonstrated the Locust Walk: scurrying along on her spike heels with her collar clamped tight around her neck to guard against a locust's falling inside her blouse. And the Locust Stomp: that crazed dance you saw passersby performing when they all at once discovered an unexpected hitchhiker in their hair. And the Locust Exit: slapping smartly at the screen door before she stepped outside so they wouldn't fly up and zoom into her when the door slammed shut again. She was a card, that Marilyn—all sharp angles and peroxided curls and red lipstick, long red nails, tight red skirts and swinging ear-bobs; the kind of person who didn't mind looking like a fool from time to time if it would make other people laugh a little bit. Corey's husband thought she was sort of cheap, but Corey got a real kick out of her.

Only in the few hours before dawn now was there any peace. The rest of the time the air was frantically busy, so filled with noise you had to raise your voice to be heard. Those locusts that were far away made a zinging sound like tires on a wet highway, while the closer ones buzzed like chain saws, and there was another kind—a whole separate species, the newspaper said—that gave an unpleasant, rising scream. All these sounds competed, insistently. Lying in bed at night, Corey would ask, "How can they keep this up? Wouldn't you think they'd get tired?"

"Maybe they work in shifts," Ben told the ceiling. Then he tossed irritably on his pillow and said, "If only we had air-conditioning, we could close the windows."

The people across the street had put an air conditioner in their bedroom—something that astounded Corey, for she associated air-conditioning with major department stores and those movie theaters that advertise "It's Cold Inside!," each letter dripping blue icicles. Also, she felt there was something dank and shallow about air-conditioned air. "I like to catch the breeze," she told Ben. "I like that moment at night when everything all at once cools down."

"What breeze? What moment?" he asked. "Lately it's been hot as Hades the whole night through." Then he said, "The fact is, you're just not a person who feels the heat."

"I feel it," she said. "It just doesn't *get* to me. It has to be hot for weeks and weeks before it really gets to me."

"You're like my grandma's old fieldstone house," he told her. "It takes a while for the weather to sink through to you."

And then he laughed, because at heart he really was a good-natured man, and he turned to face her and rested a hand on her breast. His warmth traveled instantly through the thin cotton of her nightgown. Outside, the Jug Band sawed away, filling the night with clatter.

She was hauling two bags of groceries out of the car trunk because Dudley, bless his soul, had completely emptied the fridge in the day and a half he'd been home from college; and what did she see but a large black locust sitting on the curb. It had a sort of stunned look, she thought. It was utterly motionless, and when she nudged it with the toe of her sneaker it moved over slightly but it didn't fly away. She wondered if these modern fertilizers or pollutants or whatever had had some harmful effect. She wondered why her first inkling of the locusts' arrival had been this adult specimen and not the usual beige shells—although, coming up the front walk with her gro-