

ANTIC ANTILLEANA

C.K. Starr's Occasional Newsletter to Family and Friends

(Formerly *Tropic of Cancer*)

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LUNCH WITH A WAR HERO

In Ohio in the 1960s, I was in high school with Jay "Skuz" Harker. He graduated in 1968, one year behind me. If I recall correctly, it was the late Ron Sidwell who hung the nickname on him, and now I guess we'll never know why.

I knew Skuz lived in Silver Spring, Maryland in recent years, but it slipped my mind during my visit to Washington in the summer of 1998, and I didn't think to stop by or even call him. When I got back to Trinidad and realized what I had (not) done, I was mighty annoyed with myself, so I picked up the phone one night and called him. "Hey, Skuz?" I began, "It's Chris Starr." Just like that. Your editor likes to do that sort of thing, very casual, like the time Nova & I popped in on Joe Biddulph in Pontypridd, Wales, "because we were in the neighbourhood." Skuz was gratifyingly amazed. The last contact we had was probably in June of 1967.

We shot the breeze for a while, and I assured him that the next time I was in his area we would definitely get together. So, when I was planning to be back in Washington last summer, we got back in contact and arranged that Skuz would ride into town one day and we would have a leisurely lunch together. Which we did.

In the 1960s, with the war against Vietnam going on, military conscription (the draft) was a major concern of young men. On turning 18, if one was no longer a student, there were exactly four options: go into the army, evade the draft, apply for recognition as a conscientious objector, or refuse.

Like most of our schoolmates, Skuz wanted nothing to do with the war effort. Unlike most, he was serious about it and didn't think conscientious objector status was much of a protest. So, when he turned 18, he wrote to his draft board that he was not going to participate in the war in any way and would not register. The FBI came to call and informed him of his court date.

The proceedings were all very civilized. Skuz pled no-contest and testified on his own behalf. The judge politely suggested that he declare himself a conscientious objector, and Skuz politely declined to do so. He was sentenced to 60 days to six years, instructed when and where to turn himself in, and then he went home.

Skuz did 18 months in Petersburg, Virginia. It was a real prison, but it was not especially hard time. He hung out with others who were in for war resistance. After prison, he went to Earlham College for two years, then he dropped out and drifted. It was during that period that he first experience mental problems, which got progressively worse for a time. Schizophrenia.

It has been a struggle ever since, and it has taken its toll, including economically. Skuz has had about 60 different jobs over the years. He starts at a new one, then he just loses interest, can't be bothered, and he drifts again.

This piece is a tribute to Skuz, for two reasons. First, even at an early age, with all the weight of official and public opinion against him, he did the right thing. He refused to participate in an unjust war, and he went to the trouble to refuse in a strong way. I recently read an interview with Daniel Ellsberg, the Defense Department analyst who leaked the Pentagon Papers not long after Skuz went to prison. Ellsberg had been much affected by those who openly refused to cooperate and instead went to prison, and it was this that led him to ask himself what he could do. Right there is plain historical proof that men like Skuz made a difference.

Second, he retains that same fighting spirit today in the struggle against the schizophrenia inside. He takes his medication, keeps a close watch on himself, and he does not make excuses. I once asked Skuz if his time on the inside had made him nuts, and he plainly refused to blame it on prison. In fact, he doesn't blame it on anything. It's a chemical imbalance in the brain, nobody's fault, just one of those misfortunes that can befall us. And he's been fighting it for more than 20 years.

Wandering

NORTH AMERICA, FOR ONE

In *Antic Antilleana* no. 37 I announced the death of the patriarch of my family, Francis Starr (1916-2000) and had a few things to say about what he was made of. His memorial service took place in late May in Newmarket, Ontario, where he spent his youth. The turnout was gratifyingly large, and the tributes were most satisfying. Again, thanks to all who attended.

Afterwards, we drove north to Orillia for a substantial family social gathering. It was quite a jolly party, with a slide of archival photos to accompany dessert.

At one point, Cousin John Stanley and I and my boy Francis A. Starr were sitting on the porch, eating, when Cousin Mary Starr joined us. Now, let me explain something here. There are four branches of our family: the Copes, the Stanleys, the Good Starrs and the Bad Starrs. Uncle Stuart & Aunt Caroline and their offspring (including Mary) are the Good Starrs. We are of course the bad Starrs. Mary's arrival caused me to draw attention to this distinction. I didn't think much of it, but young Francis really got off on it, especially when he understood that he was one of the Bad Starrs. He went all over the gathering, imposing his manic question on everyone: "Are you a Good Starr or a Bad Starr?" I expect everyone got asked that at least twice. Ho ho.

Some time during the evening, John told Sushi that Uncle Raymond had always considered the Bad Starrs (he didn't put it that way) the fun branch of the family. And he told me that our mother, the Director, had always been the Mystery Aunt to them.

Then I went back to Washington for a month of working in the Smithsonian Libraries and the Library of Congress, mostly toward my thesis at the University of Utrecht. It was convenient (for me) to lodge with my old Kansas classmate Ed Barrows. That meant a substantial commute, including the 5-km choice between walking or riding the bus to/from the Friendship Heights stop to get the subway into town. I didn't always feel like walking, but often I did, especially as it was along a pleasant route during usually nice weather. Once one gets into the rhythm of it, that sort of things leaves one's mind to concentrate or wander at will.

One day I walked while reciting the three versions of Lewis Carroll's "Jabberwocky" known to me -- the original english version, plus french and german translations. On another occasion I spent the walk in learning by heart Dylan Thomas's "Fern Hill", glancing at my notes as needed. And on another I really taxed my brain by tenaciously tracking down the song line "You are the reason/ That my life's so pleasin'", which had been rattling around in my head for no apparent reason since early morning. It took a long time to place the voice, but once I figured out it was Don Gibson it was easy enough to recall the Song, "I'm All Wrapped Up in You". It's good to have these things solved, a form of exorcism with which I expect you are all familiar. And it shows you that I'm not letting all that expensive education go to waste. Or, as Bertrand Russell is reputed to have said, "There is much pleasure to be had in useless knowledge."

Working in the Library of Congress I found to be wonderfully effective. It has an enormous collection, of course, including some juicy old stuff, and the system ticks away very efficiently. After an initial lag-time of about 40 min to get the first batch of books, one need never wait again. One looks ahead, puts in requests ahead of time, including for the next day (I fairly drooled when I came in one morning to find a lovely stack of yesterday's requests sitting there waiting for me expectantly).

Now, I may have mentioned in the past that there are a very few things I miss about the north temperate zone. These include some kinds of food, and occasionally I get really horny for something that I haven't had in many years, so that when I go north I try to get some. On the previous visit it was parsnips -- I don't claim these are rational, but let's face it, you don't have to be pregnant to get cravings -- so I just had to get some and cook them up, and after I had eaten them the spell was broken, and I'm not much concerned whether I ever again have parsnips. Naturally, I had the good sense to get enough of them that I could overdose.

This last time it was Red River cereal, the only porridge I really went for in my early years. During all the years I lived in the USA, I never saw it, and in Trinidad it's pretty much just oatmeal. So in Ontario I went into a big Loblaw's counting on getting a nice mess of Red River, in which I would indulge most shamelessly back in Washington. I scanned the porridge shelves, then scanned them again, and couldn't find it. Well, this was no good, so I went looking for a Loblaw's staffer, so I could express my dissatisfaction. After all, what business do they have not stocking Red River cereal, when I've been looking forward to it all the way up from the Orinoco River Basin?

Well, it was a good thing I muffled my ire and polite to the young man, because he accompanied me back to the shelves and pointed right at it. Can you believe it? Sometime in the last 30 years, the company had changed the package. Now, maybe you're going to think this is silly, but I am still think with much satisfaction of the two 1-kg packages of Red River that I scored that day. which Ed and I consumed one of them in Washington, and I brought the other to Trinidad.

Wandering

BRAZIL, FOR ANOTHER

Recall that I took Nova to England and Wales in 1995, with a brief stopover in Barbados on the way. Since then, we have been in competition with our London hosts, the

Ryveses, in the numbers of countries visited. I may catch up with Ann Ryves before too too long, but not with either Bruno or his sister, Margaret. I keep adding to my list, but they don't sit still either.

In any event, that jaunt had put Nova ahead of Francis by two, so that when I found myself bound for Brazil this summer with no reasonable prospect of taking both children, it was obviously Francis's turn.

It was good for Francis's education, although he seems to have almost no geographic sense. He was quite unimpressed by the fact that we were crossing the Equator in the night, and he evidently hadn't thought to study about Brazil in advance in the encyclopedia or the great big atlas I gave them a couple of years ago. However, I gave him a new portuguese expression every day to learn and practise, and after a slow start he seemed to get off on the idea and came to take a certain delight in exercising his vocabulary. Even after we came back to Trinidad, he preferred to thank people with "Obrigado", for example. That's the stuff.

It was also my own first experience with speaking Portuguese. I had had the tapes and textbook to learn it for about two years, but I never found the discipline to address the task properly, so that I probably got to Brazil with no more than three or four hours' practice.

Accordingly, I approached Brazil much as someone from a Spanish-speaking country would do, aware that the two are only approximately alike, but figuring that there was enough mutual intelligibility to let me get by. And in some situations one can even speak English. In Sao Paulo we had a luggage difficulty, so I approached the desk and asked if I should speak Spanish or English. Spanish, the agent told me quickly. So we did, and I continued to speak Spanish in almost all situations for about a day. However, I soon felt like it was a crutch and somehow rather ridiculous, under the circumstances, so after that first day I abandoned Spanish for (my brand of) Portuguese and made every effort to improve during the month we were there. It worked acceptably well, but I still reproach myself for not making use of those learning materials in advance, a serious lost opportunity.

Here was the plan. We would spend a couple of weeks near the mouth of the Amazon, hosted by my old Kansas classmate Mild Bill Overal of the Goeldi Museum in Belém, there to be joined by our old buddies Justin Orval Schmidt and Al Willie Hook. Then we would all five ride the bus south to Iguassu Falls for the International Congress of Entomology. After that, Orval would go on to Argentina, Al Willie would head straight home to Texas, and the rest of us would go back to Belém for a couple more days.

In Belém we stayed at Mild Bill's spacious and wonderfully comfortable country house. ONE day, after a large, sociable lunch, some of us retired for a siesta. I was lying there deeply groggy when the sky opened up and we had another of those dry-season downpours. After listening to it for a few moments, I realized that there was only one thing to do. I called to Francis to put on his bathing suit, I put on mine, and we went out into the rain, with special attention to the spouts under the eaves. We raced around the yard hilariously, and then I had an inspiration. There was a wheelbarrow over there. I got Francis to sit in it, we stood there for a few moments, revving up loudly in place, and then we took off around the yard. Francis was screaming, and this strange composite beast of Francis and me and the wheelbarrow must have seemed surpassingly strange and downright menacing to the poodle, because he came chasing after us, barking furiously.

The one identifiable part of the beast that he could get at was evidently Francis's feet, because he concentrated his leaping nips there, which of course had Francis screaming louder than ever. The folks on the dry porch were screaming too, in a different sort of way. I tell you, friends, this is my idea of good, clean fun.

Al Willie was already in Belém when we arrived, while Orval came about a week later. In the interlude the four of us (minus Orval) took a boat upriver for a week or so at a field station on the Caxiuana River, a blackwater tributary of the Amazon. Francis appeared to be having great fun on that trip and was lively and charming to one and all. At one point, not far from our destination, we entered a big lake that was almost black water, and there we ran into mechanical trouble. Oil or water in the engine, something like that. We sat there for a while, patiently digging the scene, and then Al Willie appeared in his bathing suit and jumped from the railing, just like that. Well now, that was a mighty good idea, so I quickly stripped down to my (respectably dark) undies and jumped into that fine, almost-black water. Wonderful. After a while I persuaded Francis to change into his bathing suit and jump in too. I got him started by promising him 5 reais to jump in, but I soon saw that I could have gotten it for less. And there was my very own boy swimming in the Amazon River! Hallelujah.

After that, I went swimming every day in the Caxiuana River, and on the first day I tried something radical. First, the background. As a kid in Ottawa, I often went swimming in the Rideau River in the summer, sometimes every day for weeks. Then one day when I was 10 I came home with sinus congestion, and ever since then I'd had to keep unchlorinated fresh water out of my nostrils. After various experiments, I learned that the only way to do this when my head was under water was to hold my nose with one hand and use the other to swim, a very inconvenient arrangement. And even that doesn't always work, as I have learned in rivers and lakes on three continents.

Now, it just occurred to me that black water might be different, so I took the risk and swam underwater with my nose open. Wonderful. No congestion whatsoever. That was one reason that kept me swimming every day in the Caxiuana.

The other was the fish. After I came out of the river on our first day at the station, Mild Bill casually mentioned that there were plenty of piranhas in the water. As I looked at him in consternation -- I'm sure that's exactly what he wanted -- he just as casually mentioned that of course they didn't attack living animals except under conditions of starvation. He's like that. And, once I was assured that they weren't about to eat my nuts off or even nibble on my toes, I quite fancied the idea of swimming with piranhas, although I never saw any.

One of the attractions of this station was a tower reaching above the forest canopy, so that one could go up through vegetation at all layers, including the highest. One day Francis & I went for a walk to the tower. I put a safety belt on him and told him to go up the stairs. With that, Francis started up the stairs without a hint of complaint about the long climb or the scary height. Right to the top, and when he got there he was in no great hurry to get back down. I was quite proud of my boy. I took some pictures of him up there, and then at his suggestion I took a couple of shots looking down, as he was concerned that people wouldn't believe he was at a great height.

One day at breakfast someone mentioned the German word for the Amazon forest, Urwald. Mild Bill, ever on the alert, suggested that this was a better name for Orval. So it was decided. Henceforth he is to be known as Urwald.

The trip south to Iguassu Falls was instructive and useful, but it was also quite wearing. If you look on the map, you will see that Belém is getting toward the northern end of Brazil, while Iguassu Falls is close to the southern tip, and Brazil is a big country. The trip took almost three days. What it showed me is that eastern Brazil south of the Amazon is by no means a wild land. And it has not been tamed gently. To put it another way, if the Amazon region is truly a Brazilian responsibility, as the nationalists are fond of saying, then the Amazon is as good as trashed. And liberals who remain on my mailing list aren't going to like this, but there it is. Because it was such a long north-south journey, we witnessed considerable climatic change as we traveled. It got decidedly chilly toward the end, and a recent winter frost had apparently killed off all the Cecropia trees at what was presumably near their southern limit.

I had feared that Francis might find the bus trip and especially the time in Iguassu Falls tedious. What was he to do while the rest of us were congressing? As it turned out, this was not a problem, not even a little one. For one thing, the congress was not terribly compelling, so that I was by no means in sessions all the time. For another, Mild Bill was very good about taking him on little excursions when he was not in sessions, which again was not infrequently.

And Francis discovered two kinds of special food in Brazil. The first and major one was buffet. In fact, Buffet. Especially on that long bus trip, the scheduled stops tended to be at places with a buffet, and Francis really got into it. In Iguassu Falls, whenever I was to take him out for food, the inevitable question arose "Will it be Buffet?" There's a lot to be said for laying out a spread for children and letting them take their pick, within reason. That "within reason" is not a small item, as they have to get their spinach and liver.

The other was x-burgers. We saw a lot of different kinds of x-burgers in various eateries, depending on what else was thrown in. We figured out that "x" is cheese, although we never figured out why. In any event, next to Buffet, Francis's favourite meal became the bacon x-burger, and on days when I was going to be absent for several hours it was a simple matter to leave some money with him, and he would just toddle on down to the little roadside diner near our hotel and have a bacon x-burger or whatever else was on the menu that he fancied and knew how to say. He got pretty good at the names for what he considered essential food items.

Sometimes I think Nova is rather precocious (compared with my generation) about the facts of life, and I have wondered if Francis might be as well. I guess not. Walking back from supper one evening, we passed a lady standing on the corner. I nodded to her gallantly without especially taking notice, but a few steps on Francis said "That woman looks like a man." I shushed him, but it occurred to me that he was right, so when we were a decent distance down the street I told him that in fact she was. Why did he dress up like a woman? Francis wanted to know. Was he a secret agent? No, I didn't think so. Well, it wasn't Hallowe'en here in Brazil, was it? No, I tried to explain, it's just that some guys would rather live like women. He took that in but plainly didn't think I really knew what was going on. After rolling around the Hallowe'en idea a bit more, he decided that the man had really been some kind of secret agent.

Then one morning I decided to skip whatever sessions were happening for a few hours and take Francis over to Paraguay. We found a city bus stop on what looked like the route to the other side of the Paraná River, and before long the Ciudad del Este bus came along. We passed Immigration and Customs, who showed no interest in us -- as

far as I could see, no uniform so much as spoke to the driver -- so the passports stayed in the pocket.

When we got off it was just one big market for ordinary consumer goods. The currency is the guaraní, more than 3000 to the US\$. I had intended to just get some postcards and mail them from there, walk around a bit in Paraguay, have lunch, and then go back. As it was, I ended up spending somewhat more. Among other things, I got Francis some undies and socks after assuring the vendors repeatedly and quite sincerely that I didn't want any, no matter what the price. As we were walking away, Francis remarked that they were very persistent, and I was reminded of what one of my teachers had told us long ago about the market vendors in Mexico.

We wandered around for a while, looking for postcards. It was plain that this was no tourist destination, but we finally found some dandy ones in a bookstore recommended to us by a druggist whom I asked. As we were walking away with his advice, I pointed out to Francis the importance of approaching the right kind of people when seeking information. Teaching him explicit lessons is one way in which I try to emulate my own father.

We stopped at a nice little eatery, whose pleasant, Portuguese-speaking manager treated us very well. Francis went for Buffet, but this one was largely lost on him, as all he had from it was some beans and ribs. No matter, the price was right. I figured I should finally give *tereré* a try. This is mate, which I had often had in Argentina, except that it is drunk cold. It was good to experience it, but I prefer hot mate. And we made out our postcards, so we could send them from Paraguay. In his card to Nova, Francis simply wrote the names of the countries in his list, now equal in length to hers.

But there was a disappointment in Ciudad del Este. I had been counting on going into a market there and getting a great big list of vegetable names in Guaraní for Stan Kays's multi-lingual compendium. But I found no real market, just scattered stands, and none of the people I had asked knew the guaraní names for things. One woman told me plainly that she could only speak Spanish and Portuguese. I had figured Guaraní for a *lingua franca* at least to the borders of Paraguay.

After lunch, we just walked across the street to a bus stop and caught the bus that said Foz do Iguaçu. Just after us, a man got on with a box full of cartons of cigarets. He proceeded to open the box and take out all the cigarets, then lie down on the floor and stuff the cartons up behind the row of seats at the back of the bus. When I asked about this, he told us pleasantly that he could get a better price for them in Brazil, on account of the higher taxes there. The conductor watched his nonchalantly, as if it was routine -- I believe I later saw him slip her a bill. I thought this was quite amusing and told Francis that the man was smuggling cigarets and that if a uniform got on the bus he, Francis, was not to look at where the cigarets were hidden. As it happened, we needn't have worried, as once again we passed Immigration and Customs as if they weren't there.

Back in Belém, during our last day, I was packing while Francis watched political ads on the tube. I didn't pay much attention, but it looked like every candidate for alderman got a 20- or 30-second slot, one right after the other. None of the rest of us was watching the programme, so I encouraged Francis to give a free interpretation of what the candidates were saying, which he did with increasing gusto. It got so he was really raving. "Vote for Zenaldo. Don't vote for that other guy. The other guy said he would get everyone to respect me, but what he meant was that he would get all the homosexuals to respect me." That's the one I remember.

PLACES WITH NO GOOD REASON TO EXIST

The liberals out there in Newsletterland are going to be mighty offended, but let's be frank, there are some parts of the world that would not be missed if one day they just fell into the ocean. I do not refer to those places that one would positively like to be rid of -- as Phil Ochs pointed out, all in all, we would be better off without Mississippi -- but those whose existence seems somehow to have come about through oversight.

Of an August evening in Belém, the talk turned to this very question, and opinions were offered. To remind you of the principals, they were: a) our host, William L. "Mild Bill" Overall, curator of invertebrates at the Emílio Goeldi Museum in Belém, b) Justin O. "Urwald" Schmidt, the world's leading researcher into the ecological significance of arthropod venoms, c) Allan W. "Mad Dog" Hook, investigator of solitary wasps and renowned sex maniac, and d) your editor, known in this company as "Gonzo". The following are some of the candidates for places that would not be missed.

RHODE ISLAND It's just too little. On the map it doesn't even give you enough space to put its name on it, like those forms they give you on the plane. (Mild Bill)

LICHTENSTEIN For pretty much the same reasons, although we would lose some nice stamps if it were to disappear. (Urwald)

BANGLA DESH A poor idea from the start, although one can understand the folks wanting to take their distance from Pakistan. The hurricanes and flooding will probably take care of it. (Mad Dog)

BELGIUM A nonsense country hatched in some preposterous treaty by tacking a piece of France onto a piece of the Netherlands. One bears the Belgians no ill will, but what has ever issued from that hodgepodge except more Belgians? One could probably say much the same about the modern country of Syria. (Gonzo)

CENTRAL AMERICA, EXCEPT FOR COSTA RICA AND PANAMA The other countries just take up space and get in the way. (Mild Bill)

INDIANA [No rationale given, none needed.] (Urwald)

NEW ZEALAND I like white people and sheep as much as the next guy, but it takes more than that to make a real place. And that accent is a big mistake. (Gonzo)

A Reader's Notes

A BLACK POWER READING LIST

A couple of years ago I had occasion to advise one of my students on reading matter in Black Nationalism and Pan-Africanism. It occurs to me that some of you might extract

some advantage from the list that I cobbled together. Different books are included for different reasons, and this should not be mistaken for a bibliography in the subject. In addition, there is a bias toward west-indian material.

Chinua Achebe. *Anthills of the Savannah* and *Arrow of God*.

Maya Angelou. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*.

Herbert Aptheker. *Nat Turner's Slave Rebellion*.

Douglas Archibald. *Isidore and the Turtle*.

Ayi Kwei Armah. Start with *The Beautiful Ones are Not Yet Born*. The rest of his books are optional. Ghana's best-known fiction writer.

Kofi Awoonor. *The Breast of the Earth*.

James Baldwin. Especially recommended: *Blues for Mister Charlie*; *The Fire Next Time*; *Nobody Knows My Name*; *Notes of a Native Son*; *Tell me How Long the Train's Been Gone*.

Amiri Baraka. *Black Music*.

Ulli Beier (ed.). *Political Spider*. African creation myths.

Arna Bontemps. *Great Slave Narratives*.

George Breitman. *Evolution of a Revolutionary: The Last Year of Malcolm X*. Indispensable supplement to the autobiography.

Paul Buhle. *C.L.R. James: The Artist as Revolutionary*.

Camara Laye. Start with *The Dark Child*. Go on from there to *The Master of the Word* and/or *The Radiance of the King* if you have the appetite. His surname is Camara.

Peter Camejo. *Racism, Revolution, Reaction, 1861-1877*. A history of the Radical Reconstruction movement.

Aimé Césaire. *Return to my Native Land*. Nobody in the West Indies has any business not reading this book.

Samuel B. Charters. *The Legacy of the Blues*.

J.P. Clark. *A Decade of Tongues*. Includes "Ibadan", the first West-African poem that ever grabbed me.

Wanda Coleman. *Heavy Daughter Blues*.

Harold Courlander. *The Drum and the Hoe*.

Maya Deren. *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*. The best book I have read about voodoo.

Frederick Douglass. *My Bondage and My Freedom*. Autobiography of one of the righteousest dudes who ever lived.

W.E.B. DuBois. *Dusk of Dawn* and *The Souls of Black Folk*.

Cyprian Ekwensi. The grand old man of Nigerian letters. *Lokotown and other Stories* would be a good place to start.

D.O. Fagunwa. *The Forest of a Thousand Demons*. Translated by Wole Soyinka, no less.

Frantz Fanon. No one serious about Pan-Africanism can afford not to read *A Dying Colonialism*, *Toward the African Revolution*, and *The Wretched of the Earth*.

Paul Garon. *Blues and the Poetic Spirit*.

Eugene D. Genovese. *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* and *The World the Slaveholders Made*.

Nadine Gordimer. Take your pick.

J.H. Griffin. *Black Like Me*.

Wilson Harris. His writing in general, especially *The Guyana Quartet*, comprising *Palace of the Peacock*, *The Far Journey of Oudin*, *The Whole Armour*, and *The Secret Ladder*.

Melville J. Herskovits. *Life in a Haitian Valley*.

Langston Hughes. *Not without Laughter* (autobiographical) and *The Ways of White Folks* (short stories).

George Jackson. *Blood in my Eye*.

C.L.R. James. *The Black Jacobins* (the standard treatment of the revolution in Haiti); and *A History of Pan-African Revolt*.

James Weldon Johnson. *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. By the writer of "Life Every Voice and Sing", the national anthem of Afro-America.

John Oliver Killens. Just about anything by him. *The Cotillion* would be a good choice.

Frank Kofsky. *Black Nationalism and the Revolution in Music*.

Asare Konadu. *A Woman in her Prime*. About a strong African woman who faced things on her own terms.

George Lamming. *In the Castle of My Skin*.

Rupert Lewis. *Marcus Garvey, Anti-Colonial Champion*. The best book I have read about Garveyism.

Earl Lovelace. *The Dragon Can't Dance*, *Salt* and *The Wine of Astonishment*.

Claude McKay. *A Long Way from Home* and *My Green Hills of Jamaica*, in that order

Roger Mais. *Brother Man* and/or *The Hills were Joyful Together*.

Malcolm X. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. Simply indispensable.

Nelson Mandela. *No Easy Walk to Freedom*.

Dambudzo Marechera. *Black Sunlight* and *The House of Hunger*. After you read them it won't surprise you that he ended up killing himself.

Tony Martin. *The Pan-African Connection*. You have to read at least one book by Tony Martin, no way around it. This is a good beginning.

Ezekiel Mphahlele. *Down Second Avenue*.

Mbulelo Mzamane. *Suweto's Children*.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o. *Decolonising the Mind* and/or *Devil on the Cross*, among others. Difficult reading, but rewarding. Pretty well obligatory for anyone who is serious about Pan-Africanism.

Kwame Nkrumah. *Ghana*.

Oginga Odinga. *Not Yet Uhuru*.

Paul Oliver. *Blues Fell down this Morning*.

Sembène Ousmane. *Tribal Scars and Other Stories* and *Xala*. The movie version of the latter is recommended.

Joseph Owens. *Dread*. The best book I have read on Rastafarianism.

Ivar Oxaal. *Black Intellectuals Come to Power*.

Elsie Clews Parsons. *Folklore of the Antilles, French and English*.

Jean Price-Mars. *This is What Uncle Said*. A classic.

Saunders Redding. *The Lonesome Road*.

Walter Rodney. *The Groundings with My Brothers* and *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. Read the second one again after a year or two.

David R. Roediger. *The Wages of Whiteness*.

Jacques Roumain. *Masters of the Dew*.

Léopold Sédar Senghor. *Nocturnes*. The title in English may be different. He invented Negritude.

Ben Sidran. *Black Talk*.

Wole Soyinka. *The Interpreters*; and *Madmen and Specialists*. Plenty of others if you work up an appetite.

Wole Soyinka (ed.). *Poems of Black Africa*. This handy compendium came out in 1975. There are presumably equally good collections since then.

Eintou Pearl Springer. *Out of the Shadows*.

John Stewart. *Last Cool Days*.

William Still. *The Underground Rail Road*. Classic account of this righteous enterprise.

J.J. Thomas. *Froudacity*.

Ian Thomson. *Bonjour Blanc*. Excellent book about Haiti.

Amos Tutuola. Absolutely everything by this Nigerian genius is worthwhile. Start with *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* and don't look back.

Booker T. Washington. *Up from Slavery*.

Margaret Watts (ed.). *Washer Woman Hangs Her Poems in the Sun*.

Eric E. Williams. *Capitalism and Slavery*. Fortunately, this is about events before Williams was born, so he very well can't claim that he did it all by himself.

Richard Wright. *Black Boy*.

Sylvia Wynter. *The Hills of Hebron*.

Cultural Conjectures

A FEW PRETENTIOUS* NOTIONS ABOUT THE MOVIES ... UH, CINEMATIC ARTS,
TOO LONG-WINDED TO MASQUERADE AS APHORISMS

*Contentious, tendentious and sententious too.

Movies seem much more suited to austere, cold-temperate landscapes and peoples than tropical ones. Like wood engraving. And there's absolutely no sense in trying to show tropical people a black-and-white movie. They won't have it, unless they're terribly, self-consciously spanish, and maybe not even then. Still, I can appreciate many tropics-set movies, as long as there is not so much as a hint of soft focus.

I wonder if *Hamlet* is basically about watching an insider turn into an outsider. One thing is for sure; in Kenneth Branagh's Believe it or not, I can't for the life of me think what it was I wanted to say when I was interrupted, and it's insufferably arrogant to pretend that this scrap is worth reading. I'd tell you I now know what Coleridge felt like, but you'd just think I was kidding.

The credits to *Evita* say that Antonio Banderas played Che, but that isn't really right. He was the chorus, commenting on events and people. Like Nat King Cole in *Cat Ballou*, though not so explicitly. There is a beautiful bit of arrogance in that movie that you may not have noticed. The Antonio Banderas character is not named at any point, nor is there any suggestion that he is supposed to be Che, as far as I could tell. It just comes up off-handedly in the credits, the idea being that you're supposed to have heard so much about

this blockbuster that you knew in advance that he was Che.

The first *Godfather* is a real masterpiece, which I have watched many many times. *Part II* is also pretty good, though not nearly as tight, worth a few watches. And then there is *Part III*. When I saw it I wasn't aware of knowing anyone who had ever seen it. No wonder. It is an absolute piece of crap and must have been a real embarrassment to those who made it. I have never seen such a sharp argument against Hollywood's gutless sequel habit of recent decades. Can you imagine George C. Scott being persuaded to do a sequel?

Some american students were overnighting at my place a couple of years ago, and one of got to going through my movies. Finally, she pronounced judgement: I had a lot of "chick flicks". The expression was unfamiliar, so she explained that it means movies of a kind that appeal mainly to women. I was complimented by that. Come to think of it, the only guy movie (whatever the Americans call them) that really appeals to me is *The Wild Bunch*. Unless spaghetti westerns are definite guy movies as well.

The English Patient absolutely blew me away. It is the most engaging war movie I have ever seen, and possibly the first one to really draw my attention to North Africa. Especially Ralph Fiennes telling Kristin Scott Thomas about the various stormy winds of North Africa, the aizhezh (my spelling), the gybli, the harmattan and the saimun, which "was regarded as so evil that the natives declared war against it and went out to meet it in full battle dress."

I whole-heartedly advocate that people should name their kids after those natural events/processes that have a sort of institutional personality of their own. I would very much like to live among people with names such as Harmattan, Undertow, Tsunami, Erdbeben, Mudslide, Tai-feng, Sheet Lightning, Springtide and Heavy Sleet.

The Portrait of a Lady, too, blew, me, away. Like *Far From the Madding Crowd* combined with *A Doll's House*. The character of Gilbert Osmond (John Malkovich) was especially engaging. It took me a while to figure out that this is in fact the portrait of a paranoid.

On the other hand, the actor who played consumptive cousin Ralph Touchett seemed rather casual about his craft. He was supposed to be fading away, dying by inches over the course of three or four years, and yet he hardly looked different. If Robert de Niro had been playing that part, he would have gone without eating for a month. And Gérard Depardieu would have gone on a dissolute binge for a week and a half. You can only go so far with makeup and lighting.

Aside from the just implied examples of dedication to the craft, two others come to mind: a) Vanessa Redgrave getting her mouth beat up for *Playing for Time*, and b) Clark Gable doing his own stunts in *The Misfits*. The latter, so I'm told, shortened his life.

And the names in the credits. I was too lazy to pay close attention, but a few caught my fancy: Gethin Creagh, Lulu Zezza, Trin Din Sanh -- isn't it remarkable that, 20 years after that big surge of Vietnamese moving to the USA, they seem to have had no discernible impact on national life there? maybe this is a reflection on the kind of people who made that move -- and Barbara Raghianti. Even in american professional football the names aren't that cool.

Looking through lists of various people's favourite movies in two volumes of *The Book of Lists*, I have treated the preferences as ranked votes and so come up with a list of the 13 best movies up to about 20 years ago:

1. *The Battleship Potemkin**
2. *Citizen Kane**
3. *City Lights*
- 4/5. *The Bicycle Thieves*
- 4/5. *The Gold Rush*
- 6/7. *Greed*
- 6/7. *The Seven Samurai**
8. *The Rules of the Game*
9. *The Great Dictator**
- 10/11. *L'Avventura*
- 10/11. *The Best Years of Our Lives*
12. *Intolerance*
13. *The Godfather**

Asterisks indicate those that I can recall having seen.

The three most voluptuous scenes in the movies: a) the young centaur walks out of the stream in "Symphonie Pastorale" segment of *Fantasia*, b) the emporor kisses and fondles his wives under the big sheet in *The Last Emperor*, and, obviously c) the eating scene in *Tom Jones*.

Mailbag

A NEW UNCLE REMUS TALE UNCOVERED

Robert J. Throckmorton to CKS, 29 December 2000

(Forwarded from John Lewis)

Subject: History "revised"?

An amateur genealogical researcher discovered that his great-great uncle, Remus Starr, a fellow lacking in character, was hanged for horse stealing and train robbery in Montana in 1889. The only known photograph of Remus shows him standing on the gallows. On the back of the picture is this inscription: "Remus Starr; horse thief, sent to Montana Territorial Prison 1885, escaped 1887, robbed the Montana Flyer six times. Caught by Pinkerton detectives, convicted and hanged in 1889."

In a Family History subsequently written by his descendant, Remus's picture is cropped, scanned in as an enlarged image, and edited with image processing software so that all that's seen is a head shot. The accompanying biographical sketch is as follows: "Remus Starr was a famous cowboy in the Montana Territory. His business empire grew to include acquisition of valuable equestrian assets and intimate dealings with the Montana railroad. Beginning in 1883, he devoted several years of his life to service at a government facility, finally taking leave to resume his dealings with the railroad. In 1887, he was a key player in a vital investigation run by the renowned Pinkerton Detective Agency. In 1889, Remus passed away during an important civic function held in his honor

when the platform upon which he was standing collapsed."

CKS to RJT, 30 December 2000

Dear Rod,

Thanks very much for sending along the piece on the revision of history. However, it looks to me like the revisionist was much more interested in humor than deception. Even for those who don't know what's behind it, there are plenty of clues to tip one off that something is being twisted, especially the last remark. It puts me in mind of the prologue to Chaucer's Canterbury Tales. Reading it for the first time, and not knowing in advance what to expect, I felt this gradual growth of a paralyzing suspicion that Chaucer was trying to be funny, and by the end I thought the whole thing was a great panic. What the revisionist wrote about Uncle Remus is in much the same vein as what Chaucer wrote about the sea captain.

Yours in Word Indeed,

CKS

Cultural Conjectures

FIVE THINGS ABOUT WEST AFRICA

1. Fabulous fabrics

In the triangular trade that prevailed between Europe, the West Indies and West Africa in slavery times, the part that tends to get the least attention is from Europe to West Africa. On this leg of the journey, the ships carried mostly manufactures for sale in West Africa, including fabrics from the great Lancashire textile factories (the engine of the Industrial Revolution). This particular trade long baffled me. After all, how much of a market could there be in a tropical agricultural region for something as commonplace and expendable as English cloth?

Having been to West Africa, I now understand. Cotton cloth is not only physically far superior to the previously available bark cloth but -- and probably much more importantly -- the industrial cloth came in fabulous new colourfast patterns. Africans are wild for their bright, bold colours, and in even relatively small markets one sees sidewalk vendors with bolts of patterned cloth in profusion.

And people often dress up for even very ordinary situations. I once watched a woman walking to the village pump to do her laundry in a major traditional-style dress, complete with matching head-tie. Unfortunately, I had left my wits at home that day, so the following dialogue is imaginary:

"Excuse me, ma'am, but I couldn't help noticing that you are really decked out today. I am curious to know what the occasion is."

"Oh, I'm going to do my laundry."

"Really? But why are you all dressed up for such an everyday chore? Wouldn't you do better to save that stupendous dress for a special occasion?"

"Well, for one thing, I have this stupendous dress, as you put it, so how could I possibly bring myself not to wear it? And for another, my laundry is what I'm doing at this particular moment in my life, which makes it a special occasion."

"Mmm, yes, I see what you mean. Well, if you'll excuse me, I think I'll go home and

change, because I'm going to watch some bugs today, and I want to be properly attired for the occasion."

2. Volubility

I once heard a young Rastafarian haranguing a rather foolish old preacher on the subject of the Gospels. It was in Woodford Square in Trinidad, where people gather to debate, reason and generally shoot the breeze, and the old boy had drawn flak from various others on account of his fatuous religious theories. But, while the others had drawn attention to the contradictions in the Gospels, the Rasta brother had a much more fundamental objection. How could one possibly treat any scripture of first importance, he asked, when all scripture is merely the written word, and it is the spoken word that must have primacy?

This is very much an african attitude. One notices it co villages in the prominence of chanting and drumming (the latter being a way of talking, it seems to me). There is, so I am told, even a bantu word, "nommo" meaning "the power of the spoken word".

This love of the spoken word has its downside. West Africans are not good at coming to the point and then shutting up. In other words, it provides a fertile ground for bullshit artists. One sees this especially at conferences, and the Organization for African Unity has a well-deserved reputation as a hot-air balloon. This is not to deny that hot-air balloons sometimes get where they're going, but ... well, one needn't belabour the point.

3. Amazing asses

Oh yes, these are definitely in evidence here. I concern myself mainly with those of the feminine variety, as I can't really be bothered to pay much attention to guys' asses. Some african women look quite ordinary walking the other way, but there is certainly a rich harvest of bountiful tails with personalities of their own. And I'm not just talking about that stereotypical west-african ass that juts out so abruptly that you can set your beer down on it while the lady is standing there. No, there is a wonderful variety of shapes, all variously mobile, that fairly walk down the street declaiming "Hello dere."

4. Babies carried on the back

There are various ways of transporting babies, and this one has to be the most appealing, at least to the onlooker. There is a standard procedure, which I have watched many times, to wrap the baby in place (in a length of fabulous fabric, of course), and as far as I can tell it is always perfectly secure. And there the baby sits, comfortably bound to the mother's back, invisible from the front except for those darling little tootsies peeking around the sides.

5. Loads carried on the head

In Southeast Asia I have often watched people carrying things on their heads, but nowhere have I found it as prevalent as in West Africa. Market women always carry their loads on their heads, and the practice prevails in many other situations as well. This evidently become such a habit that people carry things on their head when there is no particular reason to do so. I once watched a girl walk with an ordinary little bowl of food on her head, her two hands free. The main advantage, however, is evidently not in keeping the hands free but in allowing transport of relatively heavy loads. A woman once

beckoned me to come over and help her lift her tray of bananas onto her head. I was amazed at how heavy it was, such that I couldn't even lift it that high without her help. And this was after she had already sold some and was moving to another spot.

Cultural Conjectures

ONE-WORD POEMS

Permit me to lay a confession before the tolerant folks of Anticland: I am deaf to poetry. Or almost so. Occasionally a poem reaches out and strums my lute, but for the most part you could read the stuff backwards to me and I wouldn't know the difference. It's a terrible thing, I know. I believe in the liberating enterprise of poetry and do not dispute that it is the highest form of language, but after years of struggle I must conclude that I can rarely make heads or tails of it.

Maybe it's a problem of attention span, as I have no trouble penetrating haiku, which must be the shortest of the standard poetic forms. And every now and then I encounter a one-word poem that speaks directly to the heart.

One such poem leaped out at me just the other week. I was on the rural bus that serves my village in Trinidad, waiting for the driver to crank it up and take us up the valley.

The driver got on and noticed that the clasp that holds the door open had come apart and needed some attention. A Rastafarian of my acquaintance stepped over to see about it, and after fiddling with the apparatus and fashioning a knot in some twine he got it to working. He stepped back, smiled at his handiwork and, in an intimate voice that was close to a whisper, pronounced judgement: "Nice-ness". That knocked me out. What more could one want in daily life than plenty of niceness?

It put me in mind of an incident in which my hero, Jean-Henri Fabre (1823-1915) was escorting a cabinet minister about his village in the south of France. The minister was addressed in the local provençal dialect by an elderly peasant woman, who ended her exhortation with "Pécaïre". I have forgotten what this means, but Fabre explained that it is a one-word poem of considerable emotional force.

In my youth in Ottawa, the boys had a comparably heartfelt expression that was really very funny, although I didn't realize it until much later. On several occasion, as an expression of awestruck admiration (e.g. when one of the boys showed us his very nifty new jackknife), one heard "Oh, s-e-e-e-x." I don't believe any of us knew at that time what "sex" meant. It was just something one uttered in the face of the marvelous.

Mailbag

To Allan W. Hook

Legon, Ghana

21.II.2001

Yo, McGurk --

Just arrived at the office after a really choice little breakfast. I decided on the way in that I could do with some palm wine, so I headed for a joint I know in a palm grove off the

main road. On the way I came upon a woman selling hard-cooked eggs, so I asked her to shell and bag me three. Did I want pepper on them? Oh yes, please. So she lacerated each egg with a spoon and inserted a dollop of the local hot sauce with bits of onion sliced into it. I tell you, old buddy, those three spicy eggs and a calabash of fresh palm wine made me feel like all was right with the world and I was absolutely the Lord's anointed.

But that's not really what this is all about. Rather, I want to report on my first genuine west-african mamagay. It had to happen sooner or later.

I went by the main post office in Accra yesterday to send a package, and while I was at it I figured to check out the philatelic section. I walked in the front door of that office to find that things were being changed, there was a counter all the way across the room, and a uniformed female woman who plainly took such things seriously informed me that I would have to go around to the other side of the building and come in through another entrance to that side of the office, which was right there in front of me. Yes, ma'am. So I ended up with some butterfly stamps for Mild Bill and myself.

Well, just as I was ready to leave and go back around, in comes this pleasant, florid old doll and gives me a large hello. In an undertone, so that the uniform wouldn't hear, I asked if she thought I should just jump over the counter and go out that way. The old doll laughed and said I couldn't possibly do that.

Well, you know me, that sounded like a challenge. So I jumped up to sit on the counter, swung my legs over, and jumped down on the other side, just like that. The uniform approached with "What the hell?" in her eyes, so I had to think fast. Grasping the old doll's hands across the counter, I quickly explained to the uniform that normally I wouldn't think to perpetrate such an outrage (a damn lie, this), but my fiancée had told me to do it, and I had to prove my love and devotion. Then, kissing the old doll's hands tenderly, I bade her farewell with a strict injunction to save herself for me. The old doll giggled, the uniform actually smiled, and I made my getaway. True story.

Um, yas,
CKS

MORE THINGS WITH NO GOOD REASON TO EXIST

I have earlier given my view of gift shops. Let us note four more things that ought not to exist: a) light beer, b) filtered cigarets, c) Perrier water, d) insurance companies.

The first three are too obvious for comment, but insurance companies are a bit trickier. They are a response to the insecurity of life under capitalism, so that insurance is something we need but shouldn't need. Stated another way, the conditions that make insurance companies a necessity are themselves neither necessary or permanent.

This point was impressed upon me early. One day in my childhood, my father was driving me through downtown Toronto. He pointed to a couple of massive, marble-fronted insurance buildings and asked "How does thee suppose they got to have those buildings?"

That may have been my first lesson in class consciousness. The old lad was more of an anarchist than a communist, but I learned a thing or two from him.