Essays of E·B· White

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ESSAYS OF E. B. WHITE

BOOKS BY E. B. WHITE

Essays of E. B. White

Letters of E. B. White

The Trumpet of the Swan

The Points of My Compass

The Second Tree From the Corner

Charlotte's Web

Here Is New York

The Wild Flag

Stuart Little

One Man's Meat

The Fox of Peapack

Quo Vadimus?

Farewell to Model T

Every Day Is Saturday

The Lady Is Cold

An E. B. White Reader
edited by William W. Watt and Robert W. Bradford

The Elements of Style
William Strunk, Jr. (revised and enlarged by E. B. White)

A Subtreasury of American Humor
co-edited with Katharine S. White

Is Sex Necessary?
with James Thurber

FOREWORD

The essayist is a self-liberated man, sustained by the childish belief that everything he thinks about, everything that happens to him, is of general interest. He is a fellow who thoroughly enjoys his work, just as people who take bird walks enjoy theirs. Each new excursion of the essayist, each new "attempt," differs from the last and takes him into new country. This delights him. Only a person who is congenitally self-centered has the effrontery and the stamina to write essays.

There are as many kinds of essays as there are human attitudes or poses, as many essay flavors as there are Howard Johnson ice creams. The essayist arises in the morning and, if he has work to do, selects his garb from an unusually extensive wardrobe: he can pull on any sort of shirt, be any sort of person, according to his mood or his subject matter—philosopher, scold, jester, raconteur, confidant, pundit, devil's advocate, enthusiast. I like the essay, have always liked it, and even as a child was at work, attempting to inflict my young thoughts and experiences on others by putting them on paper. I early broke into print in the pages of *St. Nicholas*. I tend still to fall back on the essay form (or lack of form) when an idea strikes me, but I am not fooled about the place of the essay in twentieth-century American letters—it stands a short distance down the line. The essayist, unlike the novelist, the poet, and the playwright, must be content in his self-imposed role of second-class citizen. A writer who has his sights trained on the Nobel Prize or other earthly triumphs had best write a novel, a poem, or a play, and leave the essayist to ramble about, content with living a free life and enjoying the satisfactions of a somewhat undisciplined existence. (Dr. Johnson called the essay "an irregular, undigested piece"; this happy practitioner has no wish to quarrel with the good doctor's characterization.)

There is one thing the essayist cannot do, though—he cannot indulge himself in deceit or in concealment, for he will be found out in no time. Desmond MacCarthy, in his introductory remarks to the 1928 E. P. Dutton & Company edition of Montaigne, observes that Montaigne "had the gift of natural candour. . . ." It is the basic ingredient. And even the essayist's escape from discipline is only a partial escape: the essay, although a relaxed form, imposes its own disciplines, raises its own problems, and these disciplines and problems soon become apparent and (we all hope) act as a deterrent to anyone wielding a pen merely because he entertains random thoughts or is in a happy or wandering mood.

I think some people find the essay the last resort of the egoist, a much too self-conscious and self-serving form for their taste; they feel that it is presumptuous of a writer to assume that his little excursions or his small observations will interest the reader. There is some justice in their complaint. I have always been aware that I am by nature self-absorbed and egoistical; to write of myself to the extent I have done indicates a too great attention to my own life, not enough to the lives of others. I have worn many shirts, and not all of them have been a good fit. But when I am discouraged or downcast I need only fling open the door of my closet, and there, hidden behind everything else, hangs the mantle of Michel de Montaigne, smelling slightly of camphor.

The essays in this collection cover a long expanse of time, a wide variety of subjects. I have chosen the ones that have amused me in the rereading, along with a few that seemed to have the odor of durability clinging to them. Some, like "Here Is New York," have been seriously affected by the passage of time and now stand as period pieces. I wrote about New York in the summer of 1948, during a hot spell. The city I described has disappeared, and another city has emerged in its place—one that I'm not familiar with. But I remember the former one, with longing and with love. David McCord, in his book *About Boston* tells of a journalist from abroad visiting this country and seeing New York for the first time. He reported that it was "inspiring but temporary in appearance." I know what he means. The last time I visited New York, it seemed to have suffered a personality change, as though it had a brain tumor as yet undetected.

Two of the Florida pieces have likewise experienced a sea change. My remarks about the condition of the black race in the South have happily been nullified, and the pieces are merely prophetic, not definitive.

To assemble these essays I have rifled my other books and have added a number of pieces that are appearing for the first time between

covers. Except for extracting three chapters, I have let "One Man's Meat" alone, since it is a sustained report of about five years of country living—a report I prefer not to tamper with. The arrangement of the book is by subject matter or by mood or by place, not by chronology. Some of the pieces in the book carry a dateline, some do not. Chronology enters into the scheme, but neither the book nor its sections are perfectly chronological. Sometimes the reader will find me in the city when he thinks I am in the country, and the other way round. This may cause a mild confusion; it is unavoidable and easily explained. I spent a large part of the first half of my life as a city dweller, a large part of the second half as a countryman. In between, there were periods when nobody, including myself, quite knew (or cared) where I was: I thrashed back and forth between Maine and New York for reasons that seemed compelling at the time. Money entered into it, affection for *The New Yorker* magazine entered in. And affection for the city.

I have finally come to rest.

E. B. WHITE

April 1977

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Of the thirty-one essays in this collection, twenty-two appeared originally in *The New Yorker*. "Farewell, My Lovely!" a collaboration with Richard L. Strout, appeared first in *The New Yorker* under that title, later as a small book called *Farewell to Model T*, published by G. P. Putnam's Sons. "Death of a Pig" appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly*. "Riposte" was published on the *New York Times* Op-Ed Page, under the title "Farmer White's Brown Eggs." "Here Is New York" appeared first as an article in *Holiday*, then as a small book, published by Harper & Brothers. Two essays, "On a Florida Key" and "Once More to the Lake," were originally published in *Harper's Magazine*, in the One Man's Meat series. "The Sea and the Wind that Blows" first appeared in the *Ford Times*, and "A Slight Sound at Evening" was originally published in the *Yale Review* under the title "Walden—1954." The remarks on humor in Chapter VII formed part of an introduction to *A Subtreasury of American Humor*, published by Coward McCann. The piece on Don Marquis in the same chapter was taken from an introduction to the *lives and times of archy and mehitabel*, published by Doubleday.

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I

THE FARM

GOOD-BYE TO FORTY-EIGHTH STREET

Turtle Bay, November 12, 1957

For some weeks now I have been engaged in dispersing the contents of this apartment, trying to persuade hundreds of inanimate objects to scatter and leave me alone. It is not a simple matter. I am impressed by the reluctance of one's worldly goods to go out again into the world. During September I kept hoping that some morning, as by magic, all books, pictures, records, chairs, beds, curtains, lamps, china, glass, utensils, keepsakes would drain away from around my feet, like the outgoing tide, leaving me standing silent on a bare beach. But this did not happen. My wife and I diligently sorted and discarded things from day to day, and packed other objects for the movers, but a six-room apartment holds as much paraphernalia as an aircraft carrier. You can whittle away at it, but to empty the place completely takes real ingenuity and great staying power. On one of the mornings of disposal, a man from a second-hand bookstore visited us, bought several hundred books, and told us of the death of his brother, the word "cancer" exploding in the living room like a time bomb detonated by his grief. Even after he had departed with his heavy load, there seemed to be almost as many books as before, and twice as much sorrow.

Every morning, when I left for work, I would take something in my hand and walk off with it, for deposit in the big municipal wire trash basket at the corner of Third, on the theory that the physical act of disposal was the real key to the problem. My wife, a strategist, knew better and began quietly mobilizing the forces that would eventually put our goods to rout. A man could walk away for a thousand mornings carrying something with him to the corner and there would still

be a home full of stuff. It is not possible to keep abreast of the normal tides of acquisition. A home is like a reservoir equipped with a check valve: the valve permits influx but prevents outflow. Acquisition goes on night and day—smoothly, subtly, imperceptibly. I have no sharp taste for acquiring things, but it is not necessary to desire things in order to acquire them. Goods and chattels seek a man out; they find him even though his guard is up. Books and oddities arrive in the mail. Gifts arrive on anniversaries and fête days. Veterans send ball-point pens. Banks send memo books. If you happen to be a writer, readers send whatever may be cluttering up their own lives; I had a man once send me a chip of wood that showed the marks of a beaver's teeth. Someone dies, and a little trickle of indestructible keepsakes appears, to swell the flood. This steady influx is not counterbalanced by any comparable outgo. Under ordinary circumstances, the only stuff that leaves a home is paper trash and garbage; everything else stays on and digs in.

Lately we haven't spent our nights in the apartment; we are bivouacked in a hotel and just come here mornings to continue the work. Each of us has a costume. My wife steps into a cotton dress while I shift into midnight-blue tropical pants and bowling shoes. Then we buckle down again to the unending task.

All sorts of special problems arise during the days of disposal. Anyone who is willing to put his mind to it can get rid of a chair, say, but what about a trophy? Trophies are like leeches. The ones made of paper, such as a diploma from a school or a college, can be burned if you have the guts to light the match, but the ones made of bronze not only are indestructible but are almost impossible to throw away, because they usually carry your name, and a man doesn't like to throw away his good name, or even his bad one. Some busybody might find it. People differ in their approach to trophies, of course. In watching Edward R. Murrow's "Person to Person" program on television, I have seen several homes that contained a "trophy room," in which the celebrated pack rat of the house had assembled all his awards, so that they could give out the concentrated aroma of achievement whenever he wished to loiter in such an atmosphere. This is all very well if you enjoy the stale smell of success, but if a man doesn't care for that air he is in a real fix when disposal time comes up. One day a couple of weeks ago, I sat for a while staring moodily at a plaque that had entered my life largely as a result of some company's zest for promotion. It was bronze on walnut, heavy enough to make an anchor for a rowboat, but I didn't need a rowboat anchor, and this thing had my name on it. By deft work with a screwdriver, I finally succeeded in prying the nameplate

off; I pocketed this, and carried the mutilated remains to the corner, where the wire basket waited. The work exhausted me more than did the labor for which the award was presented.

Another day, I found myself on a sofa between the chip of wood gnawed by the beaver and an honorary hood I had once worn in an academic procession. What I really needed at the moment was the beaver himself, to eat the hood. I shall never wear the hood again, but I have too weak a character to throw it away, and I do not doubt that it will tag along with me to the end of my days, not keeping me either warm or happy but occupying a bit of my attic space.

Right in the middle of the dispersal, while the mournful rooms were still loaded with loot, I had a wonderful idea: we would shut the apartment, leave everything to soak for a while, and go to the Fryeburg Fair, in Maine, where we could sit under a tent at a cattle auction and watch somebody else trying to dispose of something. A fair, of course, is a dangerous spot if a man is hoping to avoid acquisition, and the truth is I came close to acquiring a very pretty whiteface heifer, safe in calf—which would have proved easily as burdensome as a chip of wood gnawed by a beaver. But Fryeburg is where some of my wife's ancestors lived, and is in the valley of the Saco, looking west to the mountains, and the weather promised to be perfect, and the premium list of the Agricultural Society said, "Should Any Day Be Stormy, the Exercises for That Day Will Be Postponed to the First Fair Day," and I would rather have a ringside seat at a cattle sale than a box at the opera, so we picked up and left town, deliberately overshooting Fryeburg by 175 miles in order to sleep one night at home.

The day we spent at the Fryeburg Fair was the day the first little moon was launched by the new race of moon-makers. Had I known in advance that a satellite was about to be added to my world, in this age of additives, I might have stayed in New York and sulked instead of going to the Fair, but in my innocence I was able to enjoy a day watching the orbiting of trotting horses—an ancient terrestrial phenomenon that has given pleasure to unnumbered thousands. We attended the calf scramble, the pig scramble, and the baby-beef auction; we ate lunch in the back seat of our flashy old 1949 automobile, parked in the infield; and then I found myself a ringside seat with my feet in the shavings at the Hereford sale, under the rattling tongue and inexorable hammer of auctioneer Dick Murray, enjoying the wild look in the whites of a cow's eyes.

The day had begun under the gray blanket of a fall overcast, but the sky soon cleared. Nobody had heard of the Russian moon. The wheels wheeled, the chairs spun, the cotton candy tinted the faces of

children, the bright leaves tinted the woods and hills. A cluster of amplifiers spread the theme of love over everything and everybody; the mild breeze spread the dust over everything and everybody. Next morning, in the Lafayette Hotel in Portland, I went down to breakfast and found May Craig looking solemn at one of the tables and Mr. Murray, the auctioneer, looking cheerful at another. The newspaper headlines told of the moon. At that hour of the morning, I could not take in the exact significance, if any, of a national heavenly body. But I was glad I had spent the last day of the natural firmament at the One Hundred and Seventh Annual Exhibition of the West Oxford Agricultural Society. I see nothing in space as promising as the view from a Ferris wheel.

But that was weeks ago. As I sit here this afternoon in this disheveled room, surrounded by the boxes and bales that hold my undisposable treasure, I feel the onset of melancholy. I look out onto Forty-eighth Street; one out of every ten passers-by is familiar to me. After a dozen years of gazing idly at the passing show, I have assembled, quite unbeknownst to them, a cast of characters that I depend on. They are the nameless actors who have a daily walk-on part in my play—the greatest of dramas. I shall miss them all, them and their dogs. Even more, I think, I shall miss the garden out back—the wolf whistle of the starling, the summer-night murmur of the fountain; the cat, the vine, the sky, the willow. And the visiting birds of spring and fall—the small, shy birds that drop in for one drink and stay two weeks. Over a period of thirty years, I have occupied eight caves in New York, eight digs—four in the Village, one on Murray Hill, three in Turtle Bay. In New York, a citizen is likely to keep on the move, shopping for the perfect arrangement of rooms and vistas, changing his habitation according to fortune, whim, and need. And in every place he abandons he leaves something vital, it seems to me, and starts his new life somewhat less encrusted, like a lobster that has shed its skin and is for a time soft and vulnerable.