

Next stop, Memphis! Festival of the Book. Writers, so very many writers, marching around with their chins held high. Writers from everywhere, in all sizes and shapes. The famous ones are hidden away at the invitation-only events, in special ball-room-sized auditoriums, escorted in through back doors like rock stars. Except for the It Girl of the literary world. A fifty-year-old woman (there's still hope for us) dressed entirely in green—tights, dress, necklace, sweater, reading glasses, barrette—she escapes to waltz and shine among the masses. She wants to be admired. Fame has not yet had its way with her. The rest are ordinary, everyday writers, dazed, frumpy, dressed up with a chic flair, long hair, a proud mane, coiffed, uncoiffed, ponytails on aging men, artists looking like shit, or about to look like shit, others clean-shaven, or that alluring five o'clock shadow on the young buck from Dallas, goatees, sideburns, hipster skinny-legged pants, the drunken swagger, the tart with the overexposed cleavage (*it's working!*). They are for the most part enthusiastic, grateful to have been invited. The writers are legion, too many to have never been heard of. Writers everywhere, carrying copies of their books, marked with notes and Post-its indicating how to read passages effectively.

Did you know that in the United States one in eight adults claims to be a professional writer, and that it has been estimated that the average annual income of this group is \$800 per year?

Here they converge, on display in Memphis, walking the halls of the stucco-walled convention center, the Marriott hotel, writers riding glass elevators to the rooftop lounge to sip another vodka martini while awaiting their allotted times to perform. There in the corner is the Latvian performance poet whose subject is standup misery. The drunk from Kentucky is carrying on with the pretty young thing from Manhattan who has just written her first novel. He bends in close to her, telling her she's going to be a smashing success; he saw the reviews in *The Month* and *Punch*. She gives a sweet, flirtatious chirp and looks earnestly at him. He's glutted the market with his books, one a year, the same story, the same low sales. Onward! Here the writer is king, here the writer rules, here the writer will be heard, here book lovers come by the hundreds from all over the state. They volunteer, they sell books, they buy books, they introduce authors, ferry authors from airport to hotel to airport.

Your big event is a panel discussion, "Crafting Betrayal in the American Dreamscape of Fiction." The other panelists do not show. The host does not show. There are three people in the "audience." They are resting, using the chairs to take a load off between events. You read, of course. A passage that addresses betrayal, of course. Your voice bounces off the walls, echoes in the chamber of the empty room. The audience seems to be listening attentively. They are a good audience. A man in the corner takes notes.

The Q&A: "Any questions?" you hear your voice say, as if from across a canyon. And for a moment you think you should raise your own hand.

The man taking notes in the corner (the three people are each in different rows) raises his hand.

"Is this 'fiction nonfiction'?" he asks, gray eyes, hair, face with its sharp provocative features—features designed to irritate, you realize. "Did your husband marry you and then your sister, or did he marry your sister and then you?"

Taken aback, but you keep your literary cool. "Do you mean, is the book autobiographical?" you ask.

"Well, in short, to put it bluntly. Well, yes, yes, I'd like to know. I like to know those sorts of things. It makes the reading of the book more interesting, in a way."

"Since you put it that way," you respond, "let me ask you which sister you think I am?"

"The betrayer, of course," he says, stroking his chin.

"In the nonfiction version of the fiction, you nailed it," you say and begin clapping, and the three follow suit.

On the ride back to the airport, an elderly woman who has written a self-help book on her relationship with her cat tells of how she forgot to bring her book to her event, so she had to invent a reading on the spot. "It was just so hard. I'm just so tired. It's a performance. They want so much out of you. I'm destroyed."

Who, you wonder. Who wants so much out of her?

"I would have liked to talk about my cat," you say.

The first review of *Generation of Fire* appears six weeks after publication day. It appears in *Free Moment*, written by some poor, underpaid, overworked creature who uses the first three chapters of the book (which also seems to be where she stopped reading) as a launching pad for a tirade against her boyfriend. It is a performance of the sort I see every other week, it seems, in at least one or two of my undergraduate student papers, a kind of lofty opening that addresses something big: "the beginning of time," for instance, or in this case, "American letters," and then hauls in the hapless author as Exhibit A of All That Is Wrong. There is a classic, three-paragraph "middle" of willful misreading, followed by a paragraph in which the reviewer holds up sentences that are better than anything I've ever written—lines that kept coming back to me, haunting me, that were literally beyond me, beyond my natural powers, that had, nevertheless, by dint of my persistence, rewarded me by taking up res-

idence here and there in my book. These same sentences, which knocked Theodor out of his chair, are given a pistol-whipping by the reviewer.

“Ponder the career of India Palmer if you want to know what’s gone wrong with American fiction. Grade: D—”

I can take a D, but a D-minus?

A sweet, small bookstore in Chicago. All the books hand-selected, personally and thoughtfully read by the owner and her assistant. A jolly pair: one old, one young; one stout, the other thin; one a big laugh, the other sardonic. A book group of five attends the reading. They are deciding if they will read *Generation of Fire*. Their decision will be based on the passage I read. “Not to put pressure on you,” one of them says with a giggly smile.

“Lily Starr was here last week,” the owner says boisterously. “She mentioned she was a friend of yours. She was so delightful. So talented. The place was packed! If we get her back for the paperback, we’re selling tickets.”

Washington, D.C.: My parents are the audience. My mother, a flurry of positive comments about the bookstore, how important it is to be asked to read here. Too bad about the weather—such a beautiful evening keeps people outdoors.

New York City: The store is packed. Theodor brings out all our friends, cousins, parents from the girls’ school. The Chapmans invite everyone over afterward for drinks.

At the girls’ school, a mother asks, “Have I missed the reviews?” In the paper that same day: Lily Starr is the winner of this year’s Washington Award. Three days later the paper will announce her nomination for the biggest prize, the Golden Fleece: the Eiseman.

Midnight. I am on a high-speed ferry home from a reading in Little Silver, New Jersey. Alone. All the commuters safely in bed.



It is so black outside we could be high in the air above the Atlantic. It is raining, but I cannot see the rain for the dark. I can see nothing out the window. Inside the cabin the lights are bright. The reading was a good one. Thirty women in the audience. So many questions. This is the way it goes: a sudden high to give you that bit of hope. "Your masterpiece," one woman said. "I've read all your work and this is it. This is the hit. Trust me. I'm a reader. You've captured perfectly the personal disconnection one feels against the backdrop of the hedonism of the late twentieth century." Appreciated, understood and feted in Little Silver. Well, that was something, anyway.

I cross the black water of the Narrows. Somewhere the Verazano Bridge looms. Other boats are out there, but I cannot see them. I'm alone on a high-speed ferry with my face pressed to the glass. I could vanish easily, without a trace. Would I attract attention then? In my lap Will Chapman's manuscript languishes. It is good, very good, if long. So fine it has been taking me a long time to read it—in part because I savor it, in part because I am jealous. He will sell the book, and well.

A young man appears. I can see him standing before me, reflected in the window glass. Out of nowhere, he tells me he's nineteen years old. He says it's raining outside and that I'll need an umbrella. He says, "Funny, on nights like these, how you can't see anything." Tells me he's working the ferry while in college, to see him through. "Can I talk to you?" he says eventually.

"Aren't you already?" I ask.

He chuckles, says "Funny." Then, "You're all alone."

"Observant," I say. He laughs again. We're in a bubble of light, just the two of us, in a vast darkness. He pops open a broken umbrella and tells me I can have it.

"Thank you," I say. "Where's the bridge?"

"Out there," he says.

"Oh, really?" Again I press my face to the window, and again I see nothing.

"I figured you might want some company." He wants to talk, so I let him. "This is the last shift of the night. Manhattan means quittin' time. I love this ferry. Do you ride it often?" He looks me in the eye. He's an adorable boy, not too tall, fit, filled with enthusiasm for life that seems to buck from his face, that cock-sure innocence that seems to know already how the whole world works, as if on a formula, a recipe. "This boat teaches me everything I need to know. You know that? It does. Amazing how a boat can teach what you need to know. The people that ride this boat, they're the bosses of all those people who take the subways, the buses, the trains. The people here are the rich cats. It costs them seven hundred a month just to ride this boat to work. They come in here looking all tired and frazzled and worn out. And they're impatient and touchy and jumpy. I look at them and I feel sorry for them. And for all their money, they're still like lemmings." He stops and looks at me. "You mind?"

"Of course not."

"Why are you on this ferry, anyway?"

"I gave a reading in Little Silver tonight."

"A reading?"

"I'm a writer."

"You are, are you? Cool. Just like fate," he says with genuine astonishment. He is not an ironic boy. "I've got an idea for a novel, you know? You want to hear it?"

"Sure," I say politely.

"It's about an artist, an artist who's sick of all the posers, really sick of the fraud. You know, the guy who says he's an artist but isn't really, just wants to make a buck. The kind who makes the buck, many bucks, because people believe he's the real thing because as a fraud he has the routine down, knows how to sell himself? Well, the real artist can't stand this type. The real artist is a Pollock or a Johns or damn, a Picasso. The real McCoy. Well, he beats up the frauds, really messes them up—at bars and art parties, in galleries. Anywhere he can. And then he uses their blood

to paint his pictures, really beautiful pictures made of fraudulent blood. What do you think?"

"Does he kill the frauds?" I ask.

"Oh, no. No, he definitely doesn't kill them. Not at all. Just their blood he wants. Rips them up a bit, but he doesn't kill them."

"So you're a writer," I say. "Write by day, work the boat by night?"

"No."

That makes me curious. "A painter?"

"I just work the ferry," he says, "to get me through college. I'm going to be a bridge builder someday. I want to build little bridges. Not the big ones. The little ones that get you over streams and such. I'm learning how in college. I want to really know how to make something, something with my hands. Not like all these people riding this ferry. Not like them. The people who ride this thing, they're like cattle at the gate, stammering to be let in. No dignity. Pushing up against the gate, rushing in to get their seats, waiting to do it all over in the morning. Day in, day out. They don't look happy. No smiles on their faces. You know who their bosses are? Their bosses are the ones who get to work in helicopters. That's the top of the crop. These cats think if only they could fly to work in a helicopter, then they'd have arrived. That's what they want. Imagine that." He brushes his hair back with his hand, using the window's reflection as his mirror. He unzips his fly and loosens his pants to tuck his shirt in. "Cattle," he says, and then asks again, "Do you like my idea?"