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Nicholas Howe: Across an Inland Sea

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C H A P T E R 1

Inland Sea: Buffalo and Beyond

At the start of the twentieth century, my mother's parents left Greece to settle in Buffalo, New York. Earlier in the Greek diaspora, they would have gone to another inland port, to Trebizond on the Black Sea or, most likely, to Alexandria on the Mediterranean. There were distant cousins on my grandmother's side who had settled there; as a young girl my mother met them in Athens where the family had gathered for a reunion in 1928. I sometimes wonder if these cousins knew of Cavafy when he lived in Alexandria and wrote his poems about coming home to Ithaca or waiting for barbarians at the end of things. I have no way of knowing, though, because we lost all trace of them long ago. They would not have been likely to approve of Cavafy; he was a poet, homosexual, anglophile, in short, an alienated native of the Levant rather than a loyal son of Hellas. And family gossip said that our cousins were provincial in ways that only those who live in the ruins of a great civilization can be, for they could always find in the past what they lacked in the present.

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Had my grandfather settled in Trebizond or Alexandria, this book about places persisting in memory might have been easier to write because those cities have the dusty glamour of old trade routes. But it was Buffalo where he settled, and brought my grandmother after they married, and thus I cannot trade on the romance of lost empire. Instead, I write about Buffalo from the late 1950s through the early 1990s when no travel writer would have put it on his trophy list. It might have earned a brief mention in an itinerary for Niagara Falls, and in that way perhaps have repeated my grandfather's experience. For a few years as a young man he drove a sightseeing bus from the Buffalo train station to the Falls. It was quick tourism before World War I: jump off a New York Central, see a wonder of the world, catch another train out.

Thirty-five years are a brief span in the life of a city but those from the late 1950s through the early 1990s marked a change in Buffalo. When I was growing up the Chamber of Commerce proclaimed "Boost Buffalo. It's good for you." As recently as the late seventies you could see these words on the sides of buildings, though the paint had faded and the offices inside were sometimes unoccupied. By then the city was learning to take pride in a more hard-boiled slogan, "Buffalo. City of No Illusions." Being a city of no illusions meant having a kind of weary dignity, a toughness that came from a large working-class population, bad winters, and a suspicion about more cosmopolitan parts of the state, especially New York City. Buffalo knew what it meant to be a city of casualty, a place that *Sports Illustrated* once called "The Armpit of the East." The journalist, as usual, got it wrong because Buffalo is not really a city of the eastern United States. It began to thrive only after it became the western terminus for the Erie Canal in the late 1820s. To

this day, it still feels more than superficially midwestern in its attitudes and tastes.

The city has this feel because, resting on the eastern edge of Lake Erie, it belongs to the inland waterways that give coherence to the center of the continent. Starting from Buffalo, you move west to Erie, Cleveland, Toledo, Detroit, Chicago, Milwaukee, Duluth. Along that network of lakes and rivers runs as well a shared cultural identity, for many who settled in these Rust Belt cities were immigrants in the 1840s and 1850s from Germany and then, in later decades, from Poland and elsewhere in Eastern Europe. Like other cities on the great midwestern lakes, Buffalo once took pride in its local beers: Simon Pure, Kochs, Iroquois, to name only three I drank as a teenager. They were cheaper than the national brands and certainly tasted no worse. Their neon signs dotted the small windows of the corner taverns that could be found in the city's older neighborhoods. Now that these breweries have gone out of business, the city has lost some of its flavor. The new microbreweries make better beer, but they are too decorous to splash their names in blue and red neon across the local bars where people gather after work or eat a fishfry on Friday evening.

From where I write in Columbus, it is six hours on the interstate to Buffalo: two hours northeast through Ohio, and the rest along the rim of Lake Erie past the outskirts of Cleveland through Pennsylvania and then into New York State. For this part of the trip you drive within a few miles of the lake. On the interstate, especially in Pennsylvania as it approaches New York, you ride high on the old escarpment and for a few miles look down, across acres of vineyard, to the hard blueness of the lake. For most of these four hours you cannot see the lake, though if you drive the route regularly you learn to feel its almost oceanic presence because

rain showers and snow squalls can blow off it with remarkable ferocity. More immediately, you realize after crossing the state line into New York that you are riding on what had once been the bed of the lake before it shrank to its current size. Driving that route, I came to feel the persistence of geography in life, especially as it gives form to memory. From those hours of driving toward Buffalo I learned how much that somber city had left its impress on me in ways that more inviting or glamorous places have never done and never will.

The somberness of the city had everything to do with its structures: huge factories to roll steel, tower after tower of elevators to store grain, lift bridges to give lakeboats access along the Buffalo River. The great buildings of its downtown date from a time when elegance, even modernity, meant a heavy solemnity, a lavish use of stone and tile to hide iron-work skeletons. These structures were put there to endure, and today some survive sadly without purpose. They stand against the lake and its hard weather with a kind of reassurance that more minimal buildings from late in the twentieth century cannot offer. Their heavy construction makes these turn-of-the-century buildings a nightmare for wreckers. So many of them remain because sometimes the best way to destroy is to abandon.

In winter when dusk comes early, there is never enough light in Buffalo. It has the heavy clouds typical of a city on the water. Summers in Buffalo are usually cool and sunny, but they have nothing to do with shaping the character of the place. It is the long soul-wearying grayness from late October through early April that defines the city. The snow does so as well, of course, but it falls unevenly over western New York. Towns a few miles to the south of Buffalo can dig out from two feet of snow while towns the same distance

to the north sweep away a light dusting. In the American imagination, Buffalo remains a snow capital because during one winter in each generation it suffers a massive storm that takes weeks to clear away. In flood regions, people point with pride to the high-water line on bridges or buildings; in Buffalo, they do the same with drifts that buried houses and filled underpasses.

It is the slag-gray clouds that weigh down on you for months and exhaust you during Buffalo winters. The sun when it appears seems watery and distant behind a thin glaze of cloud. In the older sections of the city, the houses are narrow and tall, typically two full stories and a usable attic. They were built close together with barely enough space between them for a single car to reach the garages in back. In these older neighborhoods, whether modest working-class or solidly upper-middle-class, the city has a cramped feel about it that has nothing to do with the constraints of topography. Only on the west side, with the lake and river, do natural boundaries press the city in on itself. No, the older houses in Buffalo cluster together to stand against the wind that blows, unbroken, across the lake from Canada. And the rooms in these houses, with their high windows and heavy woodwork, are dark. The houses have a quality of old-fashioned propriety in their darkness, of domestic life as the defining source of one's being.

In a city like Buffalo, life did not move into a public world except for church and tavern, and both are also defining and limiting in their sense of community. In the old areas, where no false piety separated church and tavern, neighborhood locals could be found on many street corners. They were usually quiet, clean, orderly. Dark booths and a few tables, a bar with blended whiskies and local draft beers, a small menu with beef on weck (the local hardroll dotted with rock

salt and caraway seeds) and a vinegar-laced German potato salad—these were places where families would come for a little cheer against the winter gloom. By no accident, one of the few good books about Buffalo, Verlyn Klinkenborg’s *The Last Fine Time*, is set in a tavern called “George & Eddie’s,” a place as unassuming as its name. Or, that once was as unassuming as its name; it’s gone now as is most of the old east-side Polish community where it was located. The Eddie of George & Eddie’s lived about half a mile from where I grew up in the suburbs, another one of those who left the old neighborhood for the comforts of a new house with a green backyard.

The artist who knew how to paint those grim Buffalo neighborhoods was Charles Burchfield, whose scenes of tall, narrow houses and wind-tormented trees have for Buffalonians an almost photographic realism. With their eerie vibrations, his paintings seem hallucinogenic only to those who have never spent a winter in Buffalo. His houses shimmer weirdly along their edges; verticals we know to be plumb and foursquare waver; houses and streets are set at disconcerting angles that make for a feeling of dislocation. His trees are more gnarled than any you can find in nature, their branches form haloes of light that give a feeling of unease. If Burchfield and Edward Hopper are often paired as American realists, their subjects are different. Hopper captures those moments when people seem overwhelmed by the emptiness of the cityscape. Burchfield paints the psychic disturbance one senses in the city itself; his buildings vibrate with the unseen, unexpressed emotions of those who live within them. Looking at his scenes of Buffalo, at such paintings as *Ice Glare* or *Sulphurous Evening*, one feels the waves of repression that emanate from his houses. These are not places where happy people live. They are the houses of those who

maintain outward appearances and who know that things inside have gotten terribly twisted.

This spookiness fills the houses in his famous *Promenade*, but to see it you have to look past the episode he paints on the sidewalk of a fat woman with a little dog being followed by a pack of big dogs. The painting seems comic, but turns ominous because the houses in the scene refuse to be merely picturesque. The elegiac Burchfield is less, however, the painter of city neighborhoods or backyards filled with massive trees than the recorder of urban industry in works with austere titles like *Ice-Bound Lake Boats*, *Freight Cars Under a Bridge*, or *Black Iron*, a meticulous rendering of a railroad lift bridge on a heavy overcast day in fall. In a work of 1929, Burchfield seems to predict the fate of industrial Buffalo by painting a pile of old boilers, gearworks, and pipes as *Still Life—Scrap Iron*. Burchfield's industrial paintings seem elegiac because of all that happened to the city since he did them: its decline, its loss of a center, its hard years of layoffs and canceled dreams. Or perhaps that decline is why I look at his paintings with the conviction that through some detail they might teach me to understand why the city changed so fundamentally.

The city's original reason for being, its place on the map, came from the confluence of the Buffalo River into the Niagara River as it flowed from Lake Erie to Lake Ontario. Travel by water turned Buffalo into the eastern edge of the American midwest. The neighborhood near Buffalo Harbor remembers the regions on the far side of the lake and beyond with streets named Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Mississippi. As an inland port, Buffalo lost its being after the St. Lawrence Seaway opened in the late 1950s. Once ocean-going freighters could move through the Great Lakes to unload their cargoes and then reload with grain or ore, Buffalo

no longer served as a center for transshipment between lake-boats and freightcars. The trainyards that sprawl across the southern parts of Buffalo belong to a lost city. But once, in the war year of 1943 when food was as vital as munitions, Buffalo shipped more grain in a single year than any other harbor ever did in history. The city, as family stories told, had not always been a backwater.

During the 1960s and early 1970s, Buffalo became a monument to the passing of the high-industrial age. Its mills and elevators remained intact but lost much of their utility and seemed to offer no possibilities for reuse. For a time the city had known scale, energy, sweat. It had been a place of transformation where grain was milled into flour and breakfast cereal, where iron ore and coke were smelted to steel for carframes and bridge girders. It was a city that knew the basic elements of life, that dealt in the changes worked by fire and water. So how had it been left to die? How had it become a monument to ways of living that no one cared about anymore?

These questions came too late, after those I might have asked had died. There were some answers that did not require family knowledge. Buffalo was part of the decline of the industrial heartland into Rust Belt; it was hit like other cities on this inland sea by rises in energy prices, labor costs, and racial unrest; it was, more uniquely, made anachronistic by changes in transportation patterns. These are all necessary explanations and others might be added. But none help me to discover what it was like to have lived through this decline. What did it mean to feel the city's life drift elsewhere, to know almost imperceptibly over time the withering of a city's identity? What did it mean to grow old in that city as it also aged and slipped into memory?

My ghosts of Buffalo come from the city's majesty before the 1950s. I want to recover that city and find my family's time in it; I want place to be a means to locate what has been lost in our lives. In classical Greek, the rhetorical patterns in stories are called *topoi* and are related etymologically to *topography*: these patterns provide the terrain of stories. In turn, stories can be a way of mapping the geography of a place. Memory is the quality of place that explains its hold on us; observation must be another because it can reveal the deceptions of memory. What holds them together is the shared meaning of stories: those we bring to a place and those we create about it. And most of our stories about place have more or less to do with the treacheries of time.

The stories of place that I heard as a child were complicated further by being always about two places at the same moment. Nothing my grandparents told me about their early years in Buffalo was just about Buffalo. Their stories were immigrants' stories, and they held Greece in their imagination as well. Stories were about times and places; they were told to make sense of the rent in their experience between their lives in an American city and their past in villages of the Peloponnesus. Unlike immigrants from other parts of Europe, my grandparents were able to visit Greece regularly. With that movement back and forth came a renewal of stories, a deeper sense that connections between places were never set in fixed form but were always fluid. Living as they did, they could never have a single sense of place but instead told their stories from shifting perspectives and moments.

In the late 1970s, I would go home to Buffalo from New York City by train. The line was Amtrak, not the New York Central, but the route was the same as it had been for gener-

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ations because it followed the lay of the land. Running straight north from the city on the eastern bank of the Hudson you would gaze for two hours or so at nineteenth-century bracketed houses in the near foreground and at the Catskills in the distance across the river. At certain moments, sometimes even for long stretches, the view from the train was as it would have been in the 1870s because nothing of our time was visible. Then suddenly there would be huge gravel pits and cement factories scarring the far bank, nuclear power plants, diesel tugs with strings of river barges, the occasional powerboat breaking a crest. At Albany, as the train crossed the river, you caught a glimpse of the state capitol, and then began the most haunted stage of the trip through the Mohawk River Valley, past old towns like Amsterdam and Herkimer with three-story brick factories and hulking water towers. In the valley, the train ran parallel to the remains of the Erie Canal, past cut-stone locks built foursquare into hillsides and modest houses for lockkeepers. By Syracuse, the landscape gave out to flat stretches but in winter, as I was going home for Christmas, the change hardly mattered because by then it would have grown dark in the heavy, closed-down way it gets dark in upstate New York. For the last two hours the train would run west to Buffalo through one-street villages where at night all you could see was a level-grade crossing and a tavern with neon signs for Genesee beer.

That run through New York State was a long and gentle way to reenter home; it gave me hours to read and smoke, to close for a time the ever-widening distance that seemed to be growing between my life in New York and my past in Buffalo. I didn't then have the strength to make the trip home by plane in an hour; there was too much to think through and clear away. I would often dream during that

trip about my grandfather riding the train in the 1920s after his law practice grew beyond the confines of Buffalo, or of my mother taking it in the 1940s when she left for graduate school at Columbia. For much of the trip, especially in the winter evening, there was nothing visible that would not have been there for them to have seen decades before. To go home to Buffalo as they had gone home seemed a way to connect with them. A drink or two in the bar car would help, especially because on the last stage of the trip after Rochester there were very few people aboard. It was quiet and one could think. At such moments, I tried to write a short story in my head about a man who loved that terrain, who knew it was the blood of his life. All that made him exceptional was his knowledge that he was linked to the soil and sky of western New York. I never wrote the story; it was no more than a mood one might have looking out a train window. It would have been called "The Landscape Artist."

Coming into Buffalo, the red-white-and-blue Amtrak train would pass through the old yards left over from the city's days as a center of transshipment, when it was second only to Chicago in its rail capacity. At the edge of those yards, standing alone, was the passenger station; located in the residential east side on Paderewski Drive, it was surprisingly far from downtown. This imperial edifice, to use a necessarily pompous phrase, was built in 1929. Its twenty-story office tower in Art Deco style was meant to balance the city hall some three miles away across the skyline. The station seemed grander for being in the midst of the modest frame houses and parish churches of the old Polish neighborhood. Now, that station tower looms over the city like an obelisk commemorating some victory in a long-forgotten war. It remains, but nobody quite knows why it was built in the first place. The station, as the stories agree, had been set far from

downtown at the demand of the New York Central, which did not want its express trains between New York and Chicago delayed by entry into the heart of Buffalo. At the edge of the city, the station could receive the Twentieth-Century Limited for a moment before it would head south along the escarpment of Lake Erie or east across the fields of upstate New York. The city's place was calibrated precisely: it rated a stop by the fastest trains, but only for a moment, and only on its periphery.

By the late seventies, three or four Amtrak trains a day would move through the station. That they stopped on the edge of the city seemed absurd because the fast trains had been gone for generations. No one taking a train to Buffalo in the 1970s was worried about speed. The passengers had time to kill or needed that time to get ready for coming home. Once off the train in Buffalo, you walked up the stairs from the platform to a walkway that led into the great waiting room of the station. There under a soaring Italianate vaulted ceiling of tile stood bank after bank of oak benches set back to back. They filled the room and could hold hundreds of people. They were empty now, dusty and dull because no one sat on them and polished their wood to a warm glow. Beyond the waiting room was a grand concourse that once held shops of all sorts: jeweler, clothier, florist, restaurant. They were gone, leaving behind only their signs. A newsstand and a small lunch counter for coffee and hot dogs were still open. All that ran through the space were the echoing sounds of passengers crowding the front curb where family and friends were waiting in cars.

In its emptiness, this space had the beauty of heartache. It should have been swarming with noise and motion, with people as jazzed as the great express trains that once waited below, impatient to head off at speed. The building was in-

tact but a ruin—its time had passed and there was nothing to do with it so far from downtown. Waiting for me at the end of my trip, perched on one of the oak benches as she had years before in her youth, was my mother. The first few times she met me there she would tell her stories about taking the train from New York during World War II when, a beautiful young woman, she was surrounded by GIs on the move. She would always say that in those years the waiting room was so full that people sat on the floor and lined up by the dozens to get a sandwich and coffee. And then she would talk about the building, pointing especially to the details of its vaulted ceiling, and appreciating them with her art-historian's eye. I know now that she gave these impromptu lectures to distract herself from the pain she felt at seeing this building in her beloved city standing on the edge of abandonment.

My mother came back to Buffalo after a divorce in the early 1960s because she wanted to give us the protection of her family, and that protection was tied in subtle, unbroken ways to the solace of place. Whatever happened, she seemed to think, my sister and I would grow up safely if we were living in her city. Now, almost ten years after her death, I can only think of her in Buffalo. Placing her there, I understand her romantic character, her particular mixture of will and melancholy. She had wanted as a young woman to leave for the big city, like the hero of a nineteenth-century novel, and went to New York to get her Ph.D. at Columbia in Classics and Archaeology under émigré German scholars. That decision meant disappointing her father, who above all wanted her to marry a well-connected Greek-American, perhaps a son of one of his fellow immigrants who had made good. She married instead a poor Jewish socialist, a man who was in all ways unimaginable to her father. Both my parents

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were children of immigrants, both knew their parents' stories of dislocation. In ways neither ever expressed to me, that must have been part of their life together. The years of their marriage, spent first in New York and then in Boston, now seem to me an interlude in her life, a respite from the hold Buffalo held over her. Through some destiny her character made for her, she had to go home to that city, to live among the same streets and walk along the river she had known as a girl. That eased the pain of dislocation for her.

The last time I took the train to Buffalo, I waited at the station for my mother for more than half an hour. Worried by her absence—she who was always punctual—I could not conceive of why she was not there. And then she did come, agitated and a bit disoriented. She had heard that Amtrak was closing the old station and opening a new one near her house in the suburbs. So she had gone there to meet me but found it was only a construction site where she had almost gotten her car stuck in the mud. She was caught painfully between two maps of the city: one that she knew from her youth and one that was being redrafted by the city's sprawl. We both knew then there would be no reason for me to take the train to Buffalo when it meant getting off at a prefab metal building far from downtown.

The old station on Paderewski Drive had a large bronze statue of a buffalo that greeted passengers on their entry. It was a wonderfully literal sign of place, one that went with the character of the city: straightforward, unornamented, a bit slow but capable of great power when needed. In his story "I am Dying, Egypt, Dying," John Updike has a character remember this statue as he, far from his home in Buffalo, suffers a middle-aged encounter with despair on a tourist boat on the Nile. From one monument of place to another, Updike seems to imply, we measure out the crises in our lives.

In a memory I alone seem to have, this statue of a buffalo was displayed in the main terminal of the Buffalo International Airport where it greeted passengers of a later era. I have since looked for the statue there but have not found it. Friends tell me they do not remember that it was ever in the airport, though a replica of the original was recently placed on the suburban campus of the University at Buffalo. In a fragmented city, that may well be the only public space where anyone can come and go. But that buffalo no longer greets anyone entering the city as a sign of the place.

Of the hundreds of family photographs I inherited after my mother's death, one has held me with a steady fascination. This photograph—a black and white kodak “snap,” undated, its surface emulsion cracked—shows my grandmother Urania Phillis standing outside the house in Buffalo where the family lived for over forty years and where my mother Thalia grew up. The season is winter, with a barely cleared street and sidewalk visible, and perhaps two feet of snow on the ground. The powerful elms along the sidewalks are bare but enough of their branches are visible to show they would arch the streets with shade in spring and summer. My grandmother wears a dark coat and hat, her hands are folded across her front, she looks straight at the camera perhaps twenty feet away. Her feet are hidden by a small mound of snow but she must be wearing arctics. She smiles and holds herself with the posture of a well-bred woman who grew up in another country late in the nineteenth century. Behind her, on the far side of the cross street, a man stands with his right foot off the ground as if to shake snow from his galoshes. Like my grandmother, this stranger wears the clothes that prevail in cold places for generations, unchanged by fashion.

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There are no cars visible in the photo. The houses were built perhaps thirty years before my grandparents moved to the corner of Hodge and Ashland in 1917. There is nothing in the scene to date the photo. My grandmother's face is visible but with insufficient detail to help me calculate her age. And, like other women in the family, she had the gift of seeming younger than she was. I would guess it's the late twenties, perhaps the early thirties. On the back of the photo, my aunt Katherine has written in English, "This is mama." And then, in a beautifully clear hand, has added in a Greek that a friend translated for me: "Do you remember when we took it? This is how much snow we have now. Tonight it is snowing a lot." That message suggests the photo was meant for a relative or family friend who had visited Buffalo earlier that winter. And then, for some reason, it was never mailed.

There is nothing remarkable about the photo. I stare at it, though, because it sets my grandmother in the city where she lived for more than sixty years. What it shows might have been any winter over those years, any number of just-fallen snows. There is no story here, not even a memorable moment or episode that might in family tradition have become a story. There is only a woman standing on the sidewalk next to her house, as she did every winter until she and her husband moved to the suburbs around 1950. What endures for me in this photograph is the presence of place, the reminder that my grandmother spent much of her life in that narrow gray house at the corner of Hodge and Ashland. It matters as well that she and my grandfather left that house before I was born, though it remained their property until they both died in 1971. I remember being in it only once, when my mother and I cleaned out the attic before putting it up for sale. There was not much left, only a few

bound volumes of *National Geographic* and some odd bits and pieces of clothing. It took very little time to gather what was left into the trash.

This house still holds most of the family stories I know. The elm trees along Ashland and Hodge are long gone to disease but otherwise the scene would look much the same now in winter as it did seventy years ago when my grandmother posed for the camera. To this day, you can see the initials “EP” my uncle Eustace Phillies carved into the brick of the building next door. The neighborhood went down a bit in the 1960s but now has come back to the comfortable solidity it knew years ago. When I would visit my mother in Buffalo and we would find ourselves downtown on family business at the lawyer’s office or bank, we would drive by the house on Hodge Avenue to see how it looked. No longer ours, it remained in the family by the right of prior occupancy.

I visited the house on Hodge Avenue two days after my mother died in 1993. She lived then far from downtown Buffalo in a suburb beyond the new university campus. That was no place to grieve for her, no place to hold the duration of her life. So we went, my sister and I and a few others in our early forties, to eat dinner and talk about her in a restaurant around the corner from where she had grown up. When she lived on Hodge Avenue, the building had been a German delicatessen where the family bought cold cuts and potato salad for Sunday night supper. Now it was an elegantly minimalist Italian restaurant with the improbable name of “BFLO Rome.”

For the space of that dinner, the three generations of the family—almost a century’s worth by then—could be held together in memory by stories because for one last time those who remained were set in a common place. But the

fact is, the stories had begun to disappear long before that evening, once those of my generation left Buffalo to live elsewhere. For one can carry away only so many stories of home before they take on the sour taste of nostalgia. Nor does telling them to strangers revive the stories. It can only preserve them, as in a memoir, and preservation is not my interest. Rather, thinking about these family stories allows me to think about their setting, the sense of place that en-folds them and survives at least in part their disappearance.

The endurance of place haunts all the stories I remember about Buffalo. All of the ways I write about places in this book begin in the stories I grew up hearing about this city on the eastern shore of an inland sea. Buffalo, Queen City of the Great Lakes. The title has an old fashioned sound to it that suggests fixed ways. Cities are female because, like Rome, they must be maternal; and the lakes are great because, like everything else in nineteenth-century America, their scale demanded excess. Now, when other cities call themselves “world-class” or “cosmopolitan” or “multicultural,” there is a faded and honorably provincial tone to this forgotten title for Buffalo.

This faded tone is the only true one for writing about the Buffalo I remember. Growing up there taught me an affection for cities and places that had been left behind. Or, more exactly, for those corners in cities that seemed to hold almost intact the ways of earlier generations. There was a sense as you traveled through neighborhoods in Buffalo that you were moving across different decades because each section retained the time of its construction. This sense that different eras were fossilized each in its own area of the city had much to do with Buffalo’s lack of economic prosperity. Not unhappily it also meant that such masterpieces as Louis Sullivan’s Prudential Building or D.H. Burnham’s Ellicott

Square Building, both dating from 1895–96, were never torn down in some benighted campaign of urban renewal. There was never the need or the means to rebuild downtown Buffalo in a systematic way. A few old buildings were torn down, some new structures went up, almost all of them for banking or government, but they did not threaten the older ones around them. There simply was never enough money in Buffalo for that to happen. They showed the workings of time, those faded monumental buildings from the 1890s, and they colored the way you learned to look at everything around them.

As she had asked, we scattered my mother's remains into the Niagara River as it flows north from the city of Buffalo toward Niagara Falls. There, standing on a breakwater she had walked since her childhood, my sister and I along with our spouses tossed handfuls of gritty ash and bone into the river. It was a walk she loved because there the river ran dangerously fast and deep, and seemed for her the place where in her inland life she could dream most vividly of elsewhere. In the years before she died, she took to going back to the breakwater where she would walk and remember a city that she had known in the 1920s and 1930s but that had changed almost beyond her ability to recognize and accept. The walk along the breakwater remained, but the inland port downriver was passing. Many of the grain elevators were empty and the steel mills south of the city no longer burned red through the night.

Stubbornly, my mother kept her safe-deposit box in a grand, beautifully-domed bank, far from where she lived, so that she would have some reason to go downtown from time to time. The box had been her mother's before her, and in the last years of her life it was listed under my name and my

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sister's. When the time came to empty it, to close out the family's connection with that bank, and the city as well, there was very little to take away. Some insurance policies, a list of serial numbers, a few pieces of unworn jewelry. For thirty years and more there had been no reason to keep a safe-deposit box in that bank, except of course for the only one that mattered to my mother. Each time she went there she quietly visited with the ghosts of her city. That was the treasure she most cherished in her romantic soul and, in ways I only understand as I write these sentences, the richest inheritance she could leave to me. For part of each visit I made back to Buffalo as she grew older was to go to that safe-deposit box to add or remove papers as needed. The errand was her way to guide me through the city she had known when she was growing up and to which she returned in her forties with my sister and me.

Working my way back to stories from my childhood in Buffalo, I realize that most have slipped away as old stories usually do. But the process is not simply one of forgetting. Some were no more than a flash in memory: my mother reminiscing about lying in bed on a summer night and hearing the sound of gunfire on the Niagara River as Treasury agents chased rumrunners crossing over from Fort Erie, Ontario, during Prohibition. Other of these stories would take a lifetime of archaeology to reconstruct: my grandfather discoursing on the ways in which as an attorney he was free to practice within the Greek community, but met great prejudice from the legal establishment when he became the best industrial negligence lawyer in the city. That was a busy practice, for Buffalo was full of dangerous mills and factories, and with badly trained immigrant workers who had been given the dirty jobs to do. He sued on behalf of maimed and

burned workers, slipping into the accents of an immigrant's English when pleading to a jury of fellow immigrants, and he felt a sense of the newcomer's triumph when he forced the insurance companies to settle cases. He knew enough about the dynamics of class in America to keep his offices in the best building in Buffalo: he loved having the top-floor corner of the Ellicott Square Building with its view of Lake Erie. Every morning he stopped in the florist's shop in the lobby for his boutonniere. Elegance mattered for a lawyer who made his living in a working-class city by suing corporations.

I resist going further because I know that soon I will move from remembering to inventing. As he meditated on accounts he had read of Atlantis, Montaigne said, "We need topographers to give us exact descriptions of the places where they have been." Such topographers should speak only of what they know directly. His caution seems especially necessary when writing about lost continents that have faded to the edges of memory. Most of my Buffalo stories have faded in that way because I never knew the city where they were set. Most of the city that mattered in the telling of these family stories was in one way or another off-limits to me: the ghetto that burned in the race riots of 1967, and also the white working-class neighborhoods of Black Rock and South Buffalo, as well as the few surviving enclaves of WASP privilege in quiet streets off Delaware Park. My Buffalo was that of a suburban child, one distanced from the city but without a center of his own.

We went downtown to Memorial Auditorium to watch the local Catholic colleges—Canisius, St. Bonaventure, Niagara—play basketball, or to War Memorial Stadium to see the Bisons play AAA baseball when the International League lived up to its name. The "Rockpile," as this stadium

was known, is gone now but it survived long enough to be the setting for 1920s baseball as depicted in the film version of *The Natural*. Even as a kid I knew those places were old and shabby, but that was part of their charm. They were memorials for things past, as their names said, and they did not heed the suburban imperative that made easy parking the important thing in life. These were places where tough, undertalented athletes tried to make it. They rarely did, but the city loved them all the more for their slowness or their lack of grace. All it asked was that they play hurt and bleeding, that they remember they were lucky not to be working graveyard at Bethlehem Steel or Hooker Chemical.

We also went downtown to Kleinhans Music Hall for the Tuesday night chamber music series when the Budapest String Quartet played, or to the Albright-Knox Art Gallery for its collection of late-nineteenth- and twentieth-century art. It became something of a family joke to take out-of-town visitors to the gallery where they expected to see a few minor pieces by overrated artists that the provincials wanted to show off as masterpieces. When they saw instead a long wall of paintings familiar to them from textbooks—Gauguin's *Yellow Christ* and *Spirit of the Dead Watching*, to name only two—they would mumble apologies about their mistaken expectations. At such moments, I learned what it meant to be growing up in a city that outsiders would call, in a gesture of politeness, provincial.

The collection of that gallery is one of the most durable memories I have of Buffalo as a place. I spent many hours there with my mother and her students as they worked their way from the early Impressionists to the latest Op Art. Now, years later, when I go to a show of a major twentieth-century artist I expect sooner or later to find a work I know from Buffalo. That collection has become for me a movable feast

of the place, one that stands for the complexity of the city. It matters as well where I see this piece on loan from Buffalo displayed—in New York or Paris or some other world-class city—for that experience of dislocation enriches my memories of having lived on an inland sea.

For all that I grew up in Buffalo hearing its stories, I did not live in the place of those stories; the connections between the stories and the place were drawn very thin by time. Growing up in a place means that you know it and yet don't, that your knowledge of the place means an intimacy with scene, landscape, people, and also an ignorance of scene, landscape, people. The native's knowledge is partial and biased in ways that the scholar's, for example, should not be. It affects my sense of Buffalo that I am ignorant about certain neighborhoods and certain stories. It alters my sense of the place that I know about the community of working-class lesbians who lived in Buffalo through the 1950s only because Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis published a fine book in 1993 called *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*. Yet this book is so true to the larger place where these women lived that it also becomes a book about Buffalo as a city.

It also matters to this chronicle that my sense of Buffalo is frozen in a set time—like a slice of tissue prepared for biopsy—from the late 1950s to 1993, when my mother died and my vital connection to the place lapsed. That time in Buffalo is the most immutable experience of my life but it was brief: from the age of eleven to seventeen, from sixth grade until my departure for college in Toronto. The city shaped me with its stubborn, unshiftable gravity: the place had weight. Perhaps it was dying of its own weight in the American landscape but there was nothing flimsy or wind-blown about it. The city was already in its decline in those

years from 1964 to 1970, though its grayest time was yet to come. Still, it was populated by those who had grown up and thrived in the years when it was the capital port on the great inland sea of North America.

Of the port of Buffalo, I remember best the twice-yearly stories on the local TV news about the last ship to leave in the fall before ice closed the harbor and the first to arrive in spring after icebreakers opened the way. There would be an occasional story of some forlorn freighter from Taiwan or Panama that got iced in because it had waited too long to leave. Its crew, or at least some of them, would spend a lonely winter in Buffalo keeping their ship safe and growing crazy from boredom. The local community feeding them dinner at Christmas always made a good human-interest story in the *Buffalo Evening News* or *Courier Express*.

During the 1960s Lake Erie was dying a slow death from the waste that washed into it from the American heartland. I knew the lake was sick precisely because I could not know it as my mother and her generation had known it. We did not take the lakeboat *Canadiana* to the amusement park at Crystal Beach, nor did we swim off Windmill Point in Ontario. And we certainly did not eat the whitefish that had been a Friday night staple across Catholic Buffalo for decades. In the late twentieth century, inland seas are fated to become holding tanks for run-off from the surrounding regions: river silt, excess fertilizer, discharged sewage, chemical pollution, family stories. In his brilliant *Black Sea*, Neal Ascherson describes a body of water dying from the bottom up as it loses the oxygen necessary for survival. These inland seas and their great trading cities have in our time reverted to backwaters where things slip away into obscurity. The Black Sea fleet of the Soviet Union rusts in the dockyards of Odessa, just as a few forlorn naval vessels are anchored

in Buffalo Harbor as a tourist attraction. These seagoing vessels of World War II vintage reached Buffalo through the opening of the St. Lawrence Seaway. They seem a sad return to the city for the opening of its harbor to the high seas.

There was very little rooted or sustaining about Buffalo as a place during my years there because I saw the city changing around my mother in ways that she could recognize but never fully absorb. The betrayal of place is that we ask it to remain constant and yet it too must change utterly. The continuity that she knew in Buffalo then was more and more a continuity of shadows: buildings remembered that no longer existed, the dead as they walked the streets where memory found them, the lake as it grew foul and polluted. Cities on inland seas are places where life lingers on too long in the old ways.

Writing about Buffalo becomes a way to see the subject of place through the filter of family memory: it becomes a way to consider place as a measure of broken continuity as generations pass and die off, but also as the site itself changes. Places, if they are to counter the betrayals of time, should have a reassuring solidity to them. We speak of things being set in place, of things fixed, rooted, connected. To think about place should be easier than to think about time because the first can be located in palpable ways, while the second is present only through the indirection of measurement. Stories, family sayings, chronicles: such are the ways time registers in place.

There are questions about place that travel writers cannot ask because they work by passing through in search of the immediate and colorful. They need to find vivid or memorable anecdotes to keep drowsy readers awake. They rarely remain behind to write chronicles of decline. Perhaps it is all forms of chronicle, all narratives of human beings

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set in place over time, that elude travel writers. Their accounts are about movement, curiosity, change. These writers have always one great advantage: when life becomes unpleasant or boring, they can move on to somewhere else. Alert readers always know that the travel writer has already moved on, to that place where the book in their hands was written. An account of living in a place cannot have this same escape; its writer is always returning, trying to find a way back to the place known earlier in life, and left behind for other sites.

This search for the “heart’s field,” to use Eudora Welty’s phrase for the desired place, has nothing at all to do with the old cliché that you can’t go home again. American life and American books are in fact condemned to that particular story. No, it is that one never does finally leave home. Years can pass spent in different sites, one’s being shifts along the gravity of time; but some memory, if only a faint smear, remains of where one first knew what it might mean to have a sense of place, even a deep attachment to place. Sometimes the writer’s return to where memory took its setting can seem an act of obliteration, an attempt to level what remains, to plow it under and then to salt the earth. These accounts of place, often written from a far distance, begin in loathing yet often end in elegy. Think of James Joyce in *Ulysses* remembering Dublin from Trieste, another inland port that fell on hard times.

The last birthday present my mother gave me was two images of Buffalo: an undated nineteenth-century engraving of the Erie Canal Basin with a grain elevator in the background and an old man fishing in the foreground; and a cover from the July 1951 issue of *Fortune* showing a montage of grain elevators and lakeboats above the title “Made in

Buffalo.” Perhaps seventy-five years separate these two images but they tell the same story about the city and its sources of wealth and power, a story I came too late to see for myself. Reading that *Fortune* article in the microfilm room of my library, I discovered it was twelve pages of slick industrial photography celebrating Buffalo as a shrine to the myth of the machine. The boys at the Buffalo Chamber of Commerce must have loved the article when it appeared, for it boosted the city for every businessman in America to see. And, for reasons they—or, more likely, their children—would come to regret, readers in Buffalo probably believed every word of it in 1951.

The images in the article were by then the clichés of the genre: photos that showed industrial power with huge machines and few workers. The text carries conviction even today because it begins with the facts of geography: “Within 500 miles [of Buffalo] are located seven of the eight biggest U.S. market cities, nearly half the U.S. population, 70 per cent of Canada’s.” The geography is 1951, before America’s market cities moved west and south. So too the article’s politics date from that time: “Predominantly Catholic, Buffalo labor is probably the most highly organized in the U.S. It is also anti-Red and often votes Republican.” Turning the pages and identifying the corporations pictured in these photos was like taking a drive through the industrial cityscape of my childhood: the grain companies, Bethlehem Steel, American Brass, Wurlitzer, American Machine and Foundry, Buffalo Forge, Chevrolet, Harrison Radiator, Westinghouse, and a few specialty craft firms like Kittinger Furniture and Birge Wallpaper, where Charles Burchfield worked as a designer. *Fortune* loved this city of 200,000 industrial workers who made everything from “pig iron to pretzel blenders.” It even got off a joke that fixes the article in

its moment, and would be unthinkable today, by saying that one Buffalo company's six-ton guided bombs were "big hits in Korea."

Forty-five years and more after the fact, this article reads as a map for a lost city because so many of the sites it celebrates have slipped away. Read in a different way, the article maps another lost Buffalo, a city that never came to happen. For it notes as well that in 1946 Curtiss Wright closed its aircraft factories in the city and left 36,000 people out of work. That was an act of postwar downsizing, of closing democracy's arsenal, but that *Fortune* article added another, more troubling sentence: "Partly because Buffalo's skilled-labor reserve is growing thin, Bell is moving its helicopter division to Texas." On the screen of a microfilm reader in 1997, that simple statement was the answer I was searching for about the city, for that throwaway line from 1951 about a gimmick—a whirlybird—explained the decline of Buffalo. It was not that the city had lacked hi-tech industries, such as aircraft, but that it could not keep them when they, instead of pig iron and pretzel blenders, would become the thriving heavy manufacturers of America. The city did not start its decline in the seventies, as had always seemed the case, but rather in the late forties and early fifties, when it lost its aircraft factories. There were only three years between 1943, when Buffalo shipped more grain than any other port in history, and 1946, when its future went south. In retrospect, the city was a victim of war or, more exactly, of the peace. Either way, that celebration of Buffalo in the bible of American capitalism got its future right, that is, if you read the subtext and ignored the photographs.

Writing about Buffalo is a form of industrial archaeology. The gloomy, forbidding structures of my visits home as an adult spoke of a lost city that had faded away almost without

being noticed by old residents. Yet even in abandonment these mills and elevators, these warehouses and trainyards remembered power and energy. The gentrified or new parts of the city that Buffalonians bragged about were, by contrast, on a far diminished scale: a lovely park on the harbor's edge with an expensive marina, a charming downtown theater district amid urban blight. These new sites, though, gave no clues for understanding the past of the city. That pursuit would require, in the absence of hard evidence, finding a metaphor that could hold all of the city's forms and moments in one telling phrase. That, in turn, came to me in Columbus as I read a brilliant study of industrial architecture in its glory years (1900–25) by the émigré Englishman Reyner Banham. His book bore the curious title *A Concrete Atlantis* and offered the most compelling vision of Buffalo I found in any text: it enabled me to imagine that the place was a lost city, built in the wonder material of the turn of the twentieth century, and submerged beneath a sea of history. But unlike Plato's Atlantis, or even the more skeptical Montaigne's, this site on the shore of Lake Erie would never become a mythic place in our lives, a site that demanded quest and invention, that compelled travelers to risk their lives to find it. This Atlantis was instead a site to mark that stage of American life that had passed so painfully we could only mock its ruins, with punning bad faith, as the Rust Belt.

Metaphor verges on bad faith if, through its brilliance, it pulls one's attention away from the object in question. If Buffalo were truly a concrete Atlantis, then there would be other accounts of it for me to read, other quest narratives and claims of discovery to help me make my return. But there are none. So I must decline Banham's metaphor, though I take solace from his description of the city's grain elevators:

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They do have an almost Egyptian monumentality in many cases, and in abandonment and death they evoke the majesties of a departed civilization. Or so it used to seem to me, looking downstream on the Buffalo River from the angle of South Street. . . . It was a privilege to know them in their ravaged antique grandeur.

Few cities have been placed with a more severe and yet more loving accuracy than is Buffalo in this passage. For when Banham finishes with Buffalo he makes of it something far more compelling than do its apologists and boosters. His Buffalo is a site from the vernacular American past far truer—and far more painful—than any eulogized by writers on the backroads and blue highways of the sentimental traveler.

Banham's book taught one last thing about place and our relation to it: that the decay of the world we have known through our own eyes or family stories is too painful to observe. It is too much like watching our own death. That may explain why so much travel writing remembers places as they never were in fact and thus as they can survive the corrosions of time. A chronicle of place must follow Montaigne's caution about accurate description; if it tells lies, as travel books have always told lies, such a chronicle betrays its charge of remembering a vanished civilization.

The authority, even the necessity that comes with this kind of depiction of place will, in the most literal and yet revitalized sense of the cliché, hit home to natives when they encounter it. Wandering through a restored section of what had been East Berlin in the summer of 1997, I found an artfully chic gallery that was showing architectural drawings of buildings currently under construction in that city. My curiosity was entirely drawn by the future of this, to me,

foreign city and so at first I failed to comprehend a sign for a show of photographs elsewhere in the gallery. It read simply, and in English, "Buffalo Grain Elevators." My failure to read that sign was a kind of cognitive dissonance, though I should have remembered more quickly than I did that German architects, especially Walter Gropius and Erich Mendelsohn, had drawn deep inspiration from Buffalo's grain elevators early in the twentieth century. These structures taught lessons about form and function that were to be applied by these architects and their disciples throughout the rest of the century.

These grain elevators were unadorned ranges of vertical cylinders placed next to each other in a beautiful, rhythmic flow. They seemed proof that the bare structure—perfect in its poured concrete form—could express an elegance beyond anything achieved by ornament. Looking back at the monuments of twentieth-century architecture that fill our cities, one can argue that the lesson of the Buffalo grain elevator was learned too well. The sterility, even the brutality of many twentieth-century buildings, though, seems all the more evident when they are set beside these elevators that have the grace of buildings that did their work well.

Those Buffalo buildings that taught the world how to be modern are long overdue for the inevitable deconstructive project, though explosives alone would be inadequate for the task. What happened to me in Berlin was an encounter with long familiar images and thus with all that they could tell about the contradictions of the place. The notion that Buffalo had once been a pilgrimage site would seem strange, even preposterous to most natives of the city. Its pride does not move in that direction, now that its elevators are marginal to this inland port. As it was, I learned this lesson through a dislocation of place, through looking at these

familiar structures in a city that seemed exotic and historically overburdened to me. And more than exotic or overburdened, for that section of Berlin was nothing but one huge site of construction and reconstruction. That summer, you couldn't photograph anywhere in the center of Berlin without framing the image with construction cranes. Berlin was all about rebuilding the glories of the past and adding monuments for the future: it was about pilgrimage or, as we call it today with embarrassment, tourism. During the summer of 1997 more visitors looked at those photographs of grain elevators in Berlin than went to look at the structures themselves in Buffalo.

Viewing these photographs by Gerrit Engel in Berlin was a way of returning to Buffalo, though it was subtly affected by his decision to work in color, unlike most photographers of the Buffalo elevators who have favored black and white. Engel's choice of film, as well as the muted tones in which he printed his images, came to seem evocatively antimemorial and thus a more accurate rendering of the damage time has worked on these elevators than do those stark black-and-white images. The weathering of concrete, the peeling of sign paint, the incrustations of rust, the inscriptions of graffiti: all of these seem more prosaic in muted color than in black-and-white. Only after looking at Engel's images for a long time did I realize what made them seem accurate. The skies in his prints were not vivid blue, as in most color photos, but rather the dull white-gray of a city built along an inland sea. His prints spoke because, thousand of miles and many years from Buffalo, I saw in them the heavy sky that loomed above my childhood.

If this experience of returning home suggests a final moment, a gaze beyond further reflection because it occurred in a foreign city, then this chronicle has failed. For such

a neat conclusion, with its sense of creative dislocation or geographical bricolage, belongs to another genre. My stories about Buffalo cannot end with images of the city viewed from a cosmopolitan distance but must return to North America's mediterranean. From there, one more point can be made about growing up in a provincial city: your sense of the metropole is such that you can only locate it on that same inland sea. From Trebizond you go to Constantinople, from Alexandria to Athens. To find the great city you look across the water, not behind your back across the land. For Buffalo in the late sixties that meant Toronto, not New York. Only after that first move was made could there be other metropolises.

Reading Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye* after it appeared in 1989 made me reimagine the Toronto I knew in the early 1970s. Further back, during the years between the opening of Atwood's novel in the 1950s and my college years, Toronto reshaped itself more self-consciously than did any other city in North America. It was not simply that it grew in numbers, but that this decorous city, whose residents had until very recently gone to Buffalo for a good time, became an entrepôt of human possibility. It became, in the phrase beloved by all civic boosters, a "world-class city," though very few of its citizens ever seemed to think then about the responsibilities carried by that label or about its costs. It was enough in the early 1970s to eat your way around the world in cheap restaurants along Bloor Street West or gaze at a numbing variety of newspapers in languages at which you could only guess. You didn't need the chamber of commerce talk to know that Toronto was an exciting place to be, though perhaps more so for an American kid like me with expatriate fantasies at the end of the Vietnam War than for

a poor immigrant from Jamaica or Sicily overwhelmed by the noise and cold of the city. It was easy for me to pass. A few shifts in idiom, a passing familiarity with hockey, and some discretion about the United States went a long way toward disguising my place of origin.

At that same time, there was in Toronto another city rapidly slipping away. This other city, growing distant, had once contained a coherent culture but was by the early seventies unable, in its thinning gentility, to restrain the smelly, noisy, life-giving rush of immigration. Only after reading *Cat's Eye*, with its portrait of a receding Toronto that one might tag in shorthand British, could I identify precisely the rare moment I had sensed while living there. In a phrase that catches how things had changed, Atwood's narrator says: "Toronto didn't used to have names like Charna." No, when I lived there, it had names from nineteenth-century British novels. Atwood's portrait of that Toronto opened in memory what I did not understand at the time when I took the bus downtown from York University at the far edge of the city. The bus passed long rows of tudor houses with dark cream stucco and fussy cross-timbering, low brick apartment buildings, signs with spellings like "theatre" and "colour" that seemed more alien than those with names in Italian or Polish or with lettering in Chinese or Arabic. It was that slight dislocation—of *-re* instead of *-er*—that was exotic to an American because the difference was so understated, so easy to miss, and yet so resonant. That was the hard difference to absorb, the one that was easy to miss. Toronto spread out its lines of prim bungalows and bits of garden until, beyond its ring highway 401, a new city began: large, cheaply built apartment blocks filled with new arrivals from anywhere you could name.

The qualities celebrated in Toronto—immigrant diversity, energy, gentrification—can be found elsewhere and give no unique sense of that city, except perhaps for the intensity of their presence. In the early seventies, what made Toronto particular was that last residue of British propriety, which could not, by contrast, have been found anywhere else. Avenue Road, that marvelously named street, ran from the Royal Ontario Museum and the Park Plaza Hotel at Bloor Street to Upper Canada College, a distance of perhaps two miles, and passed through what seemed the most British part of the city. To an outsider who hardly knew the children of British Toronto, that district seemed different beyond measure from the Jewish and Greek neighborhoods where, because of my family, I felt comfortable. The houses in this district were not the largest in the city or even the most tempting. But they had a solidity, a foursquare balance that came from an absolute certainty about the order of this world. They conveyed an assurance of blood, class, and even, it might have been admitted quietly within, the glories of what had once been empire.

There was, in those last days, a sense of colonial Britishness in Toronto that still meant women in large hats and white gloves, trolley cars on main avenues, formal gardens in parks, bewigged barristers and solicitors, cars like Humbers and Sunbeams that few other countries imported, a suspicion of foreigners, tastes like digestive biscuits or vinegar on french fries, images of the queen on dollar bills too pretty to come from a northern country, a rhetorical hatred of the nation to the south then consumed by its own imperial disease in Vietnam. These were the gestures by which the old empire had kept itself from going native or turning hybrid. During the seventies as the glories of empire exhausted themselves into the confusions of commonwealth,

as Toronto went native, these gestures turned ironic. The process seemed natural as I thought of my grandparents who came to the United States from Greece and Russia early in the century. It was, strange to say, Toronto as a last vestige of Anglo-Saxon virtues that remained exotic.

My friends and I took pride in being at York University rather than at the University of Toronto, in being at a raw, poured-concrete campus full of city kids, newcomers from the old empire, artsy types from the plains of Manitoba, rather than at the mock-Gothic campus of the privileged as it nestled downtown among parliament buildings and law offices on University Avenue. That university seemed to be located spiritually, as it was physically, amid the established life of the old city. If we belonged to the culture of a new Toronto eager to dispense with the protocols of empire, we gained ballast by having that old Toronto to define ourselves against. That city spoke with a voice I heard but could never register until I found it again years later in *Cat's Eye*:

Right behind me [at an art gallery] a woman's voice says, "Well, they certainly are *different*." It's the quintessential Toronto middle-class-matron put-down, the ultimate disapproval. It's what they say about slums. It would not look good over the sofa is what she means. . . . She's convinced of her own legitimacy, her right to pronounce: I and my kind are here on sufferance.

Yes, but those who sounded this note of sufferance seemed almost impotent by the early 1970s because they were learning not only that they couldn't keep the different ones out but that they might even welcome them as barbarians at the gate. People were just beginning to read Cavafy in translation then, just beginning to wonder what he meant when he said that barbarians might be a kind of solution.

The women I knew in Toronto came from this older Canada, from North Bay and Burlington and Ottawa. Their charm was to be foreign in slight but seductive ways and they led me through that colonial outpost as it gave way to international port of entry. For Toronto then was something more compelling than a “world-class city” as it tried to balance the culture of British Canada with inpourings from Jamaica, Hong Kong, Kenya, and India, to name only those places where my dormmates came from. The city had never been the heart of the empire, only one place where the sun never set, but it was then the site of the most painful movement of its time. It was the place immigrants desired for its possibilities of a different life, and it in turn desired their different lives to keep itself from shrinking into obscurity. It wanted to be something more than a port city on an inland sea.

My memories of Toronto have less to do with that moment and place than with a movement between places. For that was about possibility, about crossing an inland sea toward the center of things. There was in this a great sense of freedom, which came more from leaving one place than from arriving at another. At seventeen, I was sure I was through with Buffalo: I had outgrown it and was ready for cities more exotic than the one that had raised me. I would return at times to be with my family, to remember the city that had given me some of my idiom for moving through the world. I was never ashamed of having grown up in Buffalo because it gave me a sense of the toughness of life. There was a kind of reverse glamour to saying you had grown up in Buffalo. People might feel sorry for you, but they would show a wary respect for your time in a hard place.

Toronto in the early 1970s was not the center of things, perhaps because by then there was no single center left

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anywhere. What was missing for me there was a sense that its past as a city of empire had left behind traces that were neither nostalgic nor tasteful. It was a city of heritage, but that word had come to mean a past one accepts without moral or, more likely, aesthetic embarrassment. It meant a usable past for interior decorators. The utter impossibility of doing that with Buffalo's past is what has made it stay with me. Looking at the world from a city in decline keeps you from believing too many of the claims other places make about their futures. And it teaches you to value those intact ruins that were once someone else's city of the future. The Queen City of the Great Lakes: Buffalo will never be that again because the economic and cultural network of that inland sea has passed.

The Buffalo of my memory has gone. The time of decline from industrial empire to Rust Belt city is, as a historical change, already in the past. The logic of geography, the inexorable power of a city well situated, should mean that Buffalo can revive itself. How that will happen, when it will happen, are puzzles beyond my telling. History has not been kind to other ports on inland seas. Trebizond, Alexandria, Trieste have never recovered their times of glory. But perhaps one can say something else about Buffalo in the company of these inland ports: that it will be named in the chronicle of places that have for a time dealt in fire and water, in the transforming elements of life.