

THE INTERNATIONAL WRITING PROGRAM (1967-1988)

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FLASHBACKS OF 21 YEARS' IWP

When a devastating earthquake struck Bucharest a few years ago, a Rumanian novelist walking along the street on his way to a party (the occupational danger of writers) was killed as a building fell on him. He had just written a letter to Iowa. Across the city another writer was at his desk writing a chapter of his book about the life he had led with his beautiful poet-wife in Iowa City. When the apartment building shattered, he fell six stories. He was pinned by a steel beam until night when soldiers came by with a bullhorn, shouting to find any persons alive in the ruins. In his hand was the chapter on Iowa, the only thing he could grab when he felt himself falling.

Some time later all the writers in Bucharest who had lived in Iowa City held a memorial party to honor their dead friend--who was also our friend--with plenty of strong local brandy.

Why had so many of the best Rumanian writers been to a small town in the Midwest of America, not the sort of place where the world's artists, or even the world's business executives, meet annually to discuss their craft?

They came (and happily, still come) to be members of the International Writing Program, joining thirty to forty others each year from all parts of the world. How did they come? Certainly they did not travel to Iowa on their own. Very few writers in very few countries can afford plane tickets, especially for flights over the great oceans.

This is how they came.

How Did It Happen?

"Crazy! That's one of the craziest ideas I've ever heard," I shouted to Hualing in the motorboat taking us up the Coralville Reservoir north of Iowa City, an artificial lake made by a dam on the Iowa River. It was in the summer, 1966. At my voice, a great blue heron stopped fishing along the shallow waters by the river's edge and, with a lunge expressing its contempt for such a notion, lifted into the air and flew away, each beat of its big wings seeming to cry, "Crazy! Crazy! Crazy!"

What remark had made man and nature conspire to reject that simple, imaginative, and as it turned out very sensible question? Hualing was born in Hubei in Central China on the Yangzi River, survived the Japanese War (going up the river to Zhongqing in a boat pulled by men with ropes, threatened by Japanese planes overhead and hidden rocks underneath), survived the bombings, graduated from Nanjing University, and then survived the Civil War. Going to Taiwan in 1949, she began her career as a novelist and later taught at National Taiwan University and Tung-hai University in the middle of the island, where she was the first person to

teach creative writing in Chinese. With nine published books, she came to the University of Iowa in 1964 as a Visiting Writer. There she observed the many talented young people in the Poetry and Fiction Workshop, of which I was director. Each year I brought a few writers from other countries to the Writers' Workshop. Hualing took a Master of Fine Arts degree; her thesis was a book of short stories, some published in the *ATLANTIC MONTHLY*.

It was our pleasant habit to boat on the reservoir in late afternoon when our work and writing were done. Anchoring, we lit a charcoal hibachi and I swam as far as I could go and still get back. Close to the boat, I could smell Chinese-marinated steaks broiling on the coals. First a cold martini (I earned it by swimming), then ears of fresh sweet corn with leaves soaked in water. On such an evening in 1966, the river turning green from its usual loam-gray as it flowed under the overhanging trees, the aroma of prime Iowa beef enriched with soy sauce, ginger, sherry, and green scallions, Hualing made the remark that changed not only our own lives from that day forward, but also, for the next twenty years, the lives of hundreds of foreign writers a world away whose names were yet unknown.

"I've been in the Writers Workshop," Hualing said. "You have a program for young Americans. Why don't you start one for writers from other countries?"

It was then that I, my mouth full of one of the world's greatest combination--gin, steak, and sweet corn--yelled, "Crazy. That's one of the craziest ideas I've ever heard!"

Hualing looked at me with a certain affection, but with a greater pity. "But you built up the Workshop from a little class. Did you call that crazy?"

Not yet having learned that small Chinese women are undefeatable, I foolishly went on--"How would we find such writers? Take a flashlight and go down strange alleys at night where we can't speak a word of the language? How would we get them here? How could we find money for them? Could they eat Iowa food? How would we know they don't have criminal records? Would they get along with us and with each other? Would the university think they're weird? What about..."

"Paul--," Hualing said, in what was for her a loud voice (meaning it could be heard ten feet away). "I've never heard you so negative. You always like new things. Why don't you try? You're always saying 'Let's take a chance.' OK, take this chance."

The gin, the steak, the sweet corn, and my courage gone, I had only two choices: to jump back into the river, or agree. We weighed anchor and drifted downstream in the darkening twilight, the air soft as Chinese silk. A doe and spotted fawn at the water's edge drank from the flowing river. I put a hand over my mouth for silence. Long past the deer, as we floated up to the dock, Hualing said, "You only did that," pointing at my raised hand, "so you wouldn't have to talk. It's not fair."

I tied up the boat, helped Hualing onto the dock, kept hold of one hand and then took her other hand, staring off into the dark hills and then into her eyes.

"I'll try, if you'll help," I finally agreed.

"I'll try," she promised.

We started the International Writing Program in 1967. Still the only one in the world, it is known to writers in most countries. It has changed the lives of men and

women and even the nature of their books. Living in a friendly town with a university famous for all the arts has given many writers a deeper sense of the United States, to which some have come with dark suspicion and sometimes even fear.

When I had wanted to expand the one small Writers' Workshop into a big program with several workshops and many classes in modern and contemporary literature that would include works--many in translation--never before taught at the University of Iowa, I had had to ask approval from an administrator, a fine though cautious person. After I had outlined my plan, which later brought so many talents to Iowa, I was asked, "But if we have a lot of writers crawling around the campus, what will happen to our young ladies?"

I had wanted to answer with my true feeling that the young ladies would rejoice. Instead, in a shameful fit of weakness and yearning for approval, I had said, "I think they will be happy to meet such interesting people, some of whom will of course also be young ladies."

Permission had been granted.

Twenty-four years later, permission was granted for the International Writing Program (IWP), another gamble on Iowa.

Who Came?

We were not prepared for the variety, brilliance, and warmth of the foreign writers who came, for the loyalty they developed toward the program, and to this place. They were lean and fat; short and tall; handsome as Renaissance portraits and plain as bowl full of hot oatmeal; solemn as owls (not many) and witty as stand-up comics (many); beautiful as the Venus of Botticelli and bone-simple in face, save for glowing eyes that looked as if they had just come from the dark side of the moon. There were people like Nicola Breban of Rumania (1977 IWP) who, after leaving Iowa City, sent a color postcard of the south rose window of Notre Dame Cathedral from Paris. On it he wrote in French:

Long Live the Engles' Home!

For my friends in Iowa City (the unforgettable Iowa City) Hualing and Paul, here are my enduring and warmest feelings. Also, my affectionate thanks for the beautiful gift, which was the discovery of America, the America of farmers, of universities, of poets, America of great and (above all) of little cities, America of us fools, the last great sentimentalists.

Friendship, friendship, forever,

Nicolae

Later Nicolae, who we had first met some years before on the shore of the Black Sea, sent us a poem called "Indian Summer." It proved that he had lived so profoundly both in Bucharest and in Iowa that he could combine the boldness of our landscape with the subtle images of his Romance language, as in this small section:

I watch the Iowa River, which flows like a
dumbfounded tree.

A river is a tree lying down, the statue of a

had left East Germany for what she regarded as a freer life in West Germany met in a corridor another writer from East Germany. They had lived in the same city as neighbors, had had the same postman and the same milkman, had attended the same school. In that hallway they embraced, as poets have been doing for thousands of years and will, we hope, go on doing through more thousands of years.

The Chinese from Taiwan and from China Mainland ate together (common food, like a common language, is a great uniter of people), listened to the same cassettes in Chinese (many recorded in Hong Kong), kept their tempers over their differences, and were sad when they left, knowing they could never meet again. Yet where in the world but Iowa City could they live in the same building?

Suspicious when they first stared at each other across the room in a seminar discussing new writing in Asia, a Korean and a Japanese slowly began to speak to each other (the Korean spoke Japanese as a result of Japan's occupation of his country for many years) and later began to share meals. The Korean's mother had been a professional deep-sea diver, forcing herself down thirty feet in icy water to gather sponges to support her family; the Japanese remembered buying sponges labeled as coming from the south coast of Korea. There was no embracing by these people from a more formal culture, but their handshake lasted far longer than necessary.

A beautiful Japanese woman wrote poems that she sang in Tokyo nightclubs. An Indonesian from Bali danced with steps surely as old as the rock of his enchanting island. One Indian writer from New Delhi and one from Calcutta spoke to each other in English because the first did not know Bengali and the other did not know Hindi. Mostly they discussed which used cars they should buy, thus bringing their ancient cultures into the twentieth century--on smooth tires, certain to blow if they hit a sharp object.

Perhaps our greatest surprise was not the fact that writers far away could indeed be identified and brought to Iowa City to live and write with such groups of other writers as had seldom gathered on the earth, but rather that they would go home with the most astonishing affection for this place, as shown in a letter from Budapest from the leading woman poet of Hungary, Agnes Nemes Nagy¹ (1979 IWP):

After we arrived at home I looked every day in the morning for a woods under my window. I must say: the woods of Iowa, of the Mayflower. But here are no woods, only street cars, buses, in place of oaks and squirrels. It is rather incredible, but my clock in America was a woods which gave me the time by its changes from summer until winter.

All that means that I did not understand until I was here and not there, and that the beginning of the legend of Iowa began in the first moment when I left your continent. I am not alone with that legend. I have given your greeting and your gifts

¹ Agnes Nemes Nagy, one of the major poets in Hungary, published four poetry collections, a collection of essays on poetry, 64 SWANS, and four books of translation including works by Brecht, Corneille, Racine, and Moliere. She authored several volumes of children's literature. She participated in the International Writing Program with her husband, the critic Balasz Lengyel. She died two or three years ago.

to our common friends, to Agnes Gergely, Tornai, Orban; we and the "Iowa Hungarians" speak of you without stopping.

My dear Hualing, I think of those days in your house, of the Chinese furnishings, of the Asian masks on the wall, of the brilliance of plants (so many plants!). I think of you as the foundation of the program. And my dear Paul, I think of you as a pillar holding up the program, its events, its trips, a pillar with beautiful hand-embroidered shirts and with a sense of humor (about trips--the John Deere trip was one of the most beautiful things, with the Saarinen building, with the Henry Moore sculpture, even after we had seen San Francisco and New York).

Already we know--Balasz and I--that we have received from you an incomparable gift. We have become--how should I say?--broader, fuller. We have received from you, through the program, impressions of the globe, which is very useful for our European points of view. Thanks for the new continent (one continent? Five!).

And thanks for your good will, your innate kindness, not least for your angelic patience toward our English (especially). And for the squirrels!

Always, yours,
Agnes and Balasz

Such loyalty and friendship exist years later and have been demonstrated again and again. In 1972, twelve former IWP members from Rumania met us at the Bucharest airport. The wife of one (her husband later died in the earthquake) was being scrutinized by police, who were examining a large badge she wore. We went over for a close look. On the gold background in the center of the badge was an aggressive bird wearing a helmet; below it were the words GO HAWKS. Our Iowa football team! Around the edge was printed in black, UNIVERSITY OF IOWA HOMECOMING 1969. (How do you explain the importance of a homecoming football game to the police of an East European country looking for possible agent provocateurs?) At a banquet in Beijing a distinguished writer, in honor of guests from the University of Iowa, wore a black and gold necktie (the school colors) with the design of a hawk. He was a former IWP member.

Many began books that they finished at home. Some became superb observers of the endlessly changing weather patterns of Iowa, and of the somber, darkly dressed Amish in their buggies, contrasting with the lively, colorful students in their cars in Iowa City's busy streets. A few bore homesickness as if it were malaria, with fever and shaking. One of these was a young Asian woman who had never been away from home. We bought her a phonograph (the old-fashioned type with a crank) so she could play her haunting folk songs, which only made her more homesick. Once at two in the morning she called us. We had told her to telephone if anything was wrong, so we asked, "Are you in trouble?" "Yes," she said, "in very trouble. My pornograph is broken."

They met in weekly seminars where each would discuss the literary situation back home, often with discretion. We learned an immense amount about unknown writers and poets who hid their resentment of authoritarian governments in fables that government bureaucrats were not clever enough to understand. One day an East European, discussing the situation of writers in his country, said, proudly but foolishly, "We have no office of censorship." There was a long silence while other

foreign writers looked nervously at each other and several nodded their heads vigorously meaning "You answer that." Finally a novelist, also from East Europe, replied, biting the words with his teeth, "You don't need an office for censorship, because in your mind sits a little censor watching what you intend to write and often saying, 'Don't put that down on paper. It could get you into big trouble.'" It was one of the most intense seminars the program ever had, as everyone began yelling, waving arms, and verbally attacking the unhappy person who had denied censorship. He left the room pale as if he had been poisoned, staggering out the door. No one spoke to him. A few days later he had a heart attack and almost died.

One year a novelist came from a East European country where he had spent six years in prison, two years in solitary confinement, in a cell under a river where water ran slowly down the walls and dripped from the ceiling. To keep his sanity, he wrote fiction with his finger on the wet wall and watched as it gradually blurred and slid down to the floor. On his first day in prison he was tortured--authoritarian countries cannot believe that a critic is an individual acting alone, but must be a member of a conspiracy. "Give us the names. Give us the names." Then more beating on the soles of the feet, more electric current through the genitals. ("Don't worry," he told us, "it won't make you impotent.") The secret police who handled his case were punished for beating him on the face because the bruise would show there. After he had been in prison two years a guard came and took him to the same room where he had suffered his beating. On the floor was an unconscious man who had passed out under torture. "Revive this man," he was ordered, since he had been trained as a doctor. Then he confronted a bitter moral dilemma. If he revived the prisoner, the poor victim would simply be tortured again. If he did not revive him, he himself would be tortured again. What would you have done in that dirty room where the walls were stained with human screams?

Thus the situation of writers in this twentieth century.

In too many countries the writer is an endangered species, often punished with prison, internal exile, or harsh labor for writing views, or even in styles, resented by the ruling party. We have had writers who were forbidden to write for twenty years after publishing what most countries could regard as proper, even necessary, exposure of corruption in government and society. A once-imprisoned Middle Eastern poet told us that American poets, who are not imprisoned for their opinions, do not deserve to be so lucky and should pray morning and evening to keep it so.

In Iowa City poets were and are free to speak, write, or sing about any subject or any person.

IWP is not like a quiet writers' conference in the United States, where people come to have their manuscripts read, often in a resort-like atmosphere, by lakes, mountains, or in a woods, with no risk save to the ego. To IWP come the world's horrors, fears, beauties, savagery, even triumphs, all at a level of intensity seldom known in the United States. The wounded come, scars invisible except in their eyes. For many, writing is not simply a career of words, but a matter of life or death. For some, IWP is the first time they have not worked at some job to make a living, or had to worry if Big Brother was watching. One afternoon a Romanian writer came into

our office and shouted, "This is the first time I walked here without looking back to see if I was followed."

One of the valuable aspects of IWP is that our members meet writers from far countries whom they could meet nowhere else in the world. They talk much of the day and most of the night. Lifelong friendships are made. An Egyptian turns up in Hong Kong and was housed by his former roommate from the program. A Japanese woman was the guest of an IWP friend in West Germany; a Japanese woman poet visiting IWP friends in Cairo swam in the Nile, a childhood ambition. (We received a postcard of the river with her words of advice: "Never swim downstream from the camel!") A Turkish woman novelist from IWP on a trip to Asia stayed with an IWP woman writer in Hong Kong. A Belgian man and an Icelandic woman met in IWP and they became very close. That cheerful and attractive couple married. Alas, life together turned out to be as rough as the freezing waters between Brussels and Reykjavik and they divorced. In Singapore at a Conference on Writing Today (1986) we found eleven IWP writers from Africa, Europe, the United States, and Asia and had a great reunion with food and drink.

Years ago, in the '60s, at one of our first receptions for new IWP writers, a couple from Israel had just arrived in Iowa City. They wrote novels together so closely that no one could tell which were his words and which were hers. They lived on a kibbutz in the Negev desert and worked raising fruit and vegetables when not writing. When I finished talking to a tall, blonde man from Germany they came over and asked, "Were you speaking German?" "Yes." "Then we must go. We cannot bear the sound of that language; it is a torture to us. Those people tortured our family."

It was a delicate and dangerous situation. I said, "But in those Nazi years, which he hates, he was a little boy. Patience. He is a fine poet who just began a new poem here with the line, 'She was a pure blonde. He was an engineer.' A good man. Know him."

The Israelis left the house. Three weeks later an excited telephone call came from the German: "Etwas merkwürdiges! [Something remarkable!] The Jewish people invited me to dinner." They wrote each other on returning home. He was their guest at the kibbutz.

Of course, a few enmities of superb quality are also made, but most relationships are warm and trusting. Reticent Asians share rice and emotions with exuberant Poles. Hard-drinking Hungarians introduce tee-totaling Indonesians to the wonders and dangers of the bottle. At a party an Irish poet began to sing. An Indian poet from Calcutta listened, unbelieving. When the song ended he said, "That came from my country all the way across Europe. Listen." He sang the same melody in a different language. (Was it Sanskrit? It was not Bengali, spoken in Calcutta today.) Then the two of them stood side-by-side and sang, he in his ancient tongue and the man from Ireland in his native Gaelic.

Always there is a reaching out: "Show me your poem. Let me see a short story. Let's try to get it into English, bring your dictionary." Through the furious fog of languages that our writers had never seen or heard before, suddenly the sun of a realized image breaks through and the Arab understands the Marathi poem, and the

Chinese finds a Spanish phrase in a contemporary text from Argentina is like something in ancient Tu Fu. Often we hear a cry from our writers, "But there is nothing in English like this."

Translation goes on every day. We believe that even half the sense and rhythm of a poem put into another language is far better than no poem at all. We do not believe the old tag from Italian, *traduttore traditore* [translation is treason]. One year an Israeli who knew Arabic translated into Hebrew a novel by a Palestinian from the West Bank. Another translated an English version of a novel by a mainland Chinese into Hebrew.

A writer from China, now a high minister in his government, listened to a Turkish poet lecturing at the IWP about the literary scene in his country. He read a poem in Turkish and in English. Afterward the Chinese went up to him and spoke in the original language from which Turkish came. He had been punished in the Cultural Revolution by being sent to harsh labor in Xinjiang Province in the far northwest. The writer from Turkey was amazed that someone from China could speak his unusual language in Iowa. They became friends and translated together. IWP has published many volumes of translations from modern poetry in less common languages: Korean, Serbo-Croatian, Japanese, Hebrew, Polish, Farsi, and others.

In Iowa City we have our own Tower of Babel, called the Mayflower, owned by the university but not built by it, where some six hundred students live in a way that must make them envy sardines. Along corridors with dreary carpet are endless apartments. Each has a shared bath and kitchen in the middle, and on each side a narrow study desk shared by two students and a living room-bedroom shared by the same students; usually four persons live in one apartment. The IWP members, thanks to the kindness of the university, share such apartments, but with only one on each side.

One of the fascinating results of this arrangement is that cooking becomes a matter of national honor. Once a Chinese and a Venezuelan shared a kitchen. Neither could bear the other's pungent cooking smells, so when one used the kitchen the other left; garlic and hot peppers fought in the air. After one week they spoke only one word to each other, alternating the weeks when one cooked first. When the lucky one who was first was ready to take over the kitchen, he would pound on the door connecting the kitchen to the other side and yell, "Now." Fast disappearance by the one who was to cook second!

IWP writers not only meet each other, they discover the United States: eating meals in farm kitchens; riding on combines in soybean fields; enjoying the Mississippi River (which they all know through Mark Twain) on a boat with bar and food courtesy of John Deere, the largest manufacturer of farm machinery in the world; visiting the homes of Vachel Lindsay, Edgar Lee Masters (such little, modest places), Mark Twain, and Abraham Lincoln (New Salem, the reconstructed frontier village of his early manhood). They go to concerts, plays, art exhibits, and dances, amazed at the high level of the arts at a fine university between the Appalachians and the Rockies, where many of them expect to see hardly anything but Indians whooping on

horseback. (And are disappointed when they only find sixty thousand native lowans whooping at football games. But they love the games.)

All this is to say that IWP does not deal with young Americans yearning to be writers, but with proven and published talents who have gone through various trials and troubles in many countries. One hot summer evening, with sultry air that can only be found in midwestern Augusts or in old Mae West movies, several writers took off their shirts. The chest of one poet was slashed with scars. Naively, we asked, "How did you get those?" He answered gently, "I was with the First Polish Division in the attack on Monte Cassino, Italy. Sixty per cent casualties. So many died. We took the mountain." Such are the people who bring their poems, novels, plays to IWP.

How Did They Come to Iowa?

That ordinary word "money" has special meaning for IWP, which supports itself and brings writers to Iowa over those exhausting distances by a curious combination of sources--the University of Iowa, the United States Information Agency (Office of International Visitors), many cultural affairs officers in U.S. embassies, which provide most of the basic grants to the writers, corporations, foundations, and private individuals. The university does not give funds for grants to foreign writers, nor should it, since IWP does not offer courses, credits, or degrees. Our people are older, ranging in age from the late twenties to the sixties, all with published books, many with many books (a Hungarian woman novelist has had her work translated into twenty languages). They are too old to become "regular" students and they are already established as writers.

From the first year (1967) of its existence, with a handful of writers, to this (1987), its twentieth year, we have received the most generous support, patience, and good will not only from those working in the U.S. Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs in Washington, but also from a great many Americans in our embassies everywhere, most of them complete strangers to us. They have been, however, true believers in the program and have found writers of the talent and fine personality to send to it.

It surprised us that we could go to officers of corporations, large or small, and find them willing to listen to our reasons for them to take money away from private profits and give it to unknown writers in socialist countries, without restrictions. This enables us to bring writers from countries that otherwise would not have been included in our great variety of languages and cultures. If an Israeli came, it was important to have an Arab; if writers came from China Mainland we could bring some from Taiwan. If one nation suddenly refused to let its writers travel, we could bring one from the (unhappily) large number of their talented people living abroad out of fear or need. (Call it exile.) With such "capitalist" funds we could give someone a travel ticket home for an emergency, or provide help in going to American universities to lecture. If a writer's wife or husband was also a writer, she or he could also come as a member of IWP, and over the years we have in that way spared a lot of suffering, even temptation, and prevented some imminent divorces. When a

Maytag Company in Iowa offers to help poets from Africa or Asia spent three months here writing what they please and does not ask to approve anything written or any opinion, there is a remarkable freedom that does not exist in so very many places today.

Why the University of Iowa?

In most universities of the world one field of study is closely defined and studied in depth, with little other subject matter included. That astonishing invention, the American state university, offers a flexibility of subjects and plans (not known in Europe or Asia or Latin America) that allows such a unique program bringing foreign writers to a small, congenial, tree-lyrical university town to exist. For our members, many of whom are away from their own country for the first time, this is a miracle. The miraculous aspect, of course, is that a university would believe in such an original effort.

There is no problem here, although many people unfamiliar with this place may wonder about it. Without huge appropriations, and existing on funds from a primarily agricultural tax base and a thin endowment, the University of Iowa has long had to rely on originality of ideas, creative imagination, and new concepts. It was surely the first institution to state in its catalog that a thesis for an advanced degree could be a contribution to knowledge or a book of poems or fiction, a play (when working on his plays in Iowa City, Tennessee Williams served food behind the counter in the Memorial Union cafeteria), a musical composition, a painting, a sculpture, or a dance. The result was that in all areas of the arts there was not only historical instruction, but also an emphasis on creating a new work. It was daring to do this in the thirties, and there were many Philistines who were ready to denigrate any new artistic proposals at the university, ready to chop off a few innovative heads, or at least a few creative hands.

Writing flourished in the Writers Workshop, whose graduates went on to win not only all the major literary prizes in the United States, but to do so often. A count would probably show that the Yale Series of Younger Poets prize has been awarded more times to University of Iowa poets than to Yale poets (a comment we utter in soft voices while visiting New Haven). It was logical, therefore, that a community of foreign writers should be perfectly at home in Iowa City, where poets, novelists, and playwrights have been honored for some many years. One writer of IWP was having a haircut at a barbershop in town when the barber asked, "What do you do?" The man hesitated before answering such an unexpected question, then said, almost reluctantly, "I'm a writer." "Hey, that's great," the barber assured him as he snipped away the shagginess. "We get a lot of 'em in here. Nice people."

There are many reasons for such a program to exist not in one of the great American cities along a coast, but in a quiet town of about thirty thousand permanent residents and about thirty thousand students who come and go. The concentration of concerts, plays, readings, art exhibits, and dance recitals, both by

visiting artists and by university students and faculty, often jointly, must be as high per capita as in any city of the world. After a Polish writer had attended a concert by the University Symphony Orchestra (free, of course), he gave it the highest praise: "Almost good as Warsaw Orchestra." The university's Stradivari String Quartet (with original instruments) often plays in Europe. The level of every art here startles foreign writers, who come largely from the major cities of the world.

All these activities take place close to nature. Iowa City was built in an oak forest along the Iowa River, which flows through the center. Trees line most streets, save the very new ones. All IWP writers live in the Mayflower with the river to the west and hills with woods to the east, home to deer, masses of squirrels, rabbits, cardinals, doves, woodpeckers, bluejays, chickadees, juncos, and raccoons. When October comes, the oaks in the city parks along the Iowa River turn red with a flame that burns the chilly air. Trucks with corn, soybeans, hogs, cattle, and horses roar through night and day. On all sides the city ends in farms. IWP writers go to eat in those farm homes. There they get a feeling of the old America that still survives with its ancient turning of the soil, planting, harvesting: a landscape and a way of life they could never imagine if they lived in dense cities. Meeting husky farm families between house and barn, one writer said, "The Lincoln Memorial is fine, but these people are a living memorial. They are the sort of men and women from whom Lincoln came."

They also meet residents of Iowa City. It is likely that the First National Bank is the only bank in the world that opens on a Sunday afternoon so that the president, vice-presidents, cashiers, and wives can serve foreign writers from a lavish bar at one end of the lobby and food at the other end. (The vault is locked, alas.) At one such reception we asked an East German writer how he had learned to speak such slang-fluent, American-accented English. He explained, "In 1944 I was a young kid just conscripted into the German Army, sent to the Normandy coast with little training. I saw at once the war was lost and I was wasting my life. When the invasion came I was captured by American soldiers and put in a barbed wire pen on the beach below the cliffs those American GIs climbed. I heard them talking all day and all night. Where I was penned I would see the landing craft coming in from the channel with American soldiers wading through the water full of bodies and blood. Then I was sent to a prison camp in the States."

An officer of the bank had been listening. They exchanged questions and descriptions of the place. "I was there," the banker said. "Let's shake hands in memory of that day. Welcome to Iowa City." Thus this bank contributes to IWP every year to help bring together the old enemies. Our modern world has a great deal to learn from their example.

Some writers visit classes, some meet with students and faculty from their own countries, some go off to lecture at other universities. They also meet American writers who visit Iowa City and the IWP and Writers' Workshop every year. They learn the true and gritty reality of this country. In return, they bring us a knowledge of the newest literature in some of the earth's oldest languages.

Because the University of Iowa gave the Writers' Workshop the chance to prove that gifted young writers could make a productive as well as lively community of writers, because Hualing saw foreign writers in the Writers' Workshop, because she had a wide international experience in China, Taiwan, and the United States, because I lived in Europe from Ireland to the Soviet Union for three years as a Rhodes Scholar (the luckiest of all scholars) and met bright people from all over the world, and because we were willing to sacrifice many of our own books (together having published a total of thirty-six) to raise necessary funds, the International Writing Program has lived for twenty years.

We would do it all again.

*

MY AMERICAN ADVENTURE

Zbigniew Bienkowski (Poland, 1967-69 IWP)²

My American adventure was neither picturesque nor exotic. Even the size of the American continent, which lends its dimensions to each experience there, was irrelevant in my case because my adventure was confined to a small provincial town, or rather to its campus. The town seems vaster than its share because its 30 thousand inhabitants live in one- or two-story houses spread generously over the flat country. The town is green in spring, gray in summer, gold and red in autumn, and immaculately white in winter. Lots of gray squirrels give a note of picturesqueness to its commonplace scenery. In summer, the big lavishly feathered birds called cardinals arrive, and the American equivalent to our nightingales, the mockingbirds, make themselves heard. What is difficult to bear is the continental summer—hot and humid. A cold shower every hour does not bring much relief. I had a small apartment without air conditioning which means that I had to live as Americans used to twenty or thirty years ago. In July and August I seriously thought it called for heroism to be an American! Especially here. New York and Washington are within easy reach of the ocean, New Orleans has the big water in addition to its great Jazz and topless attractions, Chicago is cooled by Lake Michigan, Arizona and New Mexico are dry and have cool nights, California—you know. And Iowa City, the town I lived in? All it has is a dam on Iowa River and an artificial lake which can be a weekend attraction at the most. On weekdays shelter must be sought in the university library with its good and easily accessible collection, its comfortable chairs and its air conditioning; fortunately, it is open from 7:45 a.m. to 2 a.m. the following day. The campus merges into the city proper making an organic part of it. During university holidays Iowa City becomes deserted—it is the twenty thousand students who give the town a share of their youth and beauty.

Seen from here, across the Atlantic, Iowa City seems a typical provincial town. But in America, where most universities have their campuses in such towns, its provinciality has a different meaning. All of America is provincial in the sense that the provinces—contrary to the opposite case of France—concur in creating her culture. Not the big cities, those huge weary Molochs, are the cultural centers of America, but rather the university towns with their university presses and magazines which belong

² Zbigniew Bienkowski was born to a family of workers. Studied law and philology at the University of Warsaw and the University of Paris. During World War II he was active in the underground as an agent of the Polish government in London. Resumed literary activity in 1945 as a writer and publisher, and became one of the leaders of the literary weekly *Renaissance*. Lived in France, and Switzerland 1946-49 as the deputy director of the Polish Museum at Rapperswil. After returning to Poland in 1950 he became a member of the editorial board of the literary monthly *Creation*. Among his books of poetry are *CRYSTALS OF SHADOW*, *MATTER OF IMAGINATION*. Books of criticism: *THE HELLS AND ORPHEUSES*, *MODELS*, *POETRY AND NO-POETRY*. Some of his works were translated and published in Yugoslavia, West Germany, Czechoslovakia. He was the first writer to participate in the International Writing Program from Poland.

to the most esteemed. Universities attract also writers, poets and critics who join their teaching staff periodically or permanently. The position of a visiting writer or writer in residence has already become an institution at many American campuses. As we know, even William Faulkner, secluded as he was in his privacy, did not shun collaborating with a university. And the University of Iowa is one of such centers. Maybe not one of the most renowned but certainly one of the greatly respectable. One of my Polish friends used to Polonize the name of the town twisting the pronunciation to Jalowa (Yawova) City, which means Barren City in Polish. Well, I must confess guiltily that there was no barrenness to make my life miserable in Iowa City. Another of my friends, a New Yorker in whom I confided my feeling of being cut off from the world shortly after my coming to Iowa, wrote back bluntly: you were lucky to have discovered the true America right on your arrival in the U.S. It was not at once that I understood the meaning of his words.

Iowa City is situated almost in the ideal center of the United States. It is as far from here to New York as to San Francisco. The closest urban giant, Chicago, is 225 (in the original mistakenly: 450) miles away from here. But Iowa City lies on an important route and several highways cross here. Years ago it was the capital of the state of Iowa which has preserved its basically agricultural character till the present day. The state is sparsely populated (3 million inhabitants) and conservative although not without some liberal traditions. Civilization arrived here by fits and starts, both from the East and the West, its impact cushioned by distance. The people have preserved some pleasant characteristics of their pioneer fathers, such as friendliness and mutual trust. It is not rare, when calling on friends, to find their houses empty and unlocked. I myself lived in a house without locks for two months. Iowans boast of the best traditions of American democracy. They take pride in John Brown having organized in Iowa "stations" of his underground railroad for fugitive Southern slaves on their way to Canada. There are a good many Quakers and idealists of other kinds here. Nowhere besides Iowa have I seen such peaceful demonstrations against the war in Vietnam: every week, on Wednesday noon, a group of silent people gather on the busiest street corner and one of them distributes handbills explaining the meaning of the silent demonstration to passers-by. I have seen professors and students I knew in the group.

The University of Iowa, besides usual departments and schools, has also a school of creative writing, or the Writers' Workshop. Several hundred young men and women study for the writing profession here. I must admit there is some sense to it—in American conditions. Many graduates will actually be able to earn their living by publishing adequate stories in countless magazines. They can also obtain a master's or doctor's degree here for a volume of poetry, a collection of stories or a novel. And a few graduates happen to become distinguished writers eventually. Among the graduates of the University of Iowa were such brilliant authors as Flannery O'Connor who died several years ago. There is else an International Writing Program acting in connection with the Iowa Writers Workshop. It has been started by Hualing Nih and Paul Engle, a poet and professor, who invite a handful of writers from all over the world every year. Paul is a great enthusiast of our country

and will go to great pains to have a Polish writer in the Program each year. Krzysztof Zarzecki, Ewa Zycienska, Malgorzata Hillar, Leszek Elektorowicz (1966-67 IWP), Jan Józef Szczepanski (1968-69 IWP), and the present writer have already been guests of the University of Iowa, and the latest to go there was Julian Strykowski (1969-70 IWP). The purpose of the Program is not complicated—to create a friendly atmosphere for novelists, poets and critics arriving from different parts of the world and to encourage their mutual contacts; in other words, to contribute, to the interpenetration of cultures. Such was the background of my American adventure. It came my way, as so many things in this life, quite by chance.

Towards the end of my preliminary period in Iowa I decided it was only fair that I, too, should do something for the Program. Although it was not obligatory each member of the Program felt he had to say something about his country or his cultural background, or just to introduce himself. A young fiction writer, Hans Christopher Buch, from the Federal Republic of Germany spoke about contemporary German literature, a Panamanian read his play, a Yugoslav acquainted us with Slovene poetry, a Japanese introduced his novel, an Indian girl did this, a Chinese that, etcetera, etcetera. All of that, of course, in a more or less adequate language of the hosts.

I procrastinated as long as I possibly could, to get a bit more familiar with spoken English. Finally, I reported my readiness. The experience of previous meetings convinced me that it would be useless to give an abstract lecture on Polish literature which was totally unknown to my listeners. On the other hand, a comparison of some Polish literary phenomenon with a well-known phenomenon of world literature could be a good way to give the audience some idea of the specifically Polish cultural context. So I selected a comparative subject: Baudelaire and Norwid, two sources of modern Polish poetry. I had an outline of the lecture ready beforehand because on my way to America I had stopped in Namur, Belgium, where I had been invited (together with two other Polish poets, Adam Wazyk and Zbigniew Herbert) to take part in a Baudelaire session to commemorate the centenary of his death. It so happened that Paul invited almost the entire university staff to my lecture, and people from the Slavic, Romance and English departments turned up. I felt just miserable but somehow I survived the ordeal. What took me completely by surprise, though, was the reaction to my lecture. I might have expected anything but not that I would make my audience feel genuinely guilty about not having known of a poet of Norwid's caliber. (The sporadic English translations from Norwid had so far been published only in magazines.) The outcome was that everybody suggested I should collaborate with a group of Anglo-American poets on an English selection of Norwid's work. So it began. The proposal dazzled me at first, but soon it threw me into a panic. What dazzled me about it was its disinterestedness resulting from a learning zeal unparalleled anywhere besides America. Those people wanted to be acquainted with a Polish poet because he had been a genius, and they were determined to make up for the omission caused by the language barrier. What they had learned from my lecture should rather have discouraged them. I had made no secret of all the difficulties of Norwid's poetry, of his hermetic language. But it acted as incentive

instead. Paul Engle, the initiator and chief spokesman of Norwid's cause, found more and more arguments to lull my growing panic. "Norwid must be published in America, and you, Zbigniew, must help," he kept saying with the persistence of an incurable enthusiast. What could I do? I gave in. Not with a light heart, so help me God.

Translated by Krzysztof Zarzecki
TWORCZOSC (Warsaw, Poland), June 1970

THE AMERICAN NOTEBOOK OF JUNE 1972

Zbigniew Bienkowski

The name of Paul Engle is well-known in this country (Poland) as that of the founder and moving spirit of the International Writing Program of the University of Iowa. It is at his invitation that poets and fiction writers from all over the world come for a year's stay in the small Midwestern town of Iowa City. Well over ten of us Poles have already been there, and more are to go. A great deal has already been written in Poland about the Iowa writing school itself—I have written about it, too. But Paul Engle is not only the director of the Writing Program. He is also a poet. Also may sound a bit tactless here since he has come to the literary men's director precisely because he is a poet. But the status of the literary men's (and women's) boss is so all-important that Paul Engle the poet is hardly noticeable on his own ground. He discreetly does not advertise his own poetry. However, he does not carry false modesty too far, either, presenting each member of the Program with one of his volumes. I have also received one. But the abundance of local and visiting poets, the accumulation of famous, impressive and fashionable names is so great that Engle the poet gets lost in the hubbub. Furthermore, it seemed awkward to flatter the "boss" with an excessive interest in his poetic work while being at his place. Sensitive people cannot be bought. Anyway, the fact is that Engle the poet is not only none the better for his official position, but does not even owe anything to director Engle.

In consequence, I have become familiar with Engle the poet only now. I own a few volumes of his poetry (altogether, he has published about ten). The majority of his poems are connected, in mood even if not in subject matter, with that region of the American continent from which the poet comes—the Middle West. Born in Cedar Rapids, a smallish city in Iowa, Engle has lived all his life (except for periods of study at Oxford and of travel) in the region of his birth. The son of a poor farmer who turned a small-time haulage contractor, he helped around the stable as a boy and was a wagon driver as a young man. He has achieved everything by his own work. He told some of us about his embarrassment when he won the Rhodes scholarship to Oxford—his passage from Chicago to London had been paid but in order to get from Cedar Rapids to Chicago he had to borrow money for his railroad ticket from a neighbor. He possesses all the character traits belonging to our idea of the American Middle West, the land of pioneers, of friendly, neighborly, trustful, hard-working people. Sensitive, optimistic, guileless, he is an enthusiast who often warms up to a project with a sudden short-lived ardor, just like we Poles. Full of unrealized ideas, he

can also be tough, uncompromising, even stubborn when it comes to matters of principle. And his poetry is a clear reflection of his character. It is not the contrived, the conceptual, the intellectual type. If we were to look for analogies we could find some similarities in the poetry of the Polish authenticists (local color poets of the twenties and thirties). There is the same amazed rapture at the vastness of the world in it, the same emotional affection for life, for the existence as such, the same naive childlike feeling of love and friendship. One senses the original American in it, America the sentimental, the generous, the broad-minded, America of the Quakers, almost mythical nowadays. The pioneer ideals of the Midwest are reflected in these poems. And in the background, there is the exuberant nature contrasted with man's toil. Even the titles of the volumes stress the connection with the Middle West: AMERICAN SONG, CORN (meaning maize, the crop of Iowa), ALWAYS THE LAND, WEST OF MIDNIGHT, THE WORD OF LOVE, AMERICAN CHILD.

American poetry, like American literature in general, mirrors the American continent. Whitman was not isolated in his vision of its vastness. Reporting, factual accuracy, concrete images and emotions can be found even in the most intellectual poetry. In Paul Engle's poetry they acquire an elegiac tone which may account for its lack of sharpness. His poetry does not aim at intellectual synthesis or dramatic tension. Read today, it seems out of the museum of primitive American sensibility. It may be just this quality that alienates it the most from the contemporary American reader, rebellious against puritanism as he is, who finds it no vehicle for his emptiness and his mental and emotional vagueness. It is the kind of poetry which requires of an American reader too immaculate and too fundamental a purity of feeling. But for a non-American reader it uncovers the American myth, the American dream of America.

I find what to my knowledge is Paul Engle's last published volume so far, A WOMAN UNASHAMED, his most interesting collection. The volume collects poems written as an immediate result of the poet's contact with the nonAmerican world, mainly the world of Asia. It is the fruit of the author's voyage. The confrontation of the American simplicity and the childlike imagination with the inconceivably complicated cultural and emotional extravagance of the Orient creates the most impressive effects. The cycle of poems which gave its title to the entire volume and which tells of a Japanese woman, of her love, her lust, her longing and her loss is poetry of great beauty. One would like to quote a great many poems of the cycle. Here is "Lament," for instance:

You are gone ten months.
 Even the small bones in my
 Body are lonesome.
 There were two flowers in the garden today:
 Azalea crimson in the bold sun,
 and a bride rice-flower pale
 when her new husband stared at her.
 At midnight we could hear the moon
 barking at all of the dogs in the world.

None of the garden trees had tops.
Night had cut them.
Darkness dissolved the leaves and crept
into the tiny space between blades of grass.
We were so close, not even the night air
lay between us.
Now at high noon, in your absence, the sun
is a living wound in the sky bleeding light.

I think this poem gives a fairly accurate idea of the emotional concreteness of Paul Engle's imagination.

Translated by Krzysztof Zarzecki
TWORCZOSC (Warsaw, Poland) June 1972

TO TOUCH THE MYTH OF IOWA

A. B. YEHOASHUA (*Israel, 1968-1969 IWP*)³

I always congratulate myself for having first become acquainted with America during a long stay in Iowa City. Since my initial visit there, when I was invited in 1968 to participate in the second year of the International Writing Program in Iowa, I have returned to America many times and to many different places (though for relatively short periods). And each time I get to know yet another face of America. Nevertheless, it seems to me that my most important and meaningful acquaintance with America derives from my extended stay in a small city in the very heart of America.

When I talk about my stay in Iowa to a great many Americans (and in particular to New Yorkers) they always grin at first, as if I were talking about a Godforsaken place of no character, something accidental. But I staunchly insist that if foreigners (and maybe even Americans) want to understand America from within, to comprehend the seeds of its identity, places like Iowa City are the place to begin.

There both halves of the kernel of American identity are quite plain, with neither masks nor husks—American liberalism, individualism, kindheartedness and warmth, as well as the stubborn, almost wild conservatism, that together constitute the essence of America. From the seething intellectualism of New York and Boston or the formless freedom of California I doubt that it is possible to construct a coherent and comprehensive picture of America.

In Iowa we also had the experience of a real winter, snowy and cold. As was not the case in later years, in those days they did not spare the IWP participants the Iowa winter. And as we had come for eight months, we went into the heart of hearts of that powerful winter. Into the streets covered with endless snow for months upon months. For a person who had come from a mild Mediterranean country and who had seen snow maybe once or twice in his whole life, it was a profound experience to give a good swing of a mallet to shatter the tough layer of ice that had formed on the windshield of the car; to see the light changing on the prairies of snow; and especially to experience the green and tempestuous outburst of spring at the end of the month of April and the beginning of May. Iowa granted me an experience of Nature I shall never forget.

My stay in Iowa was at the end of the famous sixties, when the struggle against the war in Vietnam, Nixon's rise to power, the real or illusory student

³ Avraham B. Yehoshua, one of the leading fiction writers in Israel, was the first writer to participate in the IWP from Israel. Born in Jerusalem to a family that has lived in Israel for five generations; he served as a parachutist in the Israeli army and completed his doctoral work in comparative literature at the University of Paris. He worked as a dean of students and teacher in Hebrew at Haifa University College and was director of the Israel School in Paris. His novel *THREE DAYS AND A CHILD* was filmed and won a prize at the Cannes Film Festival in 1966. Some of his works have been translated and published in several countries including America.

revolution, the powerful confrontation between the two worlds filled the space around me. This was clearly the era of “The Greening of America.” As a man with his own small family, and as a person already well into his early thirties, I was sober enough to see the flower children and the various sorts of hippies in correct perspective, but I was young enough not to regard them with defensive hostility and to listen to the beautiful voices that rose out of the riots. Whenever people talk to me about the sixties in America, I recall pleasant pictures of the pretty students silently walking barefoot in their long, flowered dresses among the red brick buildings of the University of Iowa. One of those girls appeared, shortly after I returned from Iowa, in a long novella I wrote called *EARLY IN THE SUMMER OF 1970*.

During the eight months of my stay in Iowa I wrote my second play, *BOAZ’S DAYS OF AWE*, which, on my return to Israel, I decided to put into deep storage. And in a certain sense my lack of success in fathering a real, live literary “child” in Iowa left a bad taste of disappointment in my mouth about that whole stay. Only in the course of the fifteen years that have passed have I realized just how many of the elements I was trying to deal with in that play have returned to nourish any number of the stories and novels and plays I have written since I came back to Israel. So, when just a few weeks ago I was contacted by a young director who had discovered in one of the theater archives the manuscript of a play I had written in Iowa and who requested permission to stage it, I said Why bother? The play has already come alive!

I would rather not say very much now about the program itself and its participants and the connections between the people. It was all conducted by Paul Engle and his enchanting wife Hualing, with intelligence, attention, and patience. These two important creative individuals shatter the accepted truth that creative people and artists are so involved with themselves that they have no time for others. When I read the reports sent to me from Iowa about Paul Engle and his wife and when I hear my Israeli friends return from Iowa and sing his praise, I realize that before my very eyes this midwestern poet is becoming a genuine legend. And I always rejoice that I had the opportunity to touch this legend. ----Translated by Vivian Eden

(from A. B. Yehoshua, *EARLY IN THE SUMMER OF 1970*, translation Miriam Arad, New York: Doubleday, 1977.)

LEAVING KNEE-PRINTS IN THE WARM EARTH
Cheng Chou-yu (Taiwan, 1968-69 IWP)⁴

I kneel on the warm earth
gazing, face to face with the red setting sun,
on my knees.

My knees sink into the soft
and fertile ground,
fragrant and fresh
as a buckwheat cake soaked in oil.
Ah, the dark soil!
I cup a handful
and clasp it
as, in a dream,
one clasps the hand of a loved one far away;
my eyes fix on
the full setting sun
that drops towards
my barren and destitute
homeland

How I long for the day
when my native soil too
may spread such fertile fields to the horizon
and with equal warmth
allow me to kneel
while the warm glow courses from my knees
up to my throat, and then to
my eyes, and the tears that stream from them
will also be warm.

Suddenly, the sun drops and disappears,
leaving the sky splayed with red
as if it sank
into a sea of blood.
Raven begin to sing a song
of irony which I do not understand.
My barren and destitute land,
what manner of warfare
is still going on and on?

As I rise to my feet,
my tears have cooled,
slowly, I make my way back

⁴ Cheng Chou-yu is the pen name of Cheng Wen-tao. He is one of the major Chinese poets, and a rare phenomenon—his books of poetry are among the best sellers in Chinese. His poetry has been put in music, sung at concerts and made into CDs. Among his many volumes of poetry are ABOVE THE SPACE OF DREAM, THE ODALISQUES OUTSIDE THE WINDOW. He has been teaching Chinese at Yale after completing the Master of Fine Arts in the Writers Workshop at the University of Iowa.

leaving behind me two
knee-prints
as if after an execution.
In the dark abyss above me,
the carriage of ravens following
clad in black, and
in formation, are they
the pallbearers?

MEMORIES OF IOWA CITY AND THE INTERNATIONAL WRITING PROGRAM

ALFREDO VEIRAVE (ARGENTINA, 1968-69 IWP)⁵

WHEN I look back and recall the months when I lived in Iowa City, a multitude of beautiful memories reappear like transparent ghosts that accompany and enrich me. I think — I'm sure—that my participation in the International Writing Program had a decisive influence on my literary life; at the IWP, among other things, I learned to look at literature with a new, more universal vision.

I traveled to the U.S. with Pia, my wife, and I left my two small children, Delfina and Federico, in Chaco. I name them in a poem written in Iowa, or better, in the Mayflower Apartments under the circumstances that I will relate. I had seen, on live television, the space trip around the moon, and from that infinite space, the planet Earth, revolving in the cosmos. One of the astronauts said that from his cabin, looking through one eye he could never cover the planet Earth with his thumb. That intelligent observation suddenly gave me a clear idea of the smallness of our planet in the cosmos, my situation as a foreigner in Iowa, and inhabitant of the (then) distinct Chaco. Then I wrote a poem that was later translated and included in various anthologies, titled “My House is a Part of the Universe.”

Those who saw it say that the earth
is a sphere in space,
a rather small planet
the size of the astronaut's thumb.
I don't doubt it because I've seen the photograph
and because now I'm almost half a planet from my home.
The best part of all this is that in that thumb
my house is also a part of the universe.
How could it not be if in the back patio
there is a philodendron with gigantic leaves and
 also worms in the dirt
good fishing, and now that I remember
the smell of the ferns along the wall
Delfina or Federico's head between the trees
and that canary that flew away from us at night.

That same night, very late, while Pia slept, I left my apartment and went to the room of the Brazilian poet, Affonso de Sant' Anna. At that time he was writing a thesis about the great poet from his country, Drummond de Andrade, and I felt close to him because we were both poets and professors of literature, a great friendship that began in Iowa and continues today. I read him that draft and he said it was all

⁵ Alfredo Veirave is a professor of literature and Spanish at the National University of the Northeast in Argentina. His books of poetry have given him national recognition; among his poetry collections are THE DAWN, THE RIVER, YOUR PRESENCE, DESTRUCTION AND A GARDEN OF THE MEMORY. He has also published annotated editions of Argentine classics.

right although he asked me to delete—for reasons of rhythm—a line that said, “and a poet from Brazil whom I like a lot.” I mention this to indicate that the times we shared were not exclusively within the university, but during every moment of our lives in the Mayflower and in the corridors that we walked down, knocking on one or the other of the doors of the apartments where we were living. With the Mexican novelist Gustavo Sainz we even had a code for opening the door: two hard knocks followed by three rapid ones, which kept us from interrupting each other’s work at just any moment, since our social life was at times more intense than the literary one. We had created, perhaps without intending to do so, a “community” of Latin American poets and writers, out of which came friendships that still last, and many of us continue seeing each other either in Argentina or in their countries. The members of this “community” are the Chilean Carlos Cortinez, who now lives in the U.S., the Colombian Fernando Arbelaez, the Brazilians Lindolf Bell, Affonso de Sant’Anna, and Luis Vilela, the Panamanian Enrique Jaramillo, and many others who, between 1968 and 1969, shared the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa.

When we arrived in Iowa, the countryside that surrounded the university and the river was peaceful, beautiful, and captivating, giving promise of the other countryside to come that our Iowa friends told us about; starting in September I already began thinking about what snow in Iowa would be like. As autumn wore on and winter came, that promise was approaching, until one night, as we left the house of some Argentine friends living in the city, the lady of the house, looking up at the sky, casually remarked: “Tonight it’s going to snow. . . .

I have to confess that that night I didn’t sleep; every once in a while I’d get up with the same eagerness as when in my childhood I’d stay up waiting for the Wise Men and their gifts at Christmastime. . . . Several days went by like that until one morning when I woke up I heard a noise at the bedroom window. It sounded like a bird lightly touching the glass. While I was coming fully awake I had memories of similar sounds, such as that of some strange animal rubbing against the glass. And suddenly I remembered the snow, and I jumped out of bed and went to the window. There it was: snow. During the night the whole countryside had changed to white as if by magic. I was so excited that we had to get dressed and run out into the street to feel the light, magical Iowa snow. I pay tribute to that snow in a poem I entitled “Unidentified Objects,” since in those days books and many articles had been published on UFOs.

Traveling in a circle around the earth,
 recounting the trip
 in all the possible languages
 I am once again in a motionless garden
 where
 there are many unidentified objects:
 some innocent striped zebras under the birches
 pale sick guests on the back of the record
 Polyphemus’s eye beneath the jacaranda
 flower
 a glass monster with buttons

a Homeric hero who dies at the edge of the sea
the leaves of the rubber plant beneath the rain
the chemical formula for the rainbow.
After last Sunday I ought to add
to this interminable list:
the light, magical Iowa snow.

It's clear that none of this—lifelong friendships, poetry, the subsequent successes in my career—would have happened if it were not for the poet Paul Engle, an exceptional man who made possible an unforgettable time.

Translated from the Spanish by Thorpe Running

A STEP BEYOND

GOZO YOSHIMASU
(Japan, 1970-1971; 1981 IWP)⁶

TOKYO for me is a broken-down, two-story wooden house in Komagome. The phone in my home rarely rings, but now it jangled loudly, and I jumped up in a dither, since I had been happily absorbed in poetic thoughts (daydreams, actually).

“This is Tendō.”

“Tendō! Ah! How are you?”

“OK. Listen. Would you do a reading in Hokkaidō in the winter?”

“Well, yes, I . . .”

“All right. See you !”

It had been like a quick call from somebody who had won a lottery, and now the line was dead, and inside me a snowscape opened out.

It is fifteen years ago now. I was trudging alone through the snows of the American Midwest. When I say “Iowa,” Americans give me a funny look, as if I were E. T. Fruits of the earth, no, corn—cornfields as far as you can see, an ideal place, a utopia.

In that utopia, in Iowa, there is a man who is known as a kind of John Wayne of poets. Paul Engle, with his Chinese novelist wife Hualing Nieh (Engle), now director of the program, has built a peculiar thing called the International Writing Program. In order to make a utopia they bring together from each country in the world an E. T. — no, poets and writers, that most beguiling human breed. So it was that the poet Tamura Ryuichi (1967-68 IWP) came to participate as E. T., Model No. 1. Model No. 1, a headliner in places like Shinjuku and Kamkura. Thus, a quiet university town of some 40,000 became a scene that echoed night after night with “Mister Tamooruh’s” renditions of old army songs. A bit of an exaggeration, but . . .

E. T. No. 3 was me. Out of work, strung out. A fledgling poet cooped up in a four-and-a-half-mat room in an apartment in Tokyo, I got a phone call.

From Mister Tamooruh.

“Yoshimasu-kun, do you want to go to America? You’d be my successor.”

“Yes.”

So in the autumn of the year that Mishima Yukio died, I was trudging through a corner of utopia, alone and thinking desolate thoughts, feeling as though the

⁶ Gozo Yoshimasu is one of the major poets in Japan. His thousand-line poem, *Yoran, A Thousand Steps* is the first in a cycle of thousand-line poems about the seasons. His books include: *SHOSHO DE KAKARET KAWA (RIVER WRITTEN ON GRASS ‘ECRITURE’)*, *GOLDEN VERSES*, *DEPARTURE*. The poem, *Mad in the Morning*, was the one he submitted to the International Writing Program in 1970. Paul Engle said, “When I read the first few lines, I decided that this young man should come.” Now he is a world-class figure in the Japanese literary scene. He met Marilia from Brazil in the Program and they married in 1971. They have combined poetry with music and singing, and performed in many parts of the world.

squirrels hiding in the trees were whispering in English. Powdery snow danced, and I got a phone call in English.

“Gozo? This is Paul.”

It was General Paul Engle, now 68, a man I might well call my mentor. “Bring two or three pieces,” he ordered, “and assemble at the university radio station. We will record a reading.” At that time I had begun to feel somewhat close to them: the Indonesian poet, Gerson Poyk, the Philippine poet, Gelacio Guillermo (he was a young fighter; is he still underground, I wonder?) Hwang Tong-gyu from Korea, Lo Yen from Taiwan.

It was my turn. When I stepped before the microphone, I could see the Sony logo. A nice reminder of home, or no? Pasty-faced, strung-out, sullen Gozo shouted:

Golden sword looks directly at the sun
 Aah
 Pear blossom making a transit past the face of a fixed star!
 Winds blow
 The whole of Asia
 The soul becomes a wheel, and rolls along above the clouds.

Translated from the Japanese by Robert Leutner

MAD IN THE MORNING

I shout the first line of my poem
 I write the first line
 A carving knife stands up madly in the morning
 These are my rights!
 The glow of morning or a woman’s breasts are not always beautiful
 Beauty is not always first
 All music is a lie!
 Ah! First of all, let’s close all the petals and fall down to the earth
 This morning, September 24, 1966
 I wrote a letter to my dearest friend
 About original sin
 About the perfect crime and the method of destroying intelligence

Ah!
 What a drop of water rolling on my pale pink palm!
 The woman’s breast are reflected in a coffee saucer!
 Oh! I can’t fall down!
 Though I ran rapidly over the edge of the sword, the world has not disappeared!

“Waah, bravo-o-o, Go-ozo! Kamikaze! Whoa!” and so on and so forth—the studio burst into an uproar like a festival crowd.

Translated from the Japanese by Yoshida Hiriohi and John Batki

TALKING WITH PAUL ENGLE

AUREL DRAGOS MUNTEANU
(Romania, 1970-71 IWP)⁷

Tall and lanky, Paul Engle is the kind of man who does at least three things at the same time; In his office on the fourth floor of the English-Philosophy Building at the University of Iowa in Iowa City, an office crammed with books in all the languages of this Earth, Paul Engle talks continuously on the phone, the receiver held on his right shoulder, while typing on the electric typewriter and chatting with a colleague who knows from what meridian of the world, signaling, motioning towards a chair, explaining some little Job to him, listening all this time to his interlocutor's sentences at the other end of the wire, sticking the instrument under his chin. Hualing, his wife, and I laughed our heads off and marveled, for months, at the prodigiousness of our guru, as the Indian poet Shrikant Varma surnamed Paul Engle, the good friend of the Romanians wandering on the banks of the Iowa River. How easily Engle managed to help every one of the ten lost sheep in his Program, while thinking, at the same time, about the next ten, since the gathering of the funds for the following year was already underway when we arrived there, would have to be imagined. It is a fact that Paul Engle is one of the most noted poets in the last decade in the United States, and, without a doubt, the greatest in the Midwest. He has written tens of books of verse, he has affected the fate of creative writing as the director of the workshop by the same name at the University of Iowa, he has militated for the establishment of a writer's rights in his country; in a word, he is a personality. He does not like to talk about himself and this is why. I did not find it easy to persuade him to allow me to make a transcription of a long conversation I had with him in the Chinese atmosphere provided by Hualing, and after the kind of dinner (fish, in the oriental manner) you only hear about in fairy tales. Well, a couple of months before, he had accused me of not knowing how to live: since I did not eat meat, I would not be able to participate completely in the spirit of American hospitality. It seems, though, that I had relented that night without feeling sorry. Hualing's fish was truly delicious. Engle was brimming over. He tells me first a host of things that I understand about political life in the United States, about Teddy Kennedy, and who knows what else besides, then sends some advice to the kitchen, reads the *New York Times*, arranges that I be taken to a game of the University basketball team on a following day, while all this time, he is also concerned that I will not feel neglected for a moment. He exchanges nods with his wife over the appetite with which this lacto-vegetarian Romanian is relishing the American fish that has been cooked according to the Chinese recipe.

⁷ Aurel Dragos Munteanu, fiction writer and Buddhist. Among his works: UNQUIET AFTERNOON (short stories), ALONE (novel), THE SACRED SCARAB (novel), THE PHILOSOPHY OF DESCARTES--an analysis of Descartes' MEDITATIONS PHILOSOPHIQUES. He has also written literary book reviews and done translations. He played one of the leading roles in the revolt against Ceausescu's government, became the Romanian Ambassador to the United Nations in 1990.

I told him that American poets and fiction writers strike me, in comparing them with the Europeans, as exceedingly strange in their life-styles, their way of thinking about their art, the finalities they set for themselves, their way of living their art as some kind of existence. . .

Look, Engle said; I know what you are referring to. I lived for three years in Europe, I was a student in England, and I traveled in France, Germany, Italy and the Soviet Union. All this before the war. I crossed the continent, all by myself, from one end to the other, as far as Moscow. In 1963 I got to know Asia fairly well. I visited then Japan, India, Pakistan. I can talk from experience. True, we are not like the Europeans, but besides, here within the United States properly speaking there is no unitary poetic or artistic conscience. In those days, when I began to write, two extreme conditions were dominant, and they were named after the conflict that presided at the birth of the American nation. On one side, there were the “redskins,” the poets who dealt with the burden of a farmer’s life, his nearness to the soil, the pleasures of a simple life, life in the wilderness; and on the other, there were the “pale faces,” the refined and trained artists, the metaphysicals. One should try to understand, Paul Engle went on, the poetry of great extremes in everything, in the truths it expresses, and in the ways in which these truths are expressed. Take, for instance, Sandburg and Wallace Stevens. I have always admired both the wild and the refined ones. . . I have learned from experience how necessary poetic training is to the discovery of your identity. Look at all the foreigners in Iowa. The Indians become more Indian than they were before. The Romanians become more Romanian, (if that is possible, I said laughing). I love this country and its hard-working people, Engle said. I was born to poor people from Amana (a small community near Iowa City). My father had no high school, my mother was the first in her family to get secondary education. My family worked the soil, they were farmers. My mother’s dream was that I go to college. My parents were practical people; nowadays we would call them pragmatists. They worked from morning till night. My grandfather was a farmer and a soldier. That time, next to a spade you had to have a rifle. My father’s specialty was the training of horses. I can fairly say, I grew up on horseback. when I was going to school, my father used to work with horse and wagon for a telephone company. He used to drop us off to school on his way to work. That’s how I grew, in the school of hard work. In this region all the people are hard-working. I have been working since the day I could work. I sold newspapers on the street, first. I would go on a bicycle, and I would throw the papers to the porches. You need a special skill for that. (In a burst of energy, Engle, at this point, twists the *New York Times*, tightly, makes a perfect fold, then tucks in one of the ends.) Here, this is how you have to do it; you throw it, it drops on the ground, it won’t get undone, and it doesn’t scatter. I was one of the best in this kind of work, he says proudly. Do you think it was an easy job speeding on that bicycle all over town and delivering newspapers? I was in Cedar Rapids then. After this I worked as a driver, a gardener, a drugstore salesman. That’s what I liked the best. I was there from four in the afternoon to twelve midnight. I read between sales. Like all drugstores, that too had lots of magazines. I would read them all. That’s how I read Joyce’s *ULYSSES*. I also received a great deal of help. The

drugstore owner was ordering those journals that no one else was reading, just for me. Since then I have been helping others I wouldn't be anything if others hadn't helped me. At sixteen I knew that in my life I only wanted to be a writer, and that I would dedicate myself only to writing and to those who write. My first poems I published while I was still in high school. I was the first person in the United States to receive a University Degree for a volume of verse, instead of a piece of research. Likewise I was .the first to found within the University a special section dedicated to creative writing on a par with the departments of Chemistry, Physics, etc. Should a young poet ask your advice in connection with the course. he might follow in life, what would you say to him? Three things, Paul Engle replies. The first, that he should not distance himself from life. Poetry is everywhere, and all people experience poetry. Second, artistic feeling will not suffice to a poet. Monkeys too have feelings, but they won't make poetry. The poem lives in the tension between the reactions of feeling and the control of consciousness. The two of them give you artistic expression, poetry, properly speaking. Third, that he listen carefully to all people, and that he be not proud. The wisest men are frequently uneducated men. From them he will learn to do well whatever he does. But suppose you were asked by some ordinary youth, I tell him, without any poetic talent; a kid from Cedar Rapids, your home town. I would give him s single piece of advice, the last in the series to the poet: that he try, in anything he would do, to be as good as he can, to be the best there is, if possible. We Americans are a competitive nation. The only way to make it is to possess excellence in something. No matter what that is; but that you be tops at something. That's what I would tell him. How did the idea of our Program occur to you? I ask him. Engle laughs for a few uncontrollable moments I directed the Creative Writing Workshop of the University before this, as you know, he says. It was during a summer, and while Hua-ling and I were swimming in the river; I thought what would it be like if we tried in Iowa City that older idea of mine that writers can understand one another in spite of linguistic barriers, and that the literary imagination lives in all languages. It would be a program of individualities in which the writers would be respected as persons, and in which they would be able to write in peace, and feel more like themselves. People suffer so much through the fact that they do not understand one another; what would it be like if I showed that they are able to understand one another if they respect one another. I would set up a Program with just this single rule: that you respect yourself equally as you do all others. I had given thousands of scholarships to young American writers before, suppose I gave foreigners a few, creating, thus, the possibility for the most diverse men, coming from different parts of the world to come closer together. You see, the madness of it was that I gave no thought to the immense financial difficulties that would entail, so now I am running around all day to find money for you. Engle laughs again, and slaps me on the back with the force of a football player. Writers, he says, are difficult creatures. If they can live together, what should we say about the others? They should be like brothers! I laugh also. Engle pursues this thought. It is still very difficult for us who populate this deeply-tried planet. In two hundred years it will be possible to live a wonderful life. I believe in people, in their destiny. Mr. Engle, I ask him again,

do you regret anything in your life until now? He is deep in thought, looks at Hualing. In a little while he says: I would do again many of the things which I have done in the past. I regret all that which I wanted to do and could not do through my own weaknesses. In any case I would not repeat whatever angered, whatever I know hurt others.

Translated from the Romanian by Stavros Deligiorgis
LUCEAFARUL (Bucharest, Romania), October 9, 1971

A DELHI POET IN IOWA

SHRIKANT VARMA
(India, 1970-71, 79 IWP)⁸

I first met Paul Engle 10 years ago. He was in India to meet writers and acquaint himself with contemporary Indian literature. Seven years later, in May 1970, I received a surprise letter. "I have selected you for this year's International Writing Program," he wrote. "Please let me know if you will come."

I wondered how he was able to remember, after seven years, a young writer whom he had met just once by chance. I learned later that he had been reading translations of my poems.

That letter led to a memorable experience.

Paul Engle is an American poet. But he is more than that. He founded and built Iowa's famous International Writing Program. This is a unique manifestation of the American academic community's willingness to honor the world's literary talent irrespective of ideology.

Year after year Paul Engle brings together writers, poets and playwrights from all continents, provides them with a creative leisure they badly need, and expects nothing in return save the little pleasure of conversation with creative people, most of whom hardly know English. It is enthralling to watch these writers expressing their sorrow, joy and conflict, sometimes articulating complex intellectual problems, in a language which was alien to them at home.

The program does not require its participants to complete any writing project during the eight-month (October to June) session. It merely creates the conditions for writing; it does not attempt to define or arrange the leisure available to the writer. Being a creative writer himself, Paul Engle is aware that writing results from an inner compulsion; the best conditions may sometimes be unproductive. As Paul Engle puts it: "You are free to write or not to write anything."

A program fellowship is the ideal reward for a writer seeking an escape from the noncreative tensions and the bustle of city life.

Honoring writers is an old tradition in Iowa City, Iowa, once described by British author C. P. Snow as "the most cosmopolitan settlement among small towns in the world." The city, with a population around 50,000, owes its cosmopolitan and academic flavor to the University of Iowa, which was founded there in 1847. Paul Engle came there in the mid-thirties to direct and develop an American Writers' Workshop for young literary talent. American poets, playwrights and novelists who

⁸ Shrikant Varma was a special correspondent of *Dinaman*, a *Times* of India publication. He published four collection of poems, one novel and two volumes of short stories. Varma's works were published in several countries including the United States, United Kingdom, the U.S.S.R., West Germany and Japan. He died in 1985.

have learnt or taught at Iowa include Tennessee Williams, William Stafford, Robert Penn Warren, Philip Roth, Robert Bly, Anthony Hecht, Jane Cooper, Flannery O'Connor, W.D. Snodgrass, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., Vance Bourjaily and William Price Fox.

Philip Roth, who taught at the Iowa Workshop from 1960 to 1962, said that no matter how much criticism has been leveled at so-called "writers' schools," Iowa had been productive and worthwhile for him. "The workshop did a marvelous job of keeping young writers serious about their work," he said, "and the University of Iowa provided them with a fine environment in which to live cheaply, as well as being away from the temptations of the market place. It always seemed to me that writing students benefited by being around one another, too; that it was a help to have a community of like-minded sufferers."

In his own view, Paul Engle believes that "good writers, like hybrid corn, are both born and made." He feels that what he is striving to create at Iowa is "a community of articulate people who are allowed to run, stumble and jump over the lovely landscape of the imagination."

Encouraged by his success with native writers, Paul Engle founded the International Writers' Workshop with Hualing Nieh seven years ago. Since then, writers from many continents have been going to Iowa to take part in one of the most prestigious literary curriculums of the world. So far, more than 130 writers from 47 countries have attended the program.

Early every September writers start arriving in Iowa. A grant enables them to travel all over America at the end of the term. Paul Engle reserves apartments for them in Mayflower, a posh residential building on the bank of the Iowa River, which remains frozen during the three winter months.

How does Engle manage to get together writers from as many as five continents? Even the minds of "ministries of culture" would boggle at the task of processing the records of aspiring writers from more than a hundred countries. But Paul Engle has a computer's memory—and a judgment that's sounder. Recommendations do not influence him. The extravagant resumes writers sometimes provide do not awe him. Reading translations, traveling round the world, he keeps an eye on writers who have attained distinction—or merely displayed promise.

The International Writing Program is mainly a creative-cum-translation project. Round the year, writers work on themes they have in mind. The typewriters in Mayflower are never silent. They yield a number of poems, short stories and novels every year. In the 1970-71 project which I attended, Gerson Poyk of Indonesia and Hector Libertella of Argentina completed their novels. Imre Szasz of Hungary wrote his memoirs. Primoz Kozak of Yugoslavia almost completed his play. Collections of poems were produced by Adrian Paunescu of Romania, Artur Miedzyrzecki of Poland, Moshe Dor of Israel, Hwang Tong-gyu of Korea and Gozo Yoshimasu of Japan. Hector Libertella and Gozo Yoshimasu won top awards from their respective countries for works produced while in Iowa.

American teachers and students volunteer to translate works of the visiting writers into English. Some part-time translators also collaborate with the authors. In

1970-71, the Program engaged three young American writers, Denis Johnson, John Batki and Elliott Anderson, to collaborate with the visiting writers in translating their works.

Visiting poets work with translators every afternoon in two or three small rooms in the English and Philosophy Building. Most poets give the translators a prose version of their poems for rendering into poetry. The translators try to retain the flavor of the original, and study the sound pattern and rhythm of the poem. Their responsibility is twofold: to do justice to themselves, to do no injustice to the poet.

My own poems were recreated into English by Elliott Anderson. I had with me a draft translation done by my friend Vishnu Khare, a young Hindi poet and an excellent translator. This draft could hardly be improved. However, we decided to re-do it for an audience unfamiliar with “the Oriental sensibility.” For days Anderson and I worked together on the original, discussing phrases and paraphrases. We took care to preserve local color in the poems. The following excerpts from a few of our collaborative translations will illustrate this point.

*The truth is out (similes
Have been abolished
Otherwise I might
Have said
Like grass
Springing
From
Fog)*

*From the year 2000 in the year 2000
Boredom
Arrested
Everyone
Wherever he may have been.*

*The sorrow of the earth
Emerges from its lonely comer
Like a fox
And looking skyward
Weeps —
Give it
Shelter.*

—from “Augury”

From time to time the Program held a poetry recital by its participants for an invited audience. I remember two sessions—an evening of Asian poetry and an evening of European poetry. In June 1971, at the end of our program year, Nelson Arietti of Venezuela brought out a pictorial work based on the poems we had produced or translated in Iowa.

Intellectually, the most exciting feature of the Program was the Thursday evening session that discussed trends in contemporary writing. Every week a selected writer presented a paper on the literary scene in his or her country. Most

papers were ably written and gave a lucid exposition of the mind of the writer in conflict with himself.

Sometimes general issues were debated. On one occasion a certain writer remarked that Hemingway's understanding of man's predicament is hardly relevant to the contemporary writer. This led to an uproar. The writer who made this remark found at least a dozen writers arrayed against him. To my surprise, Hemingway received the strongest support from East European writers. What better example could there be of international understanding? Often, discussions continued well beyond the formal closure of the meeting.

At another meeting, the absence of tragedy in Indian writing came in for criticism. While even Asian authors failed to understand this phenomenon, Romanian novelist Aurel Dragos Munteanu, who is also a brilliant scholar of Indian philosophy, rose to explain it. "India," he remarked, "is not simply a geographical entity. It is also a frame of mind. The Indian mind does not accept death. Consequently, it banishes tragedy."

The International Writing Program would have been colorless and apathetic without its literary controversies, its burning intellectual battles. These did not create ill-will among the writers present but brought them closer. Once an eminent professor spoke on the making of modern literature. He launched a scathing attack on modern writing. He attacked Becket—who, he said, heralds the age of silence. He was profound, his arguments were sound. But we were partisans of modern writing. We felt compelled to defend it. At the end of his talk the speaker invited questions. The atmosphere was grim. Suddenly I rose and said: "What you have said about modernism in literature may be true. But will you kindly tell us what is the alternative to modern writing?" The speaker faltered and failed to answer. There was applause from fellow-writers, relieved at the speaker's failure to answer the question. Later, I apologized to our guest for having asked him an inconvenient question. He said: "I appreciate your question. In your place I would ask the same question. A writer must define and defend his position. Unless he does so he has no right to describe himself as a writer. I am happy you did so."

The weekly Thursday meetings extended into informal late-night discussions at Mayflower. These get-togethers in our apartments were a real education. We talked about sex as an indecipherable symbol in contemporary fiction, about the relevance of Maoism, about a host of other subjects, often generating heat. Authors most discussed were Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, Jean-Paul Sartre, Andre Malraux, Henry Miller, Octavio Paz, Walt Whitman, Albert Camus, Marcel Proust, Franz Kafka, Herbert Marcuse, Pablo Neruda, George Lucas, Yukio Mishima, Robert Lowell, Günter Grass, Vladimir Mayakovsky and Jorge Luis Borges.

Early one December night, Hungarian author Imre Szasz and his British wife Elizabeth invited some of us to their apartment to bid farewell to Miclos Vada, literary editor of the *New Hungarian Quarterly*, who was to depart the next morning. The night-long poetry session over drinks got so absorbing that Vada almost missed his plane. He would have, but for Elizabeth's presence of mind.

There were several such get-togethers at Mayflower. They enriched the creative personalities of Program participants. Mayflower is in fact a unique experiment in international living. In Paul Engle's words: "The creative imagination is wonderfully alert in breaking down the barriers of nationality and language."

Every Mayflower apartment has a living-and-study room, with a kitchen and a bath shared with the occupant of an adjoining room. When I arrived in Iowa, I did not like this arrangement of a shared apartment. But I soon became friendly with Gozo Yoshimasu, who shared my apartment. I realized that it is not the apartment we shared but each other's emotions and problems.

Romania's Aurel Munteanu and Ghana's Joseph Abruqua shared another apartment. They had nothing in common and did not know each other's language, but were good friends. It was similarly difficult to fathom the bond between Korea's Hwang Dong-gyu and Argentina's Hector Libertella. Was it the California wine they guzzled, or their evening stroll?

It isn't mere friendships that developed in Mayflower: at least one romance blossomed. While in Iowa my friend Gozo Yoshimasu got engaged to Marilla Parker, a Brazilian beauty. They were married in Tokyo last year.

December in Iowa is a cruel month. Visiting writers have their first encounter with the snow. For days it snows. Then the university closes for the Christmas holidays. Life comes to a standstill. With students having departed for their native towns, the city wears a deserted look. Mayflower reminds one at this time of Sartre's play, *No Exit*. Those who have come with their spouses confine themselves to their apartments. Those living alone train their eyes on television sets.

Even the resourceful Paul Engle feels helpless. It is now that his beautiful Chinese wife, Hualing, comes to everyone's aid. She talks to them, advises them, organizes cocktail parties and other get-togethers. As a matter of fact it is difficult to conceive of Program without Hualing. A writer in her own right, she is a woman of extraordinary oriental charm. An uncompromising sense of inner discipline and an exceptional decision-making ability are the hallmarks of her personality. She has published a number of books of fiction in Chinese; her famous work, *TWO WOMEN OF CHINA* has been translated into several languages. She has translated Mao Tse-tung's poems into English with Paul Engle. Being co-director of the program, she arranges picnics and excursions throughout the year to the beautiful places around Iowa City—to Amana and Racine, and to the banks of the Mississippi River. Hualing also serves delicious food. Only those who have lived in international hostels can realize what a prominent part food plays in promoting international understanding. You may not subscribe to the thoughts of Chairman Mao, but you cannot help salivating at the sight of Chinese food.

It is not a coincidence that most writers in Mayflower ate their own national food—partly because they preferred it, partly because they wanted to introduce others to their food. The Program taught us that every nation has much to offer — by way of food, by way of thought, by way of new insights into hearts and minds. It also taught us to transcend ideology. Politics and ideology may divide the world, but in Iowa City ideological conflicts often evoked warmth among writers. The

International Writing Program brings about a meeting of minds, a meeting of nations, a meeting of cultures. It creates the conditions that evoke the best in many writers.

Gozo is a young poet from Japan. He has won a number of awards for his poetry. He is good looking with long hair and a body that is as supple and graceful as a Manupuri dancer's. He is as good a photographer as he is a poet. His poetry too is full of imagery and he has a fancy for surrealists. But his identity is intact. Japan and Japanese tradition speaks to you through his poems. In the last few years he has experimented a lot with his poetry enriching the Japanese poetic tradition with long poems of hundreds of lines.

Gozo doesn't talk much, in fact the same economy of words characterises his poems too. He is shy by nature and in the beginning hardly said anything at all. Talking seemed to require a great effort from him, partly because of the language since he spoke very little English and partly because of his preoccupation with himself. He had an interesting schedule for the day. He went to bed around three or four in the morning and slept till eleven. He managed with a couple of toasts and coffee for the whole day and spent the whole afternoon watching TV with friends. Evenings he spent in emptying cans of beer with friends though his favorite drink was scotch whiskey. This he drank at night, alone, after the others had left, till sleep came. He had but three friends, Hwang Dong-kyu, Kaco Kawachi and I.

After reading a short, translucent poem of Gozo's entitled *Burning*, I felt that all modern poetry movements ran parallel to each other all over the world. The moods may differ as they do in Japanese and Indian poetry but it expresses itself in the same manner. There is one and only one form. There really is no alternative modern poetry.

Gozo and I used to buy recent books of contemporary poets from the Iowa Book & Supply and hold interesting discussions on them. Gozo had quite an addiction to sitting in the library which he did till midnight. Gozo is an affectionate, handsome man. Girls are often infatuated with him. I left Iowa in 1971 midway through the program because of the declaration of midterm poll in India. In April I got a letter from Gozo from Europe saying that he planned to marry Marilia. Marilia Parker was the most beautiful girl in the Program. She came from Brazil and worked as translator in the Program. Gozo married her when he returned to Japan.

Gozo's style of poetry reading is quite unique. He starts in a near scream, goes on in a purely dramatic manner with all its cadences and ends on a note of deep melancholy. He uses various musical instruments with his poetry reading. Lights are dimmed during the reading, and soon there is complete darkness. In the black silence, the poet's cry reverberates like the call of primeval man in a primeval forest.

In Mayflower, Aurel Dragos Munteanu stayed next door to me. He is a novelist from Romania. I had very meaningful discussions with him. He had made a systematic study of European literature. His favorites were Joyce, Beckett, Kafka and Ionesco. They are general the favourites of Indian writers too. Munteanu knew French well, could converse, read and write in it. But his English was weak. Not quite as weak as he made it out to be. Whenever he wanted to parry a question of did not answer it, he said, "Excuse, I did not follow. My English is poor."

Romania's situation is slightly different from that of other East European countries. Though Hungary, Poland and Czechoslovakia are under pressure from Russia, the writers from these countries enjoy much more freedom of expression than their Russian counterparts. Romania is free from Russian influence and maintains links with the West but in the matter of freedom of expression, it is far behind Hungary, Poland and Czechoslovakia. Despite these limitations, Munteanu's sensibility was that of a free thinking man. He had made a deep study of French literature and Indian philosophy. Our friendship stemmed from this. He had fully grasped, after deep study, both the Hindu and Buddhist philosophies of India. He bought all available books on Indian philosophy. He held the belief that the idea of the freedom of the individual was first conceived by Indian philosophers. Indian philosophical thought deals with reality not unreality, it does not seek to escape life but faces it squarely as it is, before anything else, a confrontation with death. According to him the concept of Yama, the God of death, is a unique one that Indians alone could have thought of, since for them aloneness was a source of achievement. They reflected upon the creation and destruction of the universe, upon the birth and death of man, not from a social point of view but from a purely individual view point. Yama is a personal God, not a universal one. Death is personal, destruction universal. Siva is the God of destruction.

Indian thought had influenced not only his thinking but also his life style. He ate the minimum of food, did the minimum of talking and managed with the minimum of sleep. There were no tension. "I cared for nothing except books. One day, he said quoting Herman Hesse's *SIDDHARTA*: "I can starve, I can live without sleep and I can sacrifice."

He came to India after a few years. After a tour of India he commented, "India is a great country. But it lives in eternity. The work that could get done in one generation takes three. There is a concept of eternity here but not of time."

My discussion with Munteanu used to continue well into the night till two or two-thirty in the morning. Western literature and Indian philosophy formed the central topics. Sometimes another Romanian writer Paunescu joined us. He was more interested in passing time than the actual discussion. He was a huge man, big built and aggressive. He was quick to lose his temper. The members of the Program went in fear of his aggressiveness and tended to avoid him.

Paunescu is an important modern poet of Romania. Satre is his forte. He is egotistic in person, but not in his poetry. There is pain and deep despondency in his poems. Despite the weaknesses of his personality, Paul Engle and the members of the Program respected his poetry. There is a madness in his poetry which has in fact over the years, come to be the identifying characteristic of modern poetry. Modern poetry does not have a rational base; to a great extent it is beyond the irrational frontiers. He recited his long poem *Morocco Symphony Orchestra* to us. The poem invokes words and sounds but does not bother about communicability.

Imre Szasz from Hungary was past middle age. He teaches English in Budapest while his wife Elizabeth, whom all program members called Liz, is English. The influence of a British education and thinking is clearly discernable in Imre. He

speaks very fine English and meets people with ease and simplicity. Like the British he is disciplined, civil and well-mannered.

Imre's favourite things are Hungarian wine, English literature, and Swiss cheese. He is more interested in others than in himself. He is familiar with literature of quite a few languages and is a serious student of literature in general. I never heard him make a flippant remark.

I have corresponded with Imre. A few years ago, he came to India under the cultural exchange program and took back a whole lot of Indian literary works. He knows most of the Indian writers who have been to Budapest. His interest in Indian literature is genuine, not formal. Like other East European writers, Hungarian writers also feel quite close to India.

The truth is that literary questions are the same the world over. The basic questions are that of the freedom of the writer and his role in society. Today the attack on the freedom of the individual comes from every direction; in a different manner in the capitalist countries and on a different level in the socialist systems. The writer is more helpless and alone than ever before.

Helatio Guillermo, a Filipino poet who was the youngest Program participant and an admirer of Che Guevara. He was quite vociferous, inviting verbal duels and dubbing everyone who did not agree with him as "reactionary." He would knock at your door at midnight and drag you into a discussion. To many he was an unwelcome guest. Things changed when he read a poem at a symposium. It revealed a troubled mind but a lyrical personality.

Those days America was badly involved in the Vietnam war. The anti-war movement was gaining strength in the universities. Berkeley and Michigan were the strongholds. The intellectuals and youth of America were against involvement in Vietnam. An even larger group of people believed that this interference was unethical.

Helatio Guillermo told me one day that he had just returned from Chicago where he had gone to take part in a big demonstration against the Vietnam war in Michigan by students and other young men. Helatio was around 25. He had the restlessness and impatience of youth. But deep down there was a sense of balance in him which all the mental turmoil he went through could not break. He was mainly concerned with the fate of the Philippines, which was for him closely linked with the fate of Asian and African countries. He felt that the affluent countries of the west had made Asia and African countries their economic and conceptual colonies. He pointed this out in his paper one evening and there was a heated discussion. He felt sad about the fact that English remained the medium of expression for Philippine literature. His own command over English was better than any other member's and he tended to express rather than scream his indignation against imperialism in this very language. But there is complete freedom of expression in America. There is in fact a feeling of indifference and unconcern towards rebels and so Helatio, despite being a foreigner, enjoyed his freedom.

Helatio was on the most intimate terms of friendship with Ghana's Joseph Abruquah, who, past 50, was old enough to be Helatio's father. But they were

friends like men of the same age. Helatio respected Joseph as a student would his teacher, perhaps, because he could relate to the African destiny with that of Asia, for there was nothing common between their ways of thinking. Helatio had put up photograph of Cuban and Bolivian revolutionaries on the walls of his room. Joseph asked him to remove them, for in the ultimate analysis, he said, revolution too is nothing but a delusion. Helatio was a poet, while Joseph a literary critic. Paul Engle well knew the tender heart hidden under the revolutionary demeanor of Helatio. He said to me once: "Helatio may jump about a lot but basically he is a kind man."

It was the last day of the year, Paul Engle and Hualing gave a New Year party in the spacious house of a friend. Each of writers brought food native to his country to the party. There were altogether 57 dishes in this international dinner. Quite a few bottle of whiskey had been emptied. It was late at night yet the party had not really caught on. All the writers, men and women, were restless, waiting for the party spirit to catch on but somehow it did not. Suddenly Helatio started taking off his clothes. First he took off his coat, then his shirt and finally his pants. He stood in his underwear in the midst of the crowd. Outside the temperature was 12 degree below zero. It was snowing and one could not see beyond the window panes. Inside the room, there was cigarette smoke, the sound of cups breaking and subdued whispering. People were shocked to see Helatio standing there almost naked. Then Helatio started dancing. He did not really know how to. The steps he was doing were of no known style. But the people were shaken out of their lethargy by his uninhibited behavior, his openness and his courage in defying social norms. Slowly the people woke up, and got up to dance to the music. The party began; the room reverberated with music and laughter. Paul Engle and Hualing looked with grateful affection at Helatio. Helatio danced in his underpants all through the night. In the morning he told me, "I snatched away the mask of bourgeois hypocrisy from their faces. I stripped not myself but bourgeois culture naked."

Denmark's Paul Borum was quite an unusual person too. He did not like Mayflower, so stayed in Iowa House. He liked taking out magazines. Soon after reaching Iowa, he started a non-time bound, cyclostyled poetry magazine. The magazine published the poems of not only program members but also local aspirants to literary fame. Paul Borum bore the entire cost himself. He was happy to be known as a patron of art and literature. He indulged himself in nothing else.

He came to me one day and said: "I came to know that you are reading a paper on Indian literature tomorrow. The paper ought to be real good, but it's equally important that the style of reading should be as fine. Come on. Let's hear it!" He put his watch on the table and started listening carefully to my paper. When I finished, he said: "40 minutes, 20 seconds. Actually you should take 60 minutes to read it. you should read it with full confidence. The fact that you read with such speed indicates that you are somewhat nervous about your paper."

Paul Borum is a poet and critic. He has long hair hanging to his shoulders, is a chain smoker. He had sifted through the literature of the whole world. In our very first meeting, he told me, "I have read your poems but don't remember where. Anyway, I am writing to my wife in Copenhagen. She will let me know where, in

which collection are your poems to be found.” A month later he informed me that he had read my poems in a German collection. He was referring to Lothar Lutze’s German translation of modern Hindi poems, of which he had published a collection. Paul Borum said, “Your paper is very thought provoking and you are right in your belief that Indian literature is struggling in the stranglehold of the duality created by a strong tradition pitted against a colonial culture. But I will not come to the discussion. I don’t take part in group discussions.” And he never did. All the time that he was in Iowa he did not participate in any group discussion. He did not read his poems nor listened to those of others. After an evening’s discussion on Asian poetry, he wrote his comment on the board in the room, “show, cherry trees, fog etc.” I asked for a clarification. He said it seems as if Asian literature has not yet been able to shake off the world of age old metaphors, images and symbols. India and Japan seem to be the only exceptions, where modern poetry is being written in its true form. Paul Borum had to leave the Program in the middle because of ill health to go back to Denmark.

ENGLE COUNTRY

ARTUR MIEDZYRZECKI
(Poland, 1970-1971; 1986 IWP)⁹

I came to Iowa City in late fall of 1970. At that time the International Writing Program ran for a longer period than it does today; the one I attended lasted nine months—until May 1971, if I remember correctly. This was not my first visit to the States: in the summer of 1965 I had taken part in the Harvard International Seminar in Cambridge. But the general circumstances of my life, as well as my personal situation, had radically changed between 1965 and 1970. My stay in Cambridge had been a mere intermission in the busy life of a forty-year-old writer. Awaiting me in Warsaw were proofs of my latest book, the editorial board of the newly established poetry magazine, the regular “People and Books” column I wrote for the *Swiat* (The World) weekly, and the Polish Writers’ Union of which, in the autumn of 1965, I had been elected deputy-president.

My coming to Iowa City, however, occurred during a more difficult period. I was invited to Iowa after political events in 1968 had gravely affected the lives of my friends and in part my own life. During a memorable meeting in February 1968, Warsaw writers publicly protested against the banning of Mickiewicz’s play *FOREFATHER’S EVE* from performance at the Narodowy Theatre, and against the overall cultural policy that contained vicious anti-Semite and anti-intellectual propaganda. Only writers from Warsaw, Cracow, and other towns were openly supporting the university students who had been isolated through their demonstrations against the shocking decision to ban Mickiewicz’s play. Two more years had to pass before workers appeared on the political scene during the famous events of December 1980, which led to the overthrow of the ruling group. In his film *Man of Iron* Andrzej Wajda commemorates a historical episode depicting a group of young workers who come to the student hostel in Gdansk, bearing a banner with the words *FORGIVE US*, an allusion to the workers’ own immobility in the face of student demonstrations in 1968.

But these events had not yet materialized as I was preparing to go to Iowa. What I was leaving behind made my heart heavy: my own and my friends’ books were banned, we could not publish; my weekly column in *Swiat* was suspended; my dismissal from the monthly journal *Poezja* (Poetry) was accompanied by the resignations of Herbert, Karpowicz, and Grzesczak. In the late spring of 1968 I also resigned from my post of deputy-president of the Writers’ Union. I had to leave for America alone: my wife and daughter were not allowed to go abroad, and it was not

⁹ Artur Miedzyrzecki, one of the leading writers in Poland, has written nine books of poetry, four volumes of criticism, and five novels, in addition to making translation from French, Italian, Spanish, and Hungarian literature. He served six years as a member of the international jury for the International Prize of Poetry awarded in Belgium, and as vice-president of the Polish Writers’ Union and of the Polish PEN Club. For his literary work he has won recognition in Poland and was given the French *Prix Annuel de Traduction* with his wife, Julia Hartwig, writer and translator of French poetry.

until a few months later, after the political changes in December 1970, that they were permitted to join me in Iowa. I have allowed myself to draw this wider background because the time of one's coming is sometimes as important as one's own identity or destination. As a writer I was then, so they say, in good creative form, having recently completed two series of poems, *The River of Witches* and *Birds*, and a novel, *THE GOLDEN PARROT*. But as a citizen I was reduced to nonexistence, like the Nobody in Emily Dickinson's poem. Deprived of all official duties and occupations, baffled by my newly acquired freedom (and it was only later that I learned to appreciate such freedom), I was going to Iowa with mixed feelings: curiosity and eagerness to resume work, mingled with concern over my family and a general anxiety.

When I arrived in Iowa, my writing at first made slow progress. Frantic correspondence with family and friends took much of my time and attention. The weekly exchanges between Czesław Miłosz and myself still testify to our common state of mind at the time. "Try to write something beautiful in the tranquility of Iowa," he advised me. "Beautiful but simple," he added, as if in a half-whisper. At that time, several years before winning the Nobel Prize, he still considered himself a poet read only by writers and critics, and quite unknown to the Polish public, to say nothing of American readers. In regard to Poland he doubtless exaggerated. But we had both already learned that a poet can be killed with silence. The poet's message is supposed to be imperishable, and one should perhaps maintain this claim, if only to uphold the humanistic principles by which we live. But the matter has always been, and still is, more complicated than that.

This awareness, I think, was also shared by Paul Engle, with his deeply ingrained sense of human kinship and his instinctive urge to participate in other people's lives. These feelings were, moreover, backed by his thorough knowledge of the world—Paul was well acquainted with the realities of Europe, beginning with the troubled decade preceding the Second World War—as well as his knowledge of literature. A mature poet and an excellent academic teacher, he combined erudition with that inside awareness only poets possess, yet not all poets have. He described himself as being an unusual combination of the state of Iowa where he was born and of Oxford in England where he completed his studies as a Rhodes scholar. But this combination, however unusual, did not fully explain his far greater personality.

When we met, Paul had several volumes of poetry of his credit, including *A Woman Unashamed* and *Poems in Praise*. And he was the founder, with Hualing Nieh, of the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa where he had lectured for decades. Paul infused the program with his own indefatigable enthusiasm and energy, with his amazing power to accomplish things. Is there a writer who has never dreamed of an ideal place for uninterrupted creative work? Of an inaccessible Arcadia for himself and for others? But Paul is a man who can make a dream come true. Raising funds with a truly poetic genius he has made the program possible. On my arrival in Iowa City in 1970 I read a headline in a midwestern newspaper: "Cajoling, Pleading, Threatening, Engle Rounds Up Cash for Writers." While admiring Paul's activity, the author of that newspaper article also called attention to Paul's unusual personality.

But what made Paul unusual for me was his optimism, his magnificent vigor, and his poetic ability to create a truly alternative world—the world he himself called “Engle Country” and whose essence is also conveyed in his poem, “Paul,” which includes passages of unmistakable originality and Whitman-like dynamism. Paul’s uniqueness also came from his instinctive ability to feel the mood of the moment and to comprehend his questioner’s state of mind. It is an ability not to be acquired by learning: it is a kind of charisma, a matter of intensified spiritual awareness that allows one to *know* things even before consciously realizing them.

Thus he also immediately perceived my frame of mind; he *knew* I felt restless, professionally out of balance, and worried about my family. When I met him he proposed a drive to his suburban house among greenery where he fed birds and kept sacks of grain for them. The birds came singly or in flocks: robins, bluebirds, blackbirds with red wings, cardinals—a whole flying paradise worthy of John James Audubon, the sight of which made one smile. Paul pointed out individual birds as if introducing beloved persons to the visitor. He was fond of all animals, even horses, which he had worked with in his childhood. In the evenings, raccoons came running at the sound of his voice; but raccoons already belong to the history of Paul’s and Hualing’s new house on a wooded hill over Dubuque Street with its wide view of the Iowa River and its banks.

I became a frequent guest in both houses. I remember the wedding party of Paul and Hualing; our conversations and our silences; our visits to the legendary liquor store (at that time one still had to submit signed orders to buy liquor); our trips to Chicago, to Milwaukee, or to the nearby Amana colonies. I remember lectures given by others and by me; sessions in the university library; cinemas and stores in Iowa City; the Mayflower where we lived before moving to a house on College Street, and then to rooms rented to us by Lan Lan, Hualing’s beautiful and talented dancing daughter. But I shall always cherish the memory of that first visit to Paul’s home soon after my arrival. The following day he came to the IWP office bringing a new official invitation that would bring my wife Julia Hartwig and our daughter Anna-Daniela to the United States. I was amazed. We never talked about it; he himself guessed what troubled me. In Paul, impetuous energy mingled with delicate and engaging perceptiveness. These marked his and Hualing’s attitude toward so many people for so many years, so that in my mind they are like a comforting presence of pure and amiable spirits in what Paul used to call “this dirty world.” Upon rereading my Iowa diary I was again struck by the speed with which the program absorbed the newcomer and settled his needs. I arrived on October 19, at noon; John Batki, who met me at the airport, immediately handed me my check, after which we went straight to the bank, then to the IWP office, then to the Mayflower to deposit my luggage, and then again to the office.

On the same afternoon, I met Hualing Nieh and the other members: Primoz Kozak, a writer from Yugoslavia, with his Polish wife Jola, and Koo Siu-sun, a poet from Hong Kong. That evening all the members of the program attended a dinner, where we met Iowa faculty and staff members, including Elliot Anderson and the unforgettable Jean Wylder.

The next day, following my visit with Paul, we both dined at Hualing's place. On October 21—just two days after my arrival—Paul sent the invitation to Julia Hartwig in Warsaw. During the next few days I got acquainted with the university library; attended lectures (Seymour Krim spoke on Norman Mailer); watched films about the poets Yeats, Dylan Thomas, and Neruda; had lunch with Fred Will in his house in West Branch where I also saw President Hoover's memorabilia; and visited the university art gallery, which had paintings by Miro, Vlaminck, and Mondrian, among others. On top of all that, John Batki immediately started translating my poems, a project that later became part of a book, *14 POEMS*, published in Iowa by Windhover Press.

The rate at which things happened at the IWP was by no means calm. But every member was perfectly free to withdraw at any moment to his or her secluded niche. I didn't miss this opportunity either. Books and poems later published in Warsaw were at least partly begun in Iowa. It was also in Iowa City that the idea for an anthology of American poetry in Polish translation was born. My versions of poems by Poe, Dickinson, and Whitman were done with this goal in view. Those translations had been printed thus far in the monthly *Tworczość* (Creativity) and in *Tygodnik Powszechny* (The Universal Weekly). Last year I also published an extensive volume of e.e. cummings's poetry. At the same time Julia Hartwig published her translations of poetry by Marianne Moore and a volume of poems by Robert Bly. We have also translated a collection of poems by William Carlos Williams and are now compiling an anthology for the *Czytelnik* publishing house in Warsaw.

These and other translations from English are a fairly new development in my career. For many years I had been primarily interested in French poetry, translating Racine, Moliere, Rimbaud, Apollinaire, Oscar Milosz, and Char whenever my own writing allowed me. These translations now form a collection of twenty volumes, excluding texts printed in various collective anthologies or periodicals. As for Julia Hartwig, in the past she had translated Cendrars, Reverdy, Apollinaire, and Max Jacob, and it was also during her stay in Iowa City that she became preoccupied with American poetry.

By this time my literary horizon has, to a large extent, become saturated with the American element. At the moment I am reading proofs for *RIM BAUD, APOLLINAIRE AND OTHERS*, a bulky volume of poems and essays translated and written during the past forty years, and which includes a long chapter devoted to American poetry. Writing about Paul and Hualing I cannot fail to mention their sympathy for Polish writers. In the years between 1967 and 1985 about thirty Poles took part in the International Writing Program, their presence becoming a permanent feature of the human landscape in Iowa City. In addition to poets (Karpowicz, Bryll, and Ewa Lipska, to mention a few) and prose writers (Julian Strykowski, J. J. Szczepanski, Marek Nowakowski and others), there were translators (beginning with Krzysztof Zarzecki and Michal Ronikier and ending with Ewa Krasinska). One cannot name them all; one has to only consult the IWP master list to confirm that Polish presence.

It is with deep gratitude that I remember letters and parcels the Engles' friends in Warsaw and Cracow received from them during the difficult period following the imposition of martial law in Poland in December 1981. What was most valuable for us was feeling their unfailing friendship and concern. And this should also be remembered one day. Life in Iowa also had its problems. Sometime they were caused by one's poor command of English. Inability to communicate in full gave a feeling—particularly acute in a writer—of intellectual deprivation. This was, at first, the case with Andrzej Kijowski, one of the most impassioned souls on the Polish postwar literary scene. But his English soon improved, enabling him to fully enjoy the program's opportunities. I think that his stay in Iowa City was among the happiest periods in the life of this outstanding writer who died prematurely two years ago and is mourned by his friends both in Poland and on the other side of the Atlantic.

---Translated from the Polish by Ewa Krasinska

SZIGLIGET, IOWA
---Extracts from a book on the USA

IMRE SZASZ
(Hungary, 1970-71 IWP)¹⁰

(Note: Szigliget is a town on Lake Balaton in Hungary with a house where writers may live quietly and write their books. All East European countries have such houses.)

There is no trace of the village Szigliget in Iowa, no zip code on the letters, no area code at the North-western Bell. When I founded it -- above in the title -- I wasn't thinking of the Hungarian village, but the Writer's Union house there. Only this isn't called the Writer's Union house, but the International Writing Program, and it isn't run by the Hungarian Arts Foundation, but by Paul Engle. He should be blamed for the Program's taking place in Iowa...

"Where does this International Writing Program take place?" several people, Americans, asked me. "In Iowa City? For God's sake, why Iowa City?"

Other people, more knowledgeable.

"You can count yourself lucky; you'll see the real America. New York isn't America. New York is the most western city in Europe."

And me, in the winter, in Paul Engle's office, my face frozen glassy, my lips stiff from the 40 kilometer wind and the temperature 20 below zero.

"Paul, wouldn't it be possible to move the Program somewhere else? To California or Hawaii, for instance?"

He turns towards me in his revolving chair, leans forward, propping his elbows on his knees and clasping his hands together: "I always wanted to have the Program from April till November."

"They say it's over 100 degrees in the summer here and there are tornadoes."

"That's true," says Paul. "Maybe we should hold it in a different place every year. Next year, let's say, in Japan, the year after Yugoslavia, then Hungary. The Program would be financed every year by the government of the respective country." He sighs. "How much easier that would be. That reminds me, when I was in India..."

The Program stays in Iowa City, of course.

Paul Engle: Son of an Iowa horse breeder from Cedar Rapids, former Rhodes Scholar to Oxford. ("Paul, when you were rowing in that Cambridge team..." He bellows: "Hualing, listen to what this rascal of a Hungarian dares to say -- in that Cambridge team!") On my way home I sent him a postcard in keeping with this

¹⁰ Imre Szasz is a novelist, critic, and translator whose works have been awarded many prizes in Hungary. His novel, *FELHOFEJES* (HIGH HEADER), has been translated in Finnish and Polish. He has also published an unusual collection of meditations and portraits of anglers and fishermen, *VIZPARTI KALAUZ*, and his stories for children have been bestsellers in Hungary as well. He has done translations of Shakespeare, Browning, Melville and Hemingway, among many others, and has published critical essays on those writers. The story, *The Covered Wagon*, is based on the experience he had while living in the Mayflower Apartments, Iowa City when he was a member of the IWP.

ceremonial leg-pulling, from Cambridge, “his university town.”) One of the best known poets in the Midwest, all his feelings are with the poets (“If there is a God he must be a fiction writer and he lets us all go to hell to get good stories.”) He is 63 years old, tall, lean. There is a metal-framed tennis racket in his office, a trampoline behind his house outside Iowa City. when does he have time to take some exercise?

Paul never listen to what people say. I go to his office and tell him about my problem: I can’t get my luggage out of the customs in Chicago. To which publishing house should we offer the anthology of Hungarian shorties? Would any university be interested in a talk on Hungarian literature? Paul doesn’t listen. “Excuse me,” he says and jumps up to take something to his secretary. “What did you say?” he asks, and rummages among papers looking for something that has nothing to do with my problem. In the meantime Paul’s secret and invisible guardian angels – all of them female and pretty, even in their invisible state, otherwise Paul wouldn’t accept their help – in Paul’s voice, with Paul’s hands, somehow still get everything arranged. You know, you can see, you can feel that Paul isn’t listening to you; but even so, somehow, within five minutes, the address or the letters written by Paul are in your hand, he has talked on the phone to Chicago -- where of course he knows somebody at the airline, the customs, everywhere. Paul has acquaintances all over the world -- he doesn’t listen to you, and even so in five minutes’ time the thing is somehow all fixed up.

Paul in his office is all worries -- or, if somebody enters, all resigned sighs -- all typing, pulling open drawers, all mopping his brow.

Paul in company is all cheerfulness. He crunches radishes, glass in hand telling Polish, Romanian, Korean jokes; he shouts, chats up girls, quotes Rilke and Tu Fu, goes from one group to the other. He doesn’t offer his guests drinks: the bottles are on a little table and everyone can pour himself as much as he wants of whatever he wants. He drinks his own special dray martini: a handful of ice, nine parts gin, one part martini and about ten olives. I watch him and ostentatiously put double the amount of olives into my martini. Paul Bellows: “Hualing, look at that rascal, he puts more olives in his drink than I do.” Hualing smiles.

Hualing always smiles. (“Don’t be misled by this smile,” Paul announces. “Chinese women are very stubborn and strong-willed.”) Hualing, an émigré novelist from Taiwan, is the associate director of the International Writing Program (or, more correctly, since we left American she became Paul’s wife). If you don’t want to burst into the cave of Paul’s sighs and typewriter-tapping with your worries, you go into Hualing to bask in her smile. Hualing deals with everything just as quickly as Paul does, but smiling and listening. Smiling and listening, she has got a well-formed opinion about everything. Any excuse is good for Paul to throw a party, for Hualing to be kind. I ask her for recipes of Chinese dishes: “Come round to us this evening, I’ll cook a Chinese dinner and you can see how I do it.” Coming home from our wanderings, Paul and Hualing put my wife, Elizabeth, and me up for the night; to rush around on the last morning, we have the use of either of their cars. Hualing realizes that the two of us can hardly manage our journey on this one person grant -- Paul slips a check in our hand.

Paul is the Program. He invented it a few years ago and he keeps it going. Not out of his own pocket: even in America poets aren't all that rich. Every spring Paul starts on his travels. Though his means of transport isn't a donkey cart, but a TWA jet, his mission is not unsimilar to that of the begging monks.

He is so hoarse he can hardly talk:

“And with a voice like this should I try to sing money out of millionaires?”

From Washington to San Francisco he tries to raise money. At the Ford Foundation, the State Department and especially from firms in Iowa: the electric company, a trucking firm, the John Deere Company. The sponsor can offset some of the grant against his taxes. And the rest? Luckily there are such things as local patriotism, genuine interest in literature. Paul goes into fits of sighing at the beginning of March: “The Program will keep going next year, but I don't know what'll happen the year after.” I think by May he dearly wants the next year to be the last. I don't really know why he does it. Probably because he genuinely believes that he is doing something for the friendship of nations and for the writers invited. He loves Iowa and he loves America, though he isn't uncritical of either. His gain is to say goodbye every May to some new friends. You can't find nicer people than a really nice American anywhere in the world. It's a pity we only met a few of them. Paul belongs to them. I am justified in applying to them one of Hemingway's customarily abrupt generalizations from *THE GREEN HILLS OF AFRICA*. If for nothing else, as a way of paying back. “They had that attitude that makes brothers, that unexpressed but instant and complete acceptance that you must be Masai wherever it is you come from. That attitude you only get from the best of the English, the best of the Hungarians and the very best Spaniards...”

International Writing Program (1970-71): Thirty-three writers from 22 countries. Some of them with wives. Asians, Latin Americans, East Europeans. Two Scandinavians. Nobody from Western Europe this year. (It's more difficult for them to get a grant, as if West Europeans would benefit from the affluence of their country and convertible currency to an undue extent.) Most of them around 30, only five of us are old – over forty. We spent seven months in Iowa City and one month traveling. (Originally it was to be nine months, but there isn't enough money, times aren't all that good, budgets are being clipped back all over America.) Most of the foreigners are poets, understandably: Paul Engle is a poet himself. We have got one playwright. Bearing out the internationality of the ancient vendetta, literary critics don't get invited.

A gift of seven months. You don't have to pay much for it in time or work. The minimum is one lecture, the maximum three, depending on your knowledge of the language and willingness to talk. But this minimum one lecture can in fact be self-presentation: the main task of Elliott and John is to turn the translation made by the author or brought from home into acceptable English. Elliott knows French, John Hungarian, but they don't need either of these languages. They should know Chinese, Slovenian, Japanese, Korean, Spanish, Polish and Romanian at least. And Swedish, Czech and Vietnamese on the side. All the same, the translations are quite

good, though they dispense with the rhythm and rhymes of the original -- not that these goods are in demand in America today.

To be present at a lecture once a week, mostly as a listener and sometimes as a lecturer, is expected of you, though it isn't compulsory. The rest of your time is free. You have no worries; you can live modestly, but decently, even with a family on that grant in Iowa City. You can write novels, finish your book of poetry.

In the first three months nobody can work regularly. The poets do write the odd poem -- most of them very few -- but prose writers don't get anything much done. There isn't that "grass-growing mood" as Melville puts it which is vital for most writers of fiction. Difficulties of acclimatization? I don't know, I never had the chance to live abroad for a long period before so I had no previous experience. However, I've got a feeling that the anxiety and restlessness is not caused by the mere change of environment, but by America.

Most foreign countries you have to look for. With a guide book in your hand, or in the company of friends, turning your head around, stretching your neck, sitting under the sun-umbrellas of little local restaurants or on tall bar stools at night. You don't have to look for America. America attacks you, challenges you, cross-questions you, threatens you.

Involuntarily, unconsciously, even trying to avoid it, we came to see, to watch, to find out what the future has in store -- this is a big word but a smaller one wouldn't cover it -- for our country and mankind. (And maybe to learn a bit more about ourselves. At least about our endurance, our capacity for survival.)

And all this in a group which lives socially and linguistically isolated like a boy scout group abroad; the members of which measure things up differently but have to justify their findings to each other; and which lives its slightly insulated life in a university town today in America is like sitting right up close to the orchestra, next to the big drum, even if that university town is relative conservative, more or less all white and more or less sleepy as Iowa City is. At least the ripples of every wave reach as far as that. I haven't lived such a hectic intellectual life since my university years, and over 40 one doesn't have the need or the stomach for the permanent, restless and boundless intellectual gymnastics: one's way of thinking has already cut its narrower -- and hopefully not too shallow -- riverbed and doesn't want to overflow its banks shapelessly all the time like a spring flood...

The International Writing Program has six rooms, a contribution of the university. I go up to the fourth floor and glance into the coffee room: at this time of the day there are always a few writers there. As there are now: Shrikant, the small Indian poet, Indira Gandhi's P.R. man, one of the most cultured, sharpest-witted and tongue members of the Program; Sergio, the drawling Brazilian with his wife; Helacio, the boy-bodied and boy-faced Pilipino revolutionary; and through the open door I can see the two talkative charmers sitting in Hualing's room, Artur the gray Pole in his dark suit, and Arnošt the Czech in his usual jeans and boots. Neither of them speaks very good English, but they talk all the same. You can hear Artur's voice and Arnošt's hoarse ratata. Hualing is sitting facing them, smiling; when she sees me passing the door she sends a smile out to the corridor.

I go into the secretary's office and see whether I've got any letters. "Nothing," says Amanda by way of greeting. "You must be pinching them." I say, "I should have had two letters from Sophia Loren by now." Amanda sniggers dutifully. This is a routine ceremony. I don't get many letters from home.

Sipping my coffee I look at the posters. I look t them every single day, not really noticing them, without perceiving more than the colour and the words. A French Balzac poster, with Rodin's head of Balzac, a Polish film festival, a Venezuelan fold dance festival (or maybe a folklore symposium). I always take a longer at two of them: on one of them a naked girl wearing a stetson is kneeling on all fours, sideview; her body divided up like the diagrams of port and beef in cookery books and marked: rump steak, chops, loin, belly. I don't know which part of me loves this poster: the amateur cook, the male, or the cannibal. (Someone else must have liked it too because it was stolen later on.)

The other poster is a grim official announcement with the seal of the Civilian Defense office in Washington. "Instruction to Patrons on Premises in Case of Nuclear Bomb Attack: Upon the First Warning: 1. Stay Clear of All Windows. 2. Keep Hands Free of Glasses, Bottles, Cigarettes, etc. 3. Stand Away from Bar, Tables, Orchestra, Equipment and Furniture. 4. Loosen Necktie, Unbutton Coat and Any Other Restrictive Clothing. 5 Remove Glasses, Empty Pockets of All Sharp Objects Such as Pens, Pencils, etc. 6. Immediately upon Seeing the Brilliant Flash of Nuclear Explosion, Bend Over and Place Your Head Firmly Between Your Legs. 7. Then Kiss Your Ass Goodbye." Brought up in respect and holy reverence of authority, I take guilty and cheerful pleasure in this poster. Besides, it's that kind of nice easy-going and efficient anti-war propaganda which we, fascinated by our rhetoric, cannot (and if we could we wouldn't dare) do.

Translated by the author
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THE COVERED WAGON

--To Paul Engle

Imre Szasz

The student apartment building lay parallel to the road some distance from the town. It was twelve stories high, about six hundred feet long and housed at least two thousand people. It had been built only a few years ago; the aggressive angularity of glass and concrete was somewhat alleviated by the surrounding trees which gave the false impression of being the edge of a forest, just as papier mache and wooden facades pretend to be towns in cowboy films. One almost expected to hear the swearing of the film-hands from behind a clump of trees.

'The Covered Wagon', as the building was romantically called, aimed at a new conception in student living. And indeed, with its comfortable modern furnishings, plastic and aluminum luxuries and large metal desks, it was more a mixture of second-class hotel and institute for design than it was a student hostel. Its stillness, however, was that of a hospital. Not a sound could be heard coming from the rooms; the carpeted corridors smothered every footstep. Even that wind of the building where the foreign writers on grants were quartered was silent. Only occasionally could loud conversation be heard, when someone had bought several bottles of California wine from the only shop in town where drink was sold. At such times the literary disputes sometimes continued in the corridor after midnight--as far the next doorway at any rate. In the habits of the foreign guests you could still detect remnants of the nightly peripatetic discussions back home, though the savanna instinct of spirit and leg, like a lion in a cage, was confined here to a fifty-yard stretch of corridor. But those wine parties became less and less frequent; both the available funds and the initial big show of friendliness gradually dried up. By the end of the second week the Asians had grouped themselves loosely together, just as had the South Americans; the West Europeans had made friends, if at all, with one another, while the people from socialist countries had made friends with nobody, least of all one another. They had difficulty in making themselves understood; most of them spoke English rather poorly, and they dragged along with them in addition the voiced sounds and gutturals of their own countries. Carriers of some special linguistic disease, they seemed to withdraw into voluntary quarantine.

Thus there was normally no sound in the rooms but the sound of mechanical existence: the burr of the strip lighting and the air exhauster, the angry din of the waste disposal unit and the wail of the water pipes--almost human in its unpredictability.

Sunday evening the corridors were even more silent than usual. The girls were not even using the washing machines and the dryers, they were not sipping their Cokes on the floor of the washing room.

On one such dead Sunday evening Gabor Keri was sitting at his typewriter in room 987 A. He had been sitting there since finishing his frankfurter and mustard supper and he hadn't been able to write a single word. He hadn't been able to write a single word for the whole month he'd been away from Hungary. He looked at his watch. Half-past nine. He drew his tremendous bulk up from the chair--which wasn't designed for his measurement--crossed the kitchen, glanced with slight distaste at the pile of unwashed dishes on the table and opened the door into room B where Janos Sobor the poet lived.

"Want to play cards?" he asked.

Sobor, smart as usual in a suit, was sitting at his desk with a sheet of paper in his hand. He was a few years older than Keri and a good deal smaller.

"I've written a poem," he said. "Shall I read it to you?"

"You're shitting poems," said Keri, enviously. This was in fact the second poem Sobor had written in the month since their arrival.

"I'm a second Goethe, I am. Want to hear it?"

"No. Let's play cards."

"Let's not. I'm sick to death of cards. We play every evening. Change your shirt, you smell."

"I haven't got a clean one. Why don't we go down and play the pinball machines? I'll take you on at ten cents a game."

Sobor put down the paper.

"Okay," he said after a slight pause, "If you've got plenty of money to lose."

He swept a heap of small change into his pocket and stood up:

"The teams file out for the World Cup final. Brazil up front in yellow shirts, behind them in cherry red, Hungary. Who do you want, Brazil or Hungary?"

"Brazil," said Keri. "Wait while I grab some cash."

Jenny was coming down the corridor, the only girl in the whole place whose name they knew. She had a spotty face and thick nose, but quite a good figure. That was all they knew about her, apart from the fact that whenever they ran into her she greeted them with a shy and automatic smile.

"Hi," she said and smiled. She passed them slowly, almost hesitating, as if she wanted to ask something. She always came down the corridor with those slightly shuffling steps, as if ready to stop at any moment, like someone who finds the question marks of curiosity too heavy to carry. They'd never seen her in the company of another boy or girl--not even on campus if they happened to come across her.

Sobor looked round after her:

"Would you screw her?"

"In this war-time economy, certainly!"

"I haven't screwed anyone for a month."

"You'll have to learn English, old man. There's no sex these days without language."

They went down by elevator and wandered along to the snack-bar where the pinball machines were. The snack-bar was in darkness.

"It's shut," said Keri dismally.

They walked across to the huge lounge which was as dead and deserted as a village football ground back home on a Monday afternoon. Only in the corner, almost in hiding, a few boys were sitting with indifference, television watching. Keri and Sobor stopped behind them and had a look too. It was some sort of a talk show. They didn't understand a word of it.

"Come on, let's go," said Keri after a few minutes. In the corridor he went sluggishly over to the Coke machine, put in fifteen cents and the can came crashing out. He tore it open and took a long swig.

"God, how I loathe this drink," he said.

They ambled back to the elevators. The right one happened to be the one so up they went to the ninth floor.

"Shall we play cards?" asked Keri.

"No, I'm sick of cards. Wash your shirts."

"While you write another poem? You can't really want to write another poem?"

"A Goethe always wants to write another poem."

Keri went over to the spring door of the garbage chute, opened it and chucked the empty Coke can in. It fell clattering down nine floor.

"I'd be nice to throw a bomb down here," he said staring into the dark hole.

Sobor laughed:

"Where are you going to find a bomb here at ten o'clock at night?"

"If I'd been a bit better at chemistry," sighed Keri. "Apparently you can make bombs out of sugar and vinegar and ..."

Sobor roared with laughter.

"Sure you're not thinking of French dressing, you ass? You just need a bit of oil and mustard ..."

"I'm quite serious," said Keri, offended. "I read somewhere that you can make bombs out of sugar and vinegar or alcohol. They threw one in the London airport."

Sobor wasn't listening.

"Hey," he said with sudden inspiration, "why don't we play elevators?"

Keri looked at him, annoyed; he was still thinking about bombs.

"What do you mean elevators? I'm not a child."

"Listen. If you press the call button, you don't know which elevator's going to come first. You take the first guess, I'll take the next. A dime a go."

Keri was still peevish:

"You can hear which one's going to come."

"No, you can't. Come on, we'll try it. Press the button. Okay, which one?"

"The right."

The left elevator came and spotty-faced Jenny got out of it.

"Hi," she said smiling.

"Hi. Bless your little bottom," added Sobor in Hungarian. Keri didn't say a word. The girl walked off slowly down the corridor.

"Away we go!" said Sobor brightly. "Brazil starts."

"Right," muttered Keri. He won.

"Now for the famous Hungarian attack," said Sober. He lost. After he'd handed the fifth dime over to Keri he said:

"Spend it on doctors!"

Along came Jenny again. She smiled at them. Sobor pressed the button. "Left," he said. They waited, the right elevator door opened. Jenny got in and held the door open expectantly for the two Hungarians.

"Nem, no," said Sobor. "No luxury cruise for us, we're working," he added in Hungarian.

Jenny let the door go, and puzzled but still smiling, disappeared.

"She does nothing but grin," said Keri as the elevator door closed on the spotty-faced smile. "What about my dime?"

Sobor fished a coin out of his pocket.

"Fat men like you usually have their strokes at an early age. Do me a favor and have yours right now, will you?"

Sobor had already lost four dollars by the time Jenny stepped out of the elevator again with a carton of milk in her hand. This time, as if fortified by the milk, she stopped and asked Sobor with a smile:

"What are you two up to?"

"What does she want?" asked Sobor, whose English was even worse than Keri's.

"She wants to know what we're doing, I suppose."

Sobor smiled at the girl, went over to the elevators and pretended to press the button, pointing first to the right elevator, then to the left. "Which?" he asked, summoning up all his English knowledge. Then he pointed to the right elevator: "This." He waited a moment, took a step back. "No!" he said deeply disappointed, fished out a dime, handed it to Keri, hastily taking it back again before Keri could pocket it.

The girl looked bemusedly from Sobor to the two closed doors of the elevators.

"You might have learned Hungarian, sweetie," he said to her reproachfully in Hungarian. He turned to Keri: "Would you mind if the Hungarian team signed on an American player?"

"Okay by me," Keri shrugged his fat shoulders arrogantly. "You can sign on the whole UN for all I care."

Sobor took the girl's hand, gave her a dime, pressed the call button, and, pointing from the right elevator to the left, asked her: "Which?" Then, because she didn't reply immediately, he repeated urgently: "Which?"

The girl pointed to the left side. The left door opened.

"Hurray," shouted Sobor. He took a dime from Keri and pressed it into her hand.

Keri lost his turn and Jenny won hers again. Sobor put his hand on his heart and bowed in front of her. Then he kissed her hand. Slightly embarrassed, Jenny laughed; she was obviously happy to be one of the gang. Sobor, completing his antics, gave her a broad grin.

When she had won for the tenth time Sobor fell down on his knees before her with a rapture of a mediaeval knight.

"She's an angel! An angel from heaven! A goddess!"

Jenny got the message even though she didn't understand the words, and smiled at Sobor. Keri looked at them in disgust and irritation.

Sobor jumped up, brushed off his knees and with a grandiose gesture offered Jenny his arm:

"Come, lady." Then, to Keri in Hungarian: "I'll screw her. Where did you put the schnapps?"

"It's in the fridge." He gazed sourly after them as they paraded off down the corridor, Sobor humming the Wedding March from *Lohengrin*.

Keri went over to the elevators and press the call button. Left, he thought to himself, but the right elevator came. He went down to the first floor, looked into the lounge where the same few boys were still stuck in front of the television, loitered

there helplessly for a couple of minutes, then went back into the reception area and threw a provocative glance at the blonde girl reading at the desk. She didn't so much as raise her head from her book. He walked past her to the main entrance, opened the door, went down the steps, crossed the road and the small field and started to walk down the footpath beside the river. It was pitch dark; only the elongated and watery reflection of distant lights gave the impression of some sort of illumination. After all, I won four dollars off him, he thought. Four dollars is something. Good we stopped when we did, my luck was on the turn.

He was gradually approaching the edge of the town; the windows of the houses at the other side of the field were lit, the footpath wound between trees and bushes. I've got altogether twenty-five dollars left for this month, he thought. I shouldn't have brought my money with me. They say you shouldn't walk around in this country with cash in your pocket. Especially in deserted places like this. Two tough kids come along, hold a knife against your stomach and grab the money.

He decided that if someone attacked him and asked for his money he'd defend himself. Two hundred and forty pounds; the mere weight in itself would be an advantage. He used to tell them in the coffee house back home that he'd boxed in his youth, but it wasn't true. Still, two hundred and forty pounds, and he moves relatively easily and quickly, perhaps you can tell from his walk that there's muscle here. Those two skinny kids with their switchblades would think twice before ...

All the same he clenched his cigarette lighter in his pocket like a knuckle-duster, and, glaring at every bush, advanced along the sandy footpath. There wasn't a soul on the river bank and, apart from the chirping of a cricket, there wasn't a sound either except distant strains of rock music coming most probably from the open windows of the Pi Beta Epsilon fraternity house.

"Thugs, where are you?" he said out loud. Then, louder, "Come one, switchbladers, here I am!" Then shouting: "Hey, Al Capone, what's keeping you? Hey..." he stopped, he couldn't think of a single Mafia leader's name though he'd read about them recently in a Budapest magazine. "Up the Hungarians," he yelled instead.

He stood still. Someone's bound to come with all that row, he thought, but there wasn't a movement, there wasn't a sound. He shrugged his shoulder, took out his lighter, and, lighting a cigarette, sat down on a stone at the water's edge. Here the oblique reflection of the lamps made pleats of light on the water, but even the subcutaneous play of muscles of the undercurrent was powerless to associate the texture of light with anything living.

The stone was damp and cold and he soon got up and walked back to the Covered Wagon. The girl at the reception desk was still reading.

He went up to his room, switched on the light, paused for a moment, then went into the joint kitchen and stood there, shamelessly eaves-dropping. He could hear faint sounds of movement coming from the other room. On the table, beside the pile of unwashed dishes, was a carton of milk and the last of the schnapps they'd brought with them from home. They didn't leave me much, he thought. He rinsed out a glass under the tap, filled it up and emptied it in one gulp. Then he filled the

glass again, sat down, lit a cigarette and slowly sipped the schnapps. He looked at the dishes. At least he could have got her to wash the dishes. In the intervals. He's got nothing to do in the intervals anyway since he can't speak English. He can't exactly carry on a conversation with her. He's got to go on doing non-stop gymnastics so she won't get bored. And he's not twenty-year-old.

The idea pleased him and he went on maliciously sipping his schnapps. Of course, it's not his turn, that's why he didn't get spotty-face to do the dishes. Okay, let him exert himself. It serves him right. He got up, opened the door of the fridge, took out a frankfurter, ate it in two bites, sat down and drained the bottle. He drank slowly and dreamily...If I were home Edit would bring me a coffee, Tibi would be asleep by now, after our game of toy football. In fact he hadn't seen his son a single Sunday the whole summer. He went out in the morning, had lunch in the Hungaria and then went off to the races. After the races he played poker in the Artists' Club till midnight. Now he felt he'd played button football with his son every Sunday evening.

He finished the schnapps, got rather shakily to his feet and went back to his room. He stopped dizzily in front of the notice board on which a map of the town, a timetable, themes for short stories and diary notes were stuck though with pins like butterflies. At the upper corner of the board was the home telephone number of the professor, the dean in charge of the troupe of foreign writers, offering help in case of emergency--like the number of the police or the fire brigade.

He went out to the elevators and pressed the call button. Left, he muttered to himself. The left elevator came. Down in the reception area he put a dime into the pay phone and with a slightly shaky finger he dialed.

At the fifth ring someone lifted the receiver. "Hello," said the professor. His husky voice was even huskier now that it was dazed with sleep.

"I want children," said Keri to the husky voice. He had to tell someone how much he was missing his son.

For a moment the professor was indignant.

"At this time of night? Who is it?" Then, as he pulled himself together, he was immediately able to diagnose the peculiar linguistic disease. "Gabor?"

Keri, as if from a sunk submarine, bubbled into the telephone:

"Yes...I, Gabor. I want children."

"You've got one in Hungary."

"I want children here."

The professor's voice took on a certain animation:

"Well, adopt one. I suppose you don't expect me to make one for you?"

That was too much for Keri. He tried to unknot the sentence. Make children. That can only be one thing. What the hell does he mean, make children?

"I not make children," he said finally. "Janos makes children in room. To Jenny."

A hoarse sigh broke from the receiver:

"Oh, my God!"

"God, yes, God. And children. Children of God. I want to be children of God."
His eyes swam with tears.

"We all do one way or another," said the professor soothingly. Keri didn't understand but he didn't care either.

"But is no god," he shouted passionately and, for the sake of effect, he repeated it in Hungarian too.

He put down the receiver. To be God's child when there is no God. That's great, that's East European. And he went back to his room somewhat happier.

-----Translated by the author with Elizabeth Szasz

THE INTERNATIONAL WRITING PROGRAM: UNIQUE IN THE WORLD

ARNOŠT LUSTIG
(Czechoslovakia, 1970-71 IWP)¹¹

Everything good in the world has grown out of contradiction and conflict. Perhaps the first man to discover this truth was Heraclitus, and every thinking man since has had to rediscover the same truth. So it is not surprising that conflicting opinions about the best working conditions for writers helped create the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa; and it is not surprising that the Program should be the work of a stubborn poet, an American in body and soul, Paul Engle. His program represents without exaggeration the most that has ever been accomplished on an international scale for writers and has in the positive sense of the word, the same meaning for writers as the idea of the Olympic Games has for athletes. Given the existence of traditional writers' organizations -- the PEN Club and the European Writers Union, for instance -- it was the essential next step, essential because the time had come to do more than organize writers into unions and defend their endangered interests. It was necessary to meet writers' most basic creative need: that is, to offer them a place where they might create for a certain period of time, undisturbed by the pressures of a job.

At this moment such a place exists, and it bears the mark of its founder, the poet Paul Engle. He has made Iowa City a town of first-rate importance, a town that has the same significance for writers that Mecca has for Mohammedans and that Geneva once had for supporters of League of Nations. Today this Midwestern town of fifty thousand people -- once famous for its corn, its horses, its stubborn farmers, and, like so many American communities, its beautiful unpolluted river -- has become an oasis of the human spirit. To the concerned humanist who looks at the world and sees it endangered by an indifferent nature on the one hand and an indifferent population seemingly determined to exterminate itself on the other, the establishment of the program was a noble deed never to be forgotten.

¹¹ Arnošt Lustig, an internationally recognized writer of screenplays and fiction, was imprisoned in Theresienstadt, Auschwitz, and Buchenwald concentration camps. After his escape from a train to Dachau during the last days of the war. He was one of the leading writers revolting against "socialism with an inhuman face" in Czechoslovakia during the sixties. Following the Soviet invasion in 1968, he was exiled from his native land, invited to participate in the International Writing Program with his wife, Vera, and two children in 1970. He has been teaching at American University since 1973. Among his many prizes are B'nai B'rith Prize for *A PRAYER FOR KATERINA HOROVITZOVA* (Overlook Press-Viking) in 1974 which was adapted into a film and won first prize at the Monte Carlo film competition. Four of Lustig's other works were made into films and also received international acclaim. National Jewish Book Award for *DITA SAXOVA* (Harper and Row) in 1980. National Jewish Book Award for *THE UNLOVED: FROM THE DIARY OF PERLA S.* (Arbor House) in 1986. Three of his works, *NIGHT AND HOPE*, *DARKNESS GASTS NO SHADOW* *DIAMONDS OF THE NIGHT* (all published by Northwestern University Press), have been described as some of the finest works of fiction produced by any writer since World War II.

AN INTERNATIONAL GATHERING. I was a member of the IWP in 1970, and I speak from experience. I lived with an international gathering of poets and writers invited from all over the world, regardless of their race, bank account, skin color, religion, or political convictions. I lived for a year with people from Latin America, to whom the word *revolution* meant a vibration of all the senses, as though they were the new incarnation of Marat or Lenin; and I lived with people from Beijing and Taiwan, to whom the word meant a chilling vision of severed heads rolling senselessly over a country whose uninterrupted civilization is the oldest in the world. Regardless of their personal backgrounds, they met in Iowa City and became friends. At the very least, learning from and about each other humanized them; that is to say nothing of their work, which may one day affect the lives of millions.

Iowa City is a small university community. The names of its streets and many of its places echo a national literary center, which means as much to writers in the world today as the Hague once did to lawyers. Worms to Talmudists, Rome to Biblical scholars.

To achieve such a center required more than hard work. First, it was necessary to have an idea, and from that idea to create a real structure. Then it was necessary to make the structure a success, to shape the magic of the dream with an iron will capable of forging a strong program. Some had to do the planning; someone had to compose the thousands of letters to potential sponsors; someone had to do the talking.

It was necessary to persuade friends and enemies alike, those who were dedicated to literature and those who were indifferent, those who were inflamed and those who were cool, university administrators, congressmen, and the heads and subheads of various foundations, men who think three times before they give their money away. It was necessary, in other words, to have the endurance of a Jesse Owens, the stubbornness of a Galileo, and the cleverness of a Machiavelli. It was necessary to have a banker's nose for money and a wise philanthropist's sense of just portion. It was necessary to have a clear sense of purpose and of the risks involved. Certainly at the back of Paul Engle's mind there must have been the knowledge that after the dust of history has settled, there will remain only the words of poets and writers – blind men perhaps, like Homer, or men sentenced to live in asylums, like de Sade, but writers nonetheless.

SPIRIT OF INTERNATIONAL UNITY. And, of course, it was most necessary to know the difficulties faced by writers of this century. Engle's *Words for a Chinese Guitar* reflects not only these difficulties but the general spirit of international unity, which is the basic idea of the program.

*everybody, everywhere,
all of you, way out there,
black and brown, yellow and white,
Every nation, day and night,
I sing for you...
against the world's hate and wrong*

*I bring you this -- I bring a song.
As earth floats darkly through dark space,
More than moon, we need a singing face.*

SEEKING FINANCIAL SUPPORT. "I wanted to make the whole thing a cooperative international program, where we would pay part of the cost and the sponsoring agency would part part. I figured oil companies in the Near East, for example, would be delighted to sponsor writers. Turns out oil companies are bored with writers," Engle told a *San Francisco Chronicle* reporter last summer. "I went to see Volkswagen in Germany and Olivetti in Italy -- each of them ought to send a writer here."

As it developed, however, many of the program's sponsors are American corporations such as John Deere, Maytag, Sears and Roebuck, Northern Natural, and others. "U.S. Steel agreed to contribute the same week President Kennedy said No to their price raising -- I can tell you their thoughts were not on poetry just then," Engle has commented. Altogether, fifty individuals, corporations, and countries have contributed to the program at various times. The largest individual gift was from a retired school teacher in California -- about \$175,000 -- and the Hill Foundation has given \$125,000.

My hope is that soon there will be other similar international writing programs in the world. Surely countries like Great Britain, Italy, Switzerland, Israel, or Czechoslovakia, with their rich cultural traditions, might establish programs in the spirit of the one created by Paul Engle in Iowa City. These would be deeds in the best tradition of international friendship and would further reinforce the cause of international literary exchange.

Washington, D. C.

REFLECTIONS ON IOWA

--A Dialogue Between Two Indian Writers

ASHOKAMITRAN
(India, 1973-74 IWP)¹²

Each year, the University of Iowa invites writers, poets and playwrights from all over the world to participate in its International Writing Program, which lasts from October to the end of April. Director of the program is poet Paul Engle, whose earlier American Writers' Workshop has attracted such literary talents as Tennessee Williams, Philip Roth and Robert Penn Warren.

The International Writing Program provides participants with an opportunity to live together, exchange ideas, discuss their problems, aspirations, and literary projects. And it provides them with that ideal condition for writing—creative leisure. The foreign visitors are not required to take course work at the university, though they may attend lectures and visit classes if they wish. Once a week, they meet in a seminar to hear talks on general aspects of the literary scene in their respective countries. The program does not even insist that its participants undertake any writing. Paul Engle tells members: "You are free to write or not to." However, the International Program is concerned only with published writers. "We bring them too far not to know beforehand whether or not they have talent," says Engle.

Since the International Program started about 10 years ago, more than 150 writers from some 50 countries have benefited from it. Among recent Indian participants were Ashokamitran and U.R. Anantha Murthy (1974-75 IWP)—two of South India's leading writers. Ashokamitran is the pen name of J. Thyagarajan, a Tamil novelist and short story writer, who has published two novels and three collections of short stories. His works have been translated into English, Russian, French, Spanish, Portuguese and Arabic, besides several Indian languages. U.R. Anantha Murthy, who is a Reader in English at the University of Mysore, is well known as a novelist, short story writer, poet and critic in the Kannada language. Among his novels are *Samskara* and *Bharatipura*; his other works include three collections of short stories, two collections of essays, and a book of poems.

Shortly after Anantha Murthy returned from the International Writing Program, Ashokamitran called on him at his Mysore home where the two reminisced over their days in Iowa. The following article is an account of the conversation that took place between these two distinguished Indian writers.

¹² Ashokamitran is the pen name of J. Thyagarajan, fiction writer and translator. He is executive editor of the Madras literary monthly *Kanaiyazhi* and writes a three-times-weekly column for the Tamil daily *Swadesamitron*. He has published over one hundred articles on current affairs and literary criticism and several collections of short stories, as well as a novel, *KARAINDA NIZHALGAL*. He won the all-India short story competition in 1971 and has translated and published in a number of Indian languages, English, and Russian. His works are translated into Spanish, French, and Arabic.

“On behalf of Capt. R_ and the members of the crew, I bid you all good-bye. We hope you enjoyed the flight and we look forward to having you with us again. For your information, the temperature outside is 16 degrees Centigrade. I repeat, 16 degrees Centigrade. . . .” The December morning at Bangalore airport was cloudy and the two hours of road travel to Mysore where I was to meet Dr. U.R. Anantha Murthy didn’t promise to be very sunny. Sixteen degrees....

It was at that identical temperature on an October morning three years ago that I boarded an Ozark Air Lines plane in Chicago to go to Cedar Rapids, the last bit of air travel on my way to Iowa City. I was booked on a flight taking off at 8:45 a.m. but the counter girl asked if I would prefer to go by an earlier flight at 7:10. I said yes, had my two handbags searched, my person examined for concealed weapons and I walked out of the terminal building toward a tiny airplane a hundred yards away. I showed my boarding ticket to the pretty girl. She didn’t even look at it. She just said, “Sit anywhere you like.” I could have sat anywhere I liked for there was only one other passenger in the whole plane. During the flight a male voice spoke in the speaker. In a state of vague fear and hope and confusion, I heard that it was foggy outside and the plane was skipping a scheduled stop because of difficult landing conditions. Would it skip Cedar Rapids also, I wondered. The girl served breakfast for the two of us, I asked her for milk for my coffee, she gave me a packet. After a while I asked her again for milk. She said that is your milk. I tore open the packet, that was milk. I hadn’t thought of the possibility. All I was worried then was where is this Cedar Rapids; is it north, south, east or west of Iowa City; how far is it from Iowa City; when will I get there in all this fog and skipping of scheduled stops; will the seven dollars and a half in my pocket be sufficient to take me to Iowa City; would my suitcase be there in Cedar Rapids; what a fool I was to say yes when the girl at the New York JFK airport asked whether she could send it on to Cedar Rapids; will she know one had to change planes at Chicago: look there is only one other passenger in the whole of this plane, all the coffee and breakfast is for us two alone. . . . “I didn’t go to America with any stereotypes in my mind,” Anantha Murthy said. “Did you?”

“I should be saying the same thing but I did go with a kind of vague misapprehension. I hadn’t done any particular hard thinking on America but now that I was going there, there was a certain curiosity, also a somewhat puzzled state of mind. Abstractions, of course, but they were there. A country that produced great humanist thinkers, social philosophers, people who had spoken and written the loftiest sentiments about mankind, about the equality of men, transcendentalism. More than a century of such noble ideals and still there was a climate for an Elijah Muhammad, a Malcolm X, a Martin Luther King. I had seen photographs and movies of the Klansmen: the novel and the movie *Intruder in the Dust*; more movies like *The Liberation of L.B. Jones*. That film particularly shook me, I was sleepless for days after I saw it. There was the great admiration that such a movie could be made in the United States and made available for all the world to see but one good doesn’t really cancel one evil. You know what I mean, it bothered me that such a thing could be possible, that in the second half of the 20th century. . . . Not that I thought that was all

America, the America, but the fact it could be said of America puzzled me, frightened me...”

“Oh no. I do not think you should take such a self-righteous attitude, particularly since you are from India. We also in this country have our ugly facts, centuries of our caste system, discrimination, oppression. . . .”

“I wasn’t self-righteous that way. A little puzzled, intrigued. The West has an analytic tradition, the tradition of precise verbalization of conditions of all kinds and thrashing it out in public discussion. An Indian mind—isn’t it generally a thing that accepts an authority, too quickly, say for instance, the theory of Karma, and thus evades things that could be changed by human effort, with the result that certain things persist for centuries? They call it ‘the defect of vision,’ don’t they? (This is the head under which V.S. Naipaul in the *New York Review of Books* recently discussed Anantha Murthy’s novel *Samskara*.) America is a country where an ordinary journalist, a columnist, could defy the state machinery and the President and even succeed in bringing the President down. Such individual freedom to exist alongside social prejudice—that was my little hesitation. After all America is a rationalistic, materialistic world. . . .”

“But I had known many Americans who had grown weary of materialism. Many came and still continue to come to India for its music, in search of religious experience and spiritual light. I have known many Americans who loved India more than anything else. When you reach the acme of material prosperity, you turn the other way. Probably India had already passed that stage somewhere in its long history of thousands of years. I was lucky that I went to the United States when Americans were passing through a stupendous moral crisis. I went there with a lot of respect for the manner in which they owned the crisis and tried to solve it, publicly, truthfully. I had lived in England for three years and I had met a number of Americans there too. So I went to America with quite some experience of the West, of living in the West.”

“And I was going there for the first time.”

“The very abundance of anything must at some point produce an apathy, an aversion to it. So it is with material prosperity too. I was lucky I met quite a few young Americans who were reacting that way. There was a young engineer, a highly qualified and competent professional, who lived away from the city, in the woods, living as ascetically as was practicable, eating vegetarian food. I met a number of such young people.”

The young man at the New Mexico Museum of Art in Santa Fe said to me: “You are from India, aren’t you?” “Yes.” I said. He didn’t tell me his name and I didn’t tell mine, but he seemed to want to prolong the conversation. After all, both of us were looking at exhibits, and exhibits aren’t always the interesting things in a museum. “Is it that obvious?” I asked him. In Santa Fe there were so many who had my complexion and, even worse, had dark hair, were as short as I, skinnier, and one actually touched me for some money though he said he wanted it to buy gas for his car.

“You are so calm. I have noticed that of people from India. You must be a vegetarian.”

“Yes, I am.”

“I am a vegetarian too. Where do you get your things? Your rice?”

“Eagle’s.” Eagle’s is a large department store in Iowa City.

“Get it from health food stores. Don’t go for canned stuff. And don’t go for that instant-rice stuff.” With all his don’ts, it was he who really taught me how to cook rice on a cooking range. “Add three cups of water for a cup of rice, boil it vigorously for a minute, then turn down the flame very low and wait until all the water is gone. Don’t forget to put in a teaspoon of butter in the pan before you start cooking.”

“Butter doesn’t agree with me.”

“Then use margarine, that is good enough. Rice won’t stick to the sides of the pan and it won’t get burnt at the bottom.” His cooking hints were so practical. And it was after I met him that I noticed every American town had at least one health food store and that had many staunch customers, people who were trying to turn to nature in their living as much as practicable, an undercurrent in the American mind the anonymous friend in Santa Fe suddenly revealed to me.

Anantha Murthy said: “The silent secret aversion to things materialistic—this is one of the deepest undercurrents among the Americans, the undercurrent that flowed with great intensity in Thoreau. I knew I would find a bit of Thoreau’s America and I am glad I did find it in many young Americans. So there is that continuity. After all, as a writer, what does one look for if not for the undercurrents? Maybe it is only with a minority of the entire American population but it is the minority that creatively influences the culture of a land.”

At a number of parties in Iowa City, there would be a few who were not writers and who didn’t exactly belong to the university community—residents of nearby towns. On a couple of occasions, a staff member of the International Writing Program introduced me specially to his father, a man who spoke slowly and softly. His family had lived in Iowa for several generations, but he would say nothing of himself except that he was a simple farmer.

“I met a number of farmers of Iowa,” Anantha Murthy said. “Simple, decent people. Very human. There is a kind of idealism about them. They are very well off by any standards. They have all that money can buy but they remain really simple people. What you marvel at is that they continue to be so despite the extremely enervating civilization they live within. Meeting them was a joy and they confirmed my faith that mankind can’t become totally materialistic. They strive hard and I think they succeed in their own way to keep life simple and direct.”

“My experiences weren’t very different, either. That all the more intrigued me about my original misapprehension.”

Anantha Murthy said: “I understand. But I look at it this way: Take our own Vedanda. Is there anything to match it in affirming the oneness of all men, not just men but all living and nonliving things of the universe? We produced such a supreme vision of the world and life, but can you say, taking our own lives and our own surroundings, the general conditions available in India, that along with Vedanta there isn’t also a certain hypocrisy? There is a feeling of discomfort in the Indian psyche just as there is a discomfort in the American psyche. And that is the universal predicament, the predicament of man. Incidentally, did you meet with a specific instance of racism during your stay in the U.S.?”

“No. Did you?”

“No.”

It was a very cold day. The temperature was down to a shade below zero Fahrenheit which is minus 18 degrees Centigrade. But on the sidewalks of Iowa City, just in front of the downtown clothing stores, several young men and women walked in circles all day with placards: BOYCOTT FARAH and DON’T BUY FARAH PANTS. Farah pants are among the most famous in the States, as famous as Levis. The Farah factories in the distant states of California and New Mexico employed men and women of different ethnic groups. Willie Farah hadn’t treated them well and the boys and girls in Iowa City were registering their condemnation of an American employer accused of taking advantage of his workers. It was a peaceful demonstration in support of simple and probably helpless people several thousand miles away. It was one of the coldest days of the year and I could not prevent the images of those boys and girls surfacing in my mind whenever I saw the label of Farah on any manufactured dress. It should have been the case with a number of other people also. Maybe things have been set right now with Farah and his employees but I can’t forget the determined look of resistance on the faces of those young men and women whose each breath produced a cloud of vapor on that dense cold morning.

“I attended a poetry reading session of Ginsberg in Chicago. What an experience it was—the youth of the nation fired by a search and research into self. Renunciation amidst plenty. Many such things are happening in America. It is very wrong to have a stereotype of Americans because there is so much variety. And I went prepared for that variety.”

“Is that what you liked most in Americans?” I asked.

“I liked their openness for experimentation. Their willingness to experiment—in food, in clothes, in literature, in taste. They absorb quite a lot from the outside world. They keep themselves vulnerable to outside influences. That is what I liked most in them—their enormous capacity and also a certain confidence in themselves that keeps them open for experimentation.”

“I agree much of it is honest and deeply felt. But don’t you think there is also a tendency to overload themselves with fads? I saw an American book of records and three quarters of it was all fads and that is what I felt when I saw all the frenzied and feverish scramble for Mahesh Yogi and the teenage Maharaj Ji.”

“Everyone has to pay a price for the system one is in. The American system—rugged individualism, aggressive competitiveness, acquisition of wealth—these can stifle the individual. Their plunging into experimentation of all sorts is a symptom of their defiance of their system. I was happy to find that a number of Americans fight the system, not allowing it to destroy them. Take their awareness and concern over the problem of ecology. They are going the whole way about it.”

I remembered the expression of alarm and shock on the faces of the children when I threw away the wrapping of a food packet when I had gone on a bicycle picnic with a family on the banks of the Potomac River. Later we gathered all the leftovers, empty cans and cartons, put them all carefully in a large paperbag, the paperbag itself to be deposited in a wastebin miles away.

“Well, what was it you liked best?” Anantha Murthy asked me. I hesitated for a while and then said, “Children.” He waited patiently for me to say more. “Children—the way they were spontaneous, unafraid. This struck me very significantly in my very first bus travel in the States. There were about half a dozen children among the passengers. The children didn’t misbehave but they moved about and displayed a certain freedom and fearlessness. It might be called discipline or culture or plain inhibition, but I thought children in America assumed a certain individuality very early, a thing that can flourish if the adult world around them is appreciative or is at least not hostile toward it. Then I went to a number of homes and schools and was in the midst of hundreds of children. In the homes, of course, I found that the children keep away from guests—was it distrust? But in the schools where I went to give talks, I found them full of curiosity and self-assurance that one was bound to answer them fully and satisfactorily if they were in doubt about anything. They had done their homework well, they knew where India was, how large, the number of people, the kind of land, and so on. They spoke up if anything was ambiguous or vague, didn’t hesitate to point out what struck them as discrepancies, with the result there was perfect interaction between the speaker and the listeners. This capacity to articulate even at a very early age is what struck me as most remarkable in the American society. You taught at the University of Iowa, didn’t you?”

“Yes. Two courses. ‘Asian Humanities’ and ‘Asian Society Through Literature.’ I came intimately across to young people because of this opportunity. The first was a core course for undergraduates. I taught them from the Vedic hymns to Kalidasa. The second was for postgraduates. This I taught in two parts, pre-Independence and post-Independence Indian writing. These are things I could not have done in India—my teaching would be confined to English literature alone. But in American universities, there is such freedom in the syllabus and study. I did a lot of preparation for my classes—in the beginning I was a little nervous facing an extremely articulate community as you said. But the students liked me and I liked them and their response to my classes was fantastic. For the course in ‘Asian Society Through Literature,’ I used all available translations of Indian writings. I used a story by the Tamil writer Mowni, A.K. Ramanujan’s translation of my novel SAMSKARA, the film of SAMSKARA

and the films of Satyajit Ray. The student evaluation of my classes was ‘incredible’ to use the word of Professor Marleigh Ryan, chairman of the Department of East Asian Languages and Literatures at Iowa. It was most reassuring.”

“Ramanujan wrote me that he visited the program,” I said.

“Yes. I was able to get him invited from the University of Chicago to give a talk to the people in the Writing Program. He spoke to us on the Sangam Tamil Poetry, and writer after writer came up to me to say that Ramanujan’s was the most rewarding talk they listened to. It was the highlight of the entire program.”

“They tried to get Gopalakrishna Adiga to talk to the writers when I was in Iowa. But Adiga had a tight schedule and couldn’t come.” “That is a nice thing about Paul Engle. He has such deep affection for India and the Indian writers who go to the program. You, for instance. I felt your presence there. You were remembered and talked about. Paul once said that because of the Indians’ preoccupation with English. India would be the last outpost of the English language! He has such a vivid memory of India. He remembers all the people he had met years ago.”

“We missed him during the latter part of our stay. He and Mrs. Hua-ling Engle went on a world tour in the beginning of 1974. But while he was there he took us to a number of places in the State of Iowa—John Deere company, the American Republic company, the Duane Arnold Atomic Power Plant.”

“He took us to those places too. Most of them are donors to the Writing Program. Paul makes sure that he has the whole Iowa community involved with the program. What a diverse group of friends he has created for his work! Farmers, businessmen, industrial people. I liked him for the ease with which he moved with a range of people, not necessarily restricting himself to writers or teachers. Iowans love him—he is their local boy. He grew up in Iowa, won special honors for his poetry, won a Rhodes scholarship to Oxford, made Iowa his home and is engaged in a prestigious activity.”

Like me, Anantha Murthy hadn’t done much writing in Iowa City. “Quantitatively, I have not done much writing. In all these years, two novels, a few short stories—somewhat longish short stories—and two collections of critical essays. I love teaching; I derive a lot of satisfaction from it. My teaching assignment at the University of Iowa had me occupied fully. Of course, I did a lot of studying. You said you didn’t do much writing either.”

“I did take with me a whole bundle of notes, but soon after I landed in Iowa City, I decided that shutting myself up in an apartment to do writing was not perhaps the best way of utilizing a rare and exceptional opportunity as residing in a totally new land in the midst of a new people and a very different culture. A writer can write anywhere if he wills it—I do not believe in what is called the ideal conditions for writing. I sought every opportunity of involving myself in the mainstream of American life. I went to all possible places, met as many people as I could, talked to them, stayed with them, helped them in the kitchen. discussed matters as varied as yogic meditation and Yellowstone Park, traveled long distances by bus and train, went to churches, attended Easter service with a Catholic, kept myself available and

accessible to the other writers of the program even for little things like packing their books, touching up their translations, telling them where to get a particular book, where and how to get good photographic services, and so on. One feels the impact of a totally new experience of living seven months in a distant land in so many small and different ways. Soon after I returned to India I started on a novel I had been planning to write for a number of years and I feel that it would not have shaped the way it did if I had not experienced the diversity and sweep and expanse of the United States. For all that, the novel is about Secunderabad and Hyderabad during the years 1947 and 1948! The alchemy of the human mind, even if it is one's own, is quite mysterious."

The International Writing Program makes it possible year after year for an Indian writer to live and work with a range of writers and intellectuals, writers from the West, from Africa, from Asia, from Latin America, from the communist countries of Europe. Not meeting them just for a few hours of literary discussions, but actually living together for months. in the huge apartment building, the Mayflower, on the banks of the Iowa River.

"Living alone in a big apartment all by oneself could become a frightening thing," said Anantha Murthy. "But Hualing so wonderfully saw to it that no one felt left out or isolated. With grace and wisdom, she devised ways and means for each writer to feel he was a part of a community, the writers' community from all world. I like Iowa City. It is a small town, a beautiful town, a university town. You meet a number of other kinds of people also, simple people like farmers and small businessmen, and all these give you a sense of belonging, a repose."

"In one sense it is representative of America. In another, it is not." "Yes. it is not the other America, the America of the big cities, the hurry and bustle and traffic jams and smog and skyscrapers. I wasn't impressed with the skyscrapers of the cities. Here in India too. the Taj Mahal does not impress me whereas Fatehpur-Sikri moves me immensely. I can see a whole cultural idea behind the creation of Akbar's city. Maybe I would not have liked the Writing Program if it had been based in a big city, New York, for instance. Though it would have given you and me a glimpse of a different aspect of America. But American universities are like our own ancient *agraharas* and *ashramas* — they are sanctuaries. On the campuses you come across the best of learning and culture and aspirations. But that may not be as 'real' as what is outside them."

"Violence—the simple fear that you might be mugged anytime."

"And the enormous American wastefulness. That I liked least—the wastefulness. Wealth and wastefulness. I don't think one needs to become as rich as the Americans. Americans themselves are realizing it, as I could see. That is where a system becomes a burden on the society. If nothing, a visit to America will cure anyone of certain illusions of material progress, and show things one should avoid in one's own growth. Americans are very frank about their defects, the defects in their system, including the violence. They are not complacent, and their experience in

solving their problems is going to be a most valuable lesson to the rest of the world—just as their great experiments in democracy and national growth and social justice have been.”

There was no end to the reflections of Iowa, the International Writing Program, of Paul and Hualing Engle who bring writers from all parts of the world to Iowa City and care for them in an almost parental manner for a whole seven months, of the poet Burt Blume who always stood by the writers with a smile for sometimes unreasonable complaints and sometimes to really complicated procedures of getting exit visas, the lovely streets of the town you could walk about leisurely and peacefully at any hour of the day or night, the long hours Anantha Murthy and I had spent at the University Library, a library one could stay in and study in from early morning to the next morning at two o'clock, the Iowa Memorial Union, the handful of shops on Clinton and Washington streets, the Little Caesar's Pizza Treat, the friendly men at the Iowa City post office, the unfailing airport limousine service, the TV lounge of the Mayflower, the ducks skimming on the surface of the quiet Iowa River, the English-Philosophy Building, the dawn in Iowa City, Iowa City during a snowfall. Something very much like what Hemingway said of Paris: “If you are lucky enough to have lived there. . .then wherever you go for the rest of your life, it stays with you, for it is a movable feast.”

- From the magazine SPAN, New Delhi, India. May 1977

PAUL AND HUALING'S GARDEN

AGNES GERGELY
(Hungary, 1973-74 IWP)¹³

Wind bells over the river with an
Indian name: transplanted homelessness
disguised as a transplanted home.
The garden jingles. Odorous sandalwood censers,
kimonos and saris flashing well among
the trees cornered and rooted here, like
the ever alert deer antlers on the bank --
each particle of the sight is terror.
To reconstruct: to step barefooted from pile
on pile of scrap glass. Whether you fled from Franco
or from the red militias -- anyway you have to
think over something, but you no longer can avoid
stepping on the scrap glass. Every runaway walks
on wounded soles, and that's why murderers
and accomplices are revealed only dozens of years later
when the whole bodies are already covered by the creeping-up
heroic scars, the ivy of myths that makes money
and manner vibrate, that which will be rendered even
portlier by the historic funeral, when
-- if we may, and why shouldn't we, believe Orwell's words --
"the lie that slew you is buried
under a deeper lie."

Wind bells.

A half-mute sound. Don't stand underneath.

¹³ Agnes Gergely, poet, novelist, editor, translator of Joyce, Dylan Thomas, Edgar Lee Masters, Akutagawa and others. The prizes she has won include Attila Jozsef Prize for Literature (1977), 1987) Tibor Dery Award (1985), Milan Fust Prize (1994), Salvatore Quasimodo Prize (1995). The American Getz Prize for Literature and another Hungarian Tibor Dery Prize in 1996. Books of poetry: COBALT COUNTRY, SHADOW CITY, SELECTED POEMS, A LAND OF KINGS, SELECTED AND NEW POESMS. Novels: THE CHICAGO VERSION, STATIONS OF THE CROSS. Books of essays: REPORT-DIARY FROM THE NORTH, A HUNGARIAN OF THE WEST, CENTRAL EUROPE WAS PROMISES, AN ABSTRACT COW--MEOIRS. Three novels published in Sweden; one novel in the former GDR. A selection of poems in Sweden; another one in France. Some poems were published in England, France, Belgium, Ireland, Finland, Norway, Sweden, Israel, Iraq, India, Canada and USA. A book of poems in English is to be published under the sponsorship of the American Getz Prize.

Letter to Hualing about the poem: "...Once I had a dream about Iowa, specifically about your wonderful garden, but the dream was frightening: Hungarian history was projected onto the garden, as part of European history in the course of which someone has always been prosecuted, hurt, victimized. So I heard even the lovely voice of wind bells as gunfire and saw all those people - friends - in the garden as refugees. It was a deep terror and a great shock even if I felt surrounded by love and understanding. I had a threatening feeling that Hungary would call me back at a wrong moment. It's unexplainable. Would you understand it? Would you feel my love for Iowa and your garden come through, against all the historical threat?!..."

The myth of your homes will be absorbed
 by the metaphysics of wind-planted clangs.
 Among the trees a being-around of the bells
 hooked up on strings. And it does not matter
 if they were hooked there for fun or from despair.
 It's March, a tornado, metals tinkle and jingle.
 Great peoples. Small peoples. Diaspora peoples. Data, data!
 In the porch, above the river with the Indian name
 caps of whiskey bottles pop, tables are laid in English.
 "It would be more decent to perish now
 than to survive my homeland's death" --
 this was the message of Erno Szep during the bombardment.
 A glass of whiskey. Don't step on scrap glass.
 Wind bells.

The sounds patter around. The river
 with the Indian name or the orientally sneaking sound or
 the cadastral number: which is the illusion?
 The cadastre has no metaphysics.
 I haven't been humiliated in English yet.
 We watch the tornado from the porch. It's March.
 Kimonos. Saris. Deer antlers.
 A man's dark shoulders in a brilliant suit.
 Another Golgotha that compells me to stay.
 Another sore that runs along the old one.
 "It aches heartily" they said in the village of my birth.
 Who do you mention, then, as "my people"?
 Which way does the gossamer float, if there are
 gossamers in March in a garden inebriated
 with sandalwood smoke, over the river with the Indian name
 whose direction of flow is irrevocable?
 Towards him who would chase you with a pitchfork
 from a dunghill in your homeland,
 or towards him for whom your name means no more
 than he can gather from a footnote?
 No, the pose of the globe-trotter won't help.
 Wind bells. Kimonos. Helgas and Marussias.
 This fin de siècle with its tornadoes is no ship of ours.
 A deeper lie than the slaying lie.
 The garden jingles. An internal signal on antlers:
 a half-mute sunset. To run, run back.
 We grasp handholds. A wind, anyway. Sounds. Scrap glass.
 I am loved here. In vain. A man's dark arms. Too late.
 Wind bells. I'll go deaf.
 You can't turn silent, either. When the signal comes
 I leave the place. At once. Until that
 hold the whiskey glass fast.

Note:

I want the reader to know that I was the last one among “Hungarian lowans” who saw Paul Engle alive. I want the reader to know how much I am indebted to Paul and how much his death shocked me. I loved the Engles’ house with the deer garden, the picture of a real home. Two years after what happened to be our last conversation I had a terrifying dream of Hungarian history with fragmental memories of wartime and postwar Europe. Since dreams usually work a contradictory way, my own childhood homelessness was projected to that beautiful garden as if it had been a ship and the lovely windbells had had an amplified sound of terror. I dedicate this poem to the memory of Paul Engle, to my friend Hualing Nieh Engle, with love and gratitude, and to the Hungarian editor Pál Rez who provoked me to write about my attraction to the American Midwest.

A.G.

EXILE

ANA BLANDIANA
(Romania, 1973-74 IWP)¹⁴

I go into exile into myself.
 You are my home country
 I can't come close to anymore;
 You are the country where I was born,
 Where I learned to talk;
 I know only you in the world.
 In your eyes I swam so many times
 Surfacing ashore body all blue.
 So many times I sailed on you
 Listening to murmurs foretell the ebb
 Of blood where I could drown at any time.
 You are my portion of land;
 Only out of you do I know how to grow.
 You, master, forested
 And seeded with lakes,
 A land which once I owned
 To which I can't go back again.
 From me, from this foreign country of mine,
 Let me at night be myself your dream
 And pass through you rocking sleep,
 Let me possess you at night,
 Give yourself to me
 Like the geniuses gone live possessed by their ideas.

--Translated by the author with William Cotter Murray

¹⁴ Ana Blandiana is a poet and essayist and has edited various literary journals in Romania. She studied letters and philosophy at Cluj University and has traveled widely Europe. She has published more than a half dozen collections of poetry since 1966, including *First Person Plural*, *The Third Sacrament*, and a volume of essays, *Capacity for Witness*. She was imprisoned by the Ceausescu regime for a while before the Romanian Revolution of December in 1989 succeeded. She was freed, and appointed by the new government as the Cultural Attaché in the Romanian Embassy in Washington, DC.

THE RIVER

Ana Blandiana

Iowa City is crossed by a river which, by Romanian standards, could be considered very broad, for it is as broad as the Olt at Cozia or the Mures at Alba Iulia. It is called the Iowa River, and nobody can tell whether the river gave its name to the state and the town or dutifully adopted it from one or the other of them. In any case, one large-scaled map of America did not bother to show its deep waters, on which whole fleets of wild ducks sedately sailed only to be blown into the skies the next moment by the students' slender canes rippling the waves on the water.

Even though it is ignored by maps, the Iowa River lent its sleep banks to numberless, secretive clans of beavers, and the branches of the trees overhanging them to sentimental couples of squirrels; even so, unknown beyond the land it rendered fertile, modest and unglamorous, the river flowed like music through the vein of the town, lending it a kind of majesty which otherwise it probably would have lacked.

Among electrically heated and aluminum-plated houses, running parallel to the busy road under the sky crossed by airplanes every minute, the broad river -- its banks nearly drowned in tall grass and ancient trees, crowned with swirling wreaths of birds -- managed to keep the town in the world but *beyond* the frontiers of history, to create around it that quaint atmosphere in which the present itself became remote, as if, contemplating its face through an inverted spyglass, the river discovered its image in the past, to which it would sometimes belong -- a charming, antiquated thing.

I couldn't say how the river did it. I couldn't explain why the planes didn't frighten the ducks always, why the cars didn't drive the squirrels away, why the beavers still built their dams in the middle of the town and the grass still grew wild along the streets. Maybe it was because in winter it got frozen solid like the rivers of one's childhood and, clad in white, suffered to be crossed on foot like rivers in medieval paintings; maybe it was because in spring, after having rolled down-stream with undissimulated delight, with big tree trunks as in a virgin forest, it suddenly turned limpid and lovely, murmuring miles between its earthy banks; or it was just because its banks were earthen. Yes, indeed, this must have been its secret (which only memory discloses to me), the secret of the power that projected modern Iowa City into the universe; echoed by motorway, crossed by boulevards, flanked by aluminum-plated, electrically heated and air-conditioned houses, the river had not been coated in concrete like so many civilized waters; it had kept its grassy banks, its clayey bed, its earthy womb. Thus it belonged to almighty nature, clear of any sign of brittle architecture, which it defied and defeated only to redeem with admirable selflessness.

Grass. Many, very many are the things in America which are not like those in Europe, but nothing is more definitely different than grass. I do not mean the crazy idea of artificial grass which is so much laughed at by Europeans; or the grasses of

the South with their long, lush evergreen tufts, strong with an almost animal vitality; or the stiff, bristling, self-respecting grasses which plod their way from the heart of the continent to the shores of the desert; or even the dewy, closely clipped lawns of New England. I mean just grass -- or grassness.

In Europe grass is merely decor, an element of landscape which is carefully, sometimes snobbishly grown, a "beauty spot" made to catch an admiring eye, well protected from any human intimacy. "Keep off the grass" is a general warning, a religious commandment, a philosophic "mustn't." Grass is not nature manifest but nature tamed. In America, on the other hand, grass is the naive and uninhibited pretext under which nature breaks into the town; it is the vanguard of prairies recklessly marching forward to the crossing of the great avenues and bursting into the park to celebrate its victory. The very idea of a park is changed, transformed by the mystery and the power of grass. Far from being an architectural pattern of geometric alleys, sophisticated flowers, and masochistic trees, a park is a space of total freedom, of rocks springing from the asphalt, of forest-like trees, of triumphant grass.

The grass in American parks is a place to make speeches, to sleep, to play baseball, walk, eat, run, think. Grass is earth turned soft and silky to the touch, motherly earth, willingly submitting earth, earth spreading into a chlorophyll glory round the head of the Statue of Liberty

A CLIPPING FROM THE BOOK OF SNOW. The heavy snows of this January, all this demure whiteness which has so smoothly taken over, reminds me -- oh, with what excruciatingly fresh joy! -- of something which happened long ago, and the memory now sparkles back at me, as bright as it did when I was born there in the snow.

It was many winters ago -- more than ten -- during a January like this one, with heaps of snow; we were in the middle of the American continent in a many-storied building to one side of the campus, wedged between a hill and a river with a naked-looking stretch of lawn in front. It had been snowing for two nights and a day, patiently and tirelessly, and the endless, bottomless, and surfaceless snow dancing in front of the wide windows had been spinning and twirling its cosmic fleece round the slender, spindle-shaped hotel. For hours and hours, night hours or day hours (who could tell?), we had felt alone in the world, and intoxicating, thrilling feeling. Then suddenly, on the second day, in the early hours of the morning. It was all over; the snow stopped falling, and a timid, rather murky dawn appeared. In the milky light of the unseen sun, from our man-build height, the earth looked round, soft and white, happy and alone, just making ready to step into history. Then at the dawn of the day, at the dawn of time, before one of us and the rest of the world woke up, the other went out and, treading in knee-deep snow between the hill and the river, in front of the thousands of hotel windows, wrote TE IUBESC! in giant letters

I shall never forget the enormous exclamation mark which finished that white silent cry, or the general excitement when people woke up and set eyes on the Romanian words sparkling bright in the new snow, or the long holiday weeks during

which the letters printed in the snowy whiteness continued to glow under the cold, lonely eye of the sun while everybody, turned into children by our childish prank, moved by the discovery that the words meant “I love you,” greeted each other in Romanian with the words which had become a motto, an appeal, a paean of joy, a warning against loneliness.

Hundreds and hundreds of youngsters must have aged since then, but maybe in the scrapbook of their student years they still keep the clipping from the book of snow with the exclamation mark -- of love in a world of snow. Scores of writers went back to their countries leaving behind that American winter and the two Romanian words written in the snow of remembrance. I still remember -- I always remember when I look at fresh snow -- how proud we felt then that we were Romanians. We may have been a bit ridiculous, but we certainly were moved when we heard everybody using the magic words, when we had the epiphany that love is everything.

Bucharest.

Translated from the Romanian by Anda Teodorescu

A VIEW FROM ICELAND

SIGURDUR MAGNUSSON
(Iceland, 1976-77 IWP)¹⁵

Ten years have passed and a lot of muddy water has run under the bridge, but Iowa City of 1976 hovers in the memory like an enchanted isle in the onrushing stream with its undulating hills, its autumn-colored leaves, its fragrant and crisp air, its sunny days and long nights of hard work, its occasional meeting, parties, exhibits, concerts, plays, films, trips, and visits with interested and interesting local people. It was in every sense an entirely new experience, refreshing, stimulating, challenging, and productive of some good work.

I had the unusual privilege of being able to bring to Iowa my wife and two sons, age twelve and eight, and enjoying their company during the first months of the program. That was the month of our most lively social activities, during which the group got intimately acquainted. The high points were of course the visit to the John Deere headquarters, with its stunning art treasures from all over the world, and the boat ride on the Mississippi River accompanied by the strains of a fine orchestra. I sang myself hoarse and no doubt annoyed a number of my colleagues with my bellowing, but I simply could not help giving vent to my *joie de vivre*.

Iowa City and its surroundings were a kind of fairyland to my boys with all the trees (there are hardly any trees in Iceland), the winding and still-flowing Iowa River, the playgrounds, the trampoline at the Engle house, and all the unknown territory they were eager to explore. On one occasion they lost their way and ended up in a cemetery, to their speechless consternation. A kindly woman found them in tears and utterly desolate. They knew only the one magic word *Mayflower*, which saved the situation: they were duly taken back to the hostel, and what a relief to all!

The *Mayflower* was in its own way a dream place to the boys, with its fine indoor swimming pool, its ping-pong tables, and all the vending machines filled with sweets and soft drinks, not to forget the two black boys who became their special friends, guides, and protectors. Most exciting of all, however, was the TV set, which from early morning onward caused them to fight over which channel to select (they had very dissimilar tastes), generating almost constant headache in their helpless parents. My very low opinion of American television was in no way changed for the better during those four agonizing weeks, and it was certainly a relief to be able to remove the boys from the lure of that idiotic box and send them back to Iceland.

¹⁵ Sigurdur A. Magnusson spent most of his stay in Iowa compiling the anthology *CONTEMPORARY ICELANDIC POETRY*, which was published as part of the Iowa Translation series, with UNESCO. Among his thirty books are five verse collections, three novels, a short story collection, eleven translations (from Danish, English, German, and Creek), travel books on Greece and India, and studies on various literary and historical themes. He has been a literary and drama critic for Iceland's largest daily, editor of the country's leading cultural magazine, and chairman of the national Writers' Union. A 1979 novel was an all-time bestseller in Iceland, and its sequel was also published.

With the family gone, I settled down to serious business and for the next ten weeks or so worked as I have never done, either before or since. Paul Engle had broached the possibility of an anthology of modern Icelandic poetry and asked whether I would be willing to tackle the project. I found the idea challenging and rather enticing, especially when he offered as an assistant the best young poet in residence, Mick Fedullo. So I sent to work at once, having brought with me over a hundred books of poems, and I ordered additional ones, which arrived in due time.

The working arrangement was quite simple: I sat twelve to fourteen hours a day, seven days a week, and fashioned my versions of the poems I had selected; Mick turned up every Thursday morning, took the batch of poems I had finished, then sat down with me to go through the batch he had taken home the previous Thursday. Our sessions usually lasted all day Thursday, and thus week after week the number of completed translations expanded, until by the end of the tenth week we had some 330 poems by twenty-eight leading poets of Iceland ready for publication.

Obviously I had expected to see the fruits of our excruciating work materialize in book form right away. Various complications cropped up, however, and it was not until six years later that the anthology was finally published in the Iowa Translation Series under the title *THE POSTWAR POETRY OF ICELAND*.

I have told this prosaic story for two reasons. First, the project deprived me of any free time to write my own stuff and thus set me apart from my colleagues, who were -- most of them -- busy with their own creations. At times this made me a bit depressed, especially when I realized that the book might not be published after all. However, I never really regretted having taken on the task, since it provided an entirely new and very valuable experience. Second, after the anthology had been published and had received on the whole highly laudatory reviews, the undertaking acquired a new dimension. The burning problem of less widely known languages is the dire lack of competent translators. Every few, if any, English speaking poets know Icelandic. The only way to sidestep that hurdle is to have native and foreign poets collaborate. This proved to be a viable solution for Fedullo and me, and whenever I have spoken of our joint undertaking at international writers' conferences in Europe, the reaction has invariably been the same: here is a way out of a disturbing impasse.

The International Writing Program was in numerous ways an experience not to be forgotten. The symbiosis, under the same roof, of a highly disparate group of individuals of both sexes, coming widely different cultural backgrounds, did create emotional problems, but they were mostly solved without serious friction. Food, or rather the lack of certain kinds of food, was a source of nostalgia in some cases, but we did our best to surmount such shortcomings. Some of us might not be the best cooks in the world, but those few endowed with culinary expertise were proud to regale their neighbors with native dinners, which usually were real treats. The frequent banquets at the Engles were something out of this world.

To me the most valuable parts of the IWP, however, were the many intimate personal contacts established and the lively and very informative weekly meetings on Friday afternoons, when program members gave talks about their native literatures

or their own work, usually followed by long and sometimes heated discussions. Such gathering gave us a strong sense of the worldwide literary community and the essentially common ground we were all cultivating, each with his or her particular idiosyncrasy and personal emphasis.

Coming as I did from a highly literate country, I was perhaps not so struck as others by the small Midwestern town with its fine university devoted to all the arts, especially literature, but I was impressed by the size of the library and by the incessant cultural activities taking place almost every night. And obviously we were all strongly affected by the interest shown by the citizens at large in the International Writing Program and the various other programs of the university. The proverbial American hospitality was lavished on us from all sides and lingers in my memory as one of the salient traits of Iowans.

I came away from Iowa City with a number of life-long friendships that can never be overestimated, even if they have not tangible effects. I went back for a month in 1977 and found a new group of writers, among whom I again made several lasting friends, strengthening the sense of brotherhood across boundaries and oceans.

Apart from such subjective value, which may be elusive and are in any case highly individual, the IWP has two concrete and objective values which should be stressed and constantly reiterated. First, it provides the participating writers with much-needed freedom from daily chores and deadly routines at home, enabling them to concentrate undisturbed on whatever task they have before them. Second, and equally important, it opens up entirely new vistas on the world by bringing into close contact creative people from every nook and cranny of the world who in their day-to-day interactions provide information rarely to be found in the mass media, or even in books, doing away with misconceptions, prejudices, suspicions, and ignorance, which is the root of so much evil in this global village of ours.

Iowa City is definitely one of the most important landmarks in my entire career as a writer, and as such it will be fondly remembered to the end of my days.

Reykjavik.

SOME HAPPY MEMORIES OF IOWA

BESSIE HEAD

(South Africa, 1977-1978 *IWP*)¹⁶

As the plane from New York neared Cedar Rapids I looked down in surprise at endless stretches of neatly plowed farmland. It was in such a community that I was to live for four months. It made me review my image of the United States. To the rest of the world the United States would seem to be Hollywood, Washington, New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles, where all the bad things happen. We traveled through Iowa and it was all the same—small towns like Iowa City surrounded by vast stretches of farmland. Strange religious cults quietly lived out their ancient dramas and turned up in shops and restaurants in old-fashioned clothing. A feeling grew in me that whole villages in Europe and England had emigrated two hundred years ago to what was called the “new world” and kept that village quality of life. I soon felt happy and at ease in Iowa City. The population was the same as my village, Serowe—40,000 people. Like my village, the town was small and manageable and I soon found my way around. It was as if I had never left the Serowe post office, when I walked up to the counter clerk and asked for some aerograms.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “They are out of stock.”

Shopping sometimes gave me problems. American English isn’t the British English that is spoken in southern Africa. I walked into a stationery shop and said to the man behind the counter: “I would like to buy a rubber, please.”

The man said: “We don’t sell them in ones. We sell them in threes.”

I said: “But I want only one rubber.”

The man became hostile: “But I told you we only sell them in threes.”

I said: “All right, I’ll take three then.”

The man walked to the back of the shop and returned with a small packet of prophylactics that he handed to me. He had such a peculiar look in his eyes that I thought he believed I was a prostitute who had suddenly invaded Iowa City. Half fainting with shock I struggled to explain. “I mean the thing you rub mistakes out with.”

“Oh,” he said. “You mean an eraser.”

Wherever I live I always build quiet, predictable routines. I already had my breakfast by the time the postman called. I would look out of the window at nine o’clock, see his van, and then go downstairs and wait for him to sort the mail into our mailboxes. On a bench were piles of the university newspaper. It was so peaceful that I would read it absentmindedly. Things like chicken manure and other farming matters made the daily headlines. Then everything went wrong. Bader was killed in

¹⁶ Bessie Head published four novels, *WHEN RAIN CLOUDS GATHER*, *MARU*, *A QUESTION OF POWER*, *SERWE*, and a book of short stories, *COLLECTION OF TREASURES*. She emigrated to Botswana and continued her writing career there until her death in 1986.

prison and Sadat went to Israel. The chicken manure was swept from the front page for weeks and weeks.

I was researching a historical novel and had partly done some of the work at home. My next chore was to visit the university library. The first time I did so I was thrown off balance. A young man stood behind a counter writing on a card. He looked up briefly. "Can I help you?" he asked.

My story was a long one. I began: "I am doing research for a historical novel on southern Africa. . ."

"Africa," he said. "Fifth floor." And he went back to writing on the card again. I stood there shaking with fright. I am used to libraries where the librarian holds your hand and finds books for you. The young man was completely uninterested in my existence. I took my courage in both hands and took the lift to the fifth floor. Never had I seen such a desolation of solitude, silence, and books. I had never worked in a library like this but in libraries crowded with people. But I soon warmed up to the books when I saw what was there. Anything that had ever been published on Africa was there. Books long out of print but essential to my research were there. I looked in wonder at an ancient book, *NATIVE LIFE IN SOUTH AFRICA*, by Sol T. Plaatje. It had never been loaned or read. I had to slit open some of the pages in order to read the book. In the words of Jorge Luis Borges: "Paradise is a library." The fifth floor became that paradise to me.

I enjoyed meeting the farmers and their wives. One of the farmers' wives prepared a delicious dinner for us. Just as we were about to depart she asked us if we would send her a little sample of our writing. I sent her a love story. A few days later she phoned me. She said she had a women's club and the women were eager to talk to me. Would I come one evening, stay overnight, and let her bring me back to the Mayflower the following day? I agreed.

The woman's club was fascinating to me. There was an American flag on the mantelpiece. Before anything happened the women turned to the flag and said something. Then the chairlady opened procedures.

"We have all read your love story and enjoyed it. Now we are going to talk about love for the Lord." All the women bowed their heads and she said a little prayer. Then the women looked up at me expectantly. They were bursting with questions, eager to know about the part of the world I came from. I enjoyed this kindness. They lived in a small, quiet, shut-in, conservative world but it could admit other wonders and things.

President John Kennedy had accurately defined the soul of the American nation. "We are a conservative people," he said. He must have known about all those little villages in Europe and England that had transported themselves so many years ago to the United States. Villagers are always conservative.

WITH PAUL ENGLE AT FORT MADISON, 1978

THOMAS MCCARTHY
(Ireland, 1978 IWP)¹⁷

First sunlight in the golden bowl of Iowa.
Sunlight is so new it has
no quintessential stare. The whole area
has put on a new face for the rodeo --
Even Paul. I think he has a pair of new boots:
that cowboy hat I haven't seen before.
We walk together toward the first principle of horses;
dust on their socks, poems in their metric stare.

¹⁷ Thomas McCarthy, poet, a member of the review staff of *The Irish Times*, is on the library staff of Cork Corporation. Educated at University College, Cork; won the Patrick Kavanagh Award for Poetry and the Irish Council Bursary. Among his books of poetry are WARM CIRCLE, THE SORROW-GARDEN.

FAREWELL TO IOWA CITY

BERT SCHIERBEEK
(The Netherlands, 1979 IWP)¹⁸

Iowa City, December 10, 1979

Dear Hualing, dear Paul.

This is a farewell party. That means that there is sadness, gladness and future nostalgia.

I think that no one of us who got the invitation to be a member of this International Writing Program had the slightest idea of what he or she had to be prepared for. Many of them must have done what we did: get a map of the United States and look for Iowa. First we found Des Moines and, then indeed Iowa City and of course Cedar Rapids. So innocent and bewildered we came here. But you here were prepared. You knew already. You took us to many places. To John Deere where we saw how iron melts in great heat streams of fire that would be molded into forms we had no ideas of. Like poems. For ideas, words, language had foreseen them and made exact as was talked and agreed. We saw the Hawks with you too. You took us to the American Republic Insurance Company to see computers and art. You also blew up an old building for us there in Des Moines so we could take historical pictures. We saw farms and farmers, hogs and cows, corn and beans. We were on the Mississippi River and envied Mark Twain and the unbearable innocence of those times. We saw the Living History Farms, making history alive. We learned a lot about Iowa. So we have been here for four months. Some of us worked, some were lonely, craving for love. Some of us overcame problems by putting themselves on that daring flying trapeze called writing. And some are for the first time thrown back on our own limits and possibilities. The results will come later on, like love that comes to words when the beloved one is not there anymore. We sure will all be haunted by that vision of a Mayflower shipwrecked on the banks of Iowa River. It will also be a proof (pruf) rock and I hope that our heads have then hardened up enough to split that rock with the force and tenderness of our different tongues and languages. And of course we will never forget the vacuum cleaner, nor the cleaning up of our heads and hearts to become so void that we can put in everything in a new way.

¹⁸ Bert Schierbeek, one of the leading writers in The Netherlands. Authored over 20 major literary works in different genres. His early education at the Athenaeum included the study of German, French, Latin and Greek; he went on to the university, but his studies were interrupted by the German occupation of The Netherlands. He joined the Dutch Underground, and his experiences there resulted in his first novel, published in 1945, *REVOLT AGAINST THE PAST*. After that, he wrote steadily, producing poetry and novels. He combines the genres of poetry, fiction, and literary criticism. He died in 1996.

It is a great achievement at this time to get so many Chinese together, Chinese divided by social systems, but aware of being Chinese. You are right to be proud of that. And what you did and do for the people from the so-called “third world,” for people from East Europe by giving them the opportunity to come here, you manage to do something in the best tradition of America.

We all thank you for that.

Your broad-mindedness, many times combined with broad “cashness” too, made it possible to have so many birds of different colors and feathers in your cage. Birds singing and writing in their own languages. And you dear Hualing and Paul, without you these years of the IWP would not exist. You must know what has been said by a Chinese politician who was asked what he would do first if he had to change his country: “I would change the language, the grammar.” That is the power of language. Of that power We had here magnificent examples.

We thank you for that.

Now we would like to thank, my God, it sounds like Thanksgiving Day. Well, let’s say Mayflower Day. All the members of the staff who were always willing to help us, to keep us going. I cannot end without a special word for Mary and Peter Nazareth. They were mother and father, car dealers, meal givers, in short, they were like good parents you will never forget.

And now, my friends, poets, writers, we would like to thank each other for all the friendship and love that blossomed between us. We know much more about each other than ever before. Thank you all.

FAREWELL, IOWA

WANG MENG
(China, 1980 IWP)¹⁹

I returned to Iowa City from a lecture tour on the East Coast to find ice and snow already covering Iowa. Winter rain kept falling, melting the snow and revealing grass underneath that was as green as ever. By the bridge on the Iowa River a section of the street had been under repair for about two months but was still unfinished. The construction messed up the once-clean Dubuque Street, and the rain made it even muddier.

I had already spent nearly four months in the United States; I could hardly believe it! Two more days, and the time would come for me to say good-bye to this country. It was still summer when I first arrived. I used to go jogging in the morning in my short sleeves along the paths in the city park or around Hancher Auditorium. At night before going to bed I used to turn on the air conditioner; otherwise it would be too hot to sleep.

And then before I knew how it came about, some of the leaves on the trees started turning yellow and red. The first ones seemed to have reddened rather early, as early as the second half of September; the first person to notice them was Paul Engle, the poet. We were driving to downtown Iowa City together. He suddenly pointed out a tree by the road: "Look, the leaves are turning red!" Nobody responded to his words; the others in the car were chatting and laughing. Outside the car the trees were still as green as they had been under the same warm sunshine, and the women students were as fresh and pretty as usual, their shoulders and backs exposed to the sun. But I heard him and I was touched. When I next wrote to the folks in Peking, I told them of the first signs of Iowa autumn.

And then autumn, as in a dream, filled the space between the sky and the earth.

One day Hualing Nieh came and took Ai Qing and his wife, Wu Sheng, the poet from Taiwan, and me to enjoy the sight of red leaves and to take some photos. We started from the back of the Mayflower, where we lived. Then to fit the whole nine-

¹⁹ Wang Meng is one of the leading writers in China. He showed literary promise at an early age and became a Communist party member before he was fourteen. One of his early stories, A Young Man Arrives at the Organization Department, stirred nationwide debate in 1957, becoming the focal point of the drive to reverse the brief liberalization of Chinese literature. A literary magazine received, within a four-month period (December 1956--February 1957), 1,300 pieces of criticism on the story, a majority of which accused the story of distorting the Party organization and the image of veteran Party cadres. He was only twenty two at the time. He was sent to do hard labor in a village close to Beijing for five years and then to Shinjiang in 1963. He was rehabilitated in 1979, has become a major figure on the literary scene. Published volumes of novels, short stories and essays. He was one of the first writers to attend the International Writing Program from China. In mid-1980s he became the Minister of Culture of China, but was removed from the post after the Tiananmen Incident in 1989 because he was considered uncooperative with the hard-liners in power.

story building into the picture, we strolled farther until we reached the edge of the Iowa River, which flowed slowly by. Next we started looking for red leaves along the streets, now climbing up a hillside road and now sliding down a steep slope. Huge bunches of colorful leaves appeared before us in their full beauty.

Suddenly a line of verse by the poet Li Hou-zhu, which I had read years before, came to mind: “When would the end be for spring flowers and the autumn moon?” I later came across another version of the lines: “When would the end be for spring flowers and autumn leaves?” Back then, without thinking about it much, I had assumed that the second version was an error. It was only now, facing the red leaves of Iowa, that it occurred to me that the phrase “autumn leaves” might actually have fit the poet’s mood more precisely.

What I loved most, that fall in Iowa City, however, were the common yellow leaves. I went for a walk nearly every morning. I watched the way the leaves kept falling from tall bushes. At first, only one or two leaves, swirling and dancing gently in the air. And then more and more of them fell, soundless and gentle, like a light rain that went on through the night and day. It made me feel that it would be such a comfort for those leaves to land on the frosty ground. Maybe what the leaves dreamed of was just to return to the vast, soothing embrace of Mother Earth, after the nourishment of the sun, wind, and rain all the year round. (Could you please leave the fallen leaves alone, you elfin squirrels scurrying about on them in the woods?) Rather fancifully, I found myself lightening my footsteps so as not to disturb the leaves that had fallen.

Iowa City: serene, tranquil, with its river, woods, meadows and cornfields, and a now-sullen, now-amiable sky. Out of its population of sixty thousand, thirty thousand were college students. From morning till night and everywhere in the city you would meet young people running, wet with sweat. It was quite different from that constantly noisy, rushing, extravagant American society, full of chaos and corruption, that we imagined back home. That America exists on Broadway and Times Square in New York City, in Chicago and Los Angeles, not here in Iowa City.

There are no X-rated movies here, no skyscrapers. In the whole town there is only one small liquor store, not available to anyone under the legal drinking age. Buses run only once every fifteen minutes, and on Sunday all the buses stop and all the shops are closed; the entire city seems to be sound asleep. People here don’t seem to care about dressing in fashion, preferring casual clothes such as sport sweaters and pants, coarse jeans with the stitching fully exposed, and leather shoes with big, solid fronts and thick rubber soles. Even at banquets or concerts, there are more men not wearing ties than wearing them.

What these people do take pride in is the crops they grow; one of the major companies here is John Deere, the manufacturer of agricultural machinery. In the eating places you find healthy and tough farmers among students and faculty members. Even now, traces of the farmer still show in the person of Paul Engle. He is a strongly built man with a loud voice, fond of talking and loud laughter. When he roars with laughter you would think he had forgotten the presence of others. He loves to do manual labor and every winter he cuts down trees and chops wood for

the fireplace. With an axe he himself hacked out a path all the way through the woods at the back of their house.

When we first came, with everything so new and different, I felt very strange, like a river fish thrown into salt water. I could no longer listen to the radio program, “Everyday News and Excerpts from Newspapers” at 6:00 A.M., or the “Joint Programs of Local People’s Stations” at 8:00 P.M. I couldn’t receive my newspapers, or *People’s Literature* or *Literary Review* from the Writers’ Association. I could no longer listen to the stammering speech of Wei Xi, the eloquence of Li Tuo, the blustering Liu Shao-tang, and the windy Liu Xing-wu, with his clear logic frequently spiced with “See? see?” And—why bother to hide it—I missed my wife and the folks at home who were all waiting to hear from me from the other side of the earth.

I became a resident of Iowa City: even my name, address, and phone number were entered into the city telephone directory. Shopping for groceries once a week, pushing a cart, I became used to shuttling between shelves of abundant food and goods. Every morning I went down to the first-floor lobby to get a free copy of the *Daily Iowan*, the student newspaper, and I managed to read some of the headlines with the help of a dictionary. In the evenings, Ioanna, our warm-hearted teacher of Greek origin, would help my neighbor George Balaitza and me with our English. Whenever I needed to go downtown, I would either take a city bus from the front of the Mayflower, putting in thirty cents, or I could walk to the bridge and take the university bus, which was free. At the center of the city were three movie houses, permeated with the fragrance of popcorn. If I got hungry, I could have either an American meal or a Chinese one, or get a sandwich or an Italian pizza. . . .

I wrote in the mornings, read in the afternoons, and studied English in the evenings. I finished a short novel, about a man and a horse in Sinkiang, and wrote some odds and ends about my trip to America.

I spent a fair amount of time and energy learning English during my visit here. Thirty years ago, when I was in high school, I first learned the alphabet, but when I arrived in America I still knew no more than “OK” and “thank you.” I remember vividly the embarrassment it caused us just going through the procedure at the airport on our way from San Francisco to Iowa. However, after my efforts during the past few months, I could already get along to some extent on my English, and I was even able to speak English now and then during our lecture tour of the universities on the East Coast. When I was interviewed by the *New Yorker* in New York I also answered the questions directly in English. My teacher Ioanna was certainly very kind, patient, and good. I am also grateful to the wife of the Swedish author Erik, who, because she is a professional English teacher in her own country, always waited patiently for me to finish talking in my poor English before she replied and offered help.

I also enjoyed talking to Peter Jay, the young English poet. There was much charm in his gentle manners and the perfect rhythmic Oxford accent. We ran into each other in a bar one weekend and had a long talk. He told me that he could not understand what had happened in China. I replied that it was by no means easy—not only for an Englishman like himself, but even for me, a typical Chinese—to

comprehend the events and vicissitudes of these past years in China. Nevertheless, we must draw lessons from our past and try to understand each other as we move forward, both sharing this planet.

Our conversation shifted to friendship, to us Chinese perhaps as important and indispensable as air and sunshine and counting much more than all material values. Wasn't it that same eternal friendship—between the Chinese and different peoples, sharing the same blood—that flowed like the Iowa River in this serene little town in the Midwest of America ?

Hardly one day passed without a tête-à-tête with my best friend and neighbor Balaitza, novelist and leader of the Rumanian Writers' Association; at first stammering, but eventually, with mutual encouragement, we were able to converse quite fluently in English. We talked about our own countries and toasted the friendship between the Chinese and Rumanians and shared concern over the events in Poland.

I think of all the writers I met at the program, and I think, too, of the other ethnic Chinese who grew from the same roots as I—the poet, Wu Sheng, from Taiwan, temporary residents like the painter, Liu Guo-sung, and his wife Li Muo-hua, and Lu Jia-xing and his wife Tan Jia. These Chinese in America turned out not to be at all “foreign.” Liu still had the naturalness of northern China and the “boorish” accent of his native dialect. The delicious dishes cooked by Li Muo-hua still retained the authentic flavor of her home country. They longed to revisit their friends and relatives in their homeland.

I found it hard to believe that all this was ending soon. Wasn't it likely that somebody in haste had overturned the calendar on my desk? Even as this was written, the farewell banquet for this year's International Writing Program had already been held; ten writers had left for home; the electronic thermometer in front of the Iowa State Bank downtown informed people that the temperature had gone down to five degrees below zero. The trees were barren of leaves now, while the Christmas trees in front of the university president's house and in my teacher Ioanna's living room had just been prettily adorned with red and green lights. The river was not yet frozen, and it still wasn't cold enough for the snow to stay on the ground; the long severe winter was still to come.

My plans for learning, for forming relationships, were still far from being fulfilled; my investigation into American society had barely begun; I still had a lot more things to write here, and my language studies were just at the high point. Nevertheless, my luggage was already packed, my books mailed, the rent paid, and the cleaning nearly done. My airline tickets were lying in my drawer, as if longing to do their service to Hong Kong via Los Angeles and San Francisco.

Within some forty hours, Iowa City would be reduced to a memory for me, a thing to chat about, a thread of thought. Good-bye, Iowa, so long. When I go back to Beijing and walk along the Royal Residence Street or New Crossroad, I can take a mental trip perhaps along your Dubuque Street, Washington Street, Church Street, or Market Street. As I make a cup of hot jasmine tea in my home in the Chian San-men Apartments in Beijing, perhaps I might think of your golden clear scotch with ice

cubes. When I ride my heavy “Flying Pigeon” brand bicycle that I brought back from Sinjiang, mingling with the morning flow of bicycles in Beijing and starting my regular work for the day, perhaps I will pray for your people to have a peaceful sleep in the late hours of the night.
Bless you, my Iowa!

NOT A GUN, BUT A PEN

SAHAR KHALIFEH
(West Bank, 1978 IWP)²⁰

I will only talk from the heart, my heart.

I am here without a machine gun but with a pen. The United Nations could not bring Israel and Palestine together, but the International Writing Program has.

Despite all the mental and emotional confusion I feel toward America as an Arab, as a Palestinian, and as a socialist feminist, The International Writing Program will always remind me of the most beautiful face of America: the face where races, nationalities, sexes and beliefs are only variations in a colorful symphony rather than elements of conflict and split. If the only bliss the Americans have is this: what the IWP represents, it's enough, more than enough.

It's true that during my stay in American I discovered an experienced bitter realities: the experience of seeing my image in the American media as an ugly, filthy and mentally retarded human being; the experience of listening to the officials express their hostility and hatred against my people; the experience of watching my people in the American TV under the attack of American aircrafts and missiles used by Israelis, by Iranians, or by the American themselves, yet, my daily contact with the IWP always gave me different impressions and insights.

Opposite to the hypocritical official face stands Paul's: an honest, loving and encouraging face. Opposite to racial discrimination in American stands the most fascinating marriage between two equal poles: Paul and Hualing. Opposite to the closed mentality and snobbism that prevails among many celebrities I got in touch with during my stay in America stand Paul and Hualing's humility and humanity. With my own eyes I saw Paul and Hualing doing things for others which others felt ashamed to do for themselves. I saw Paul carrying boxes, suitcases, driving unknown writers to the grocery shops or to the airport, reading humble poems of humble poets on big occasions, and cracking jokes while tears are flowing. I saw Hualing cry too with genuine tears for fear that something might happen to an Iranian woman poet or for a writer's misfortune. In their warm, enchanting house I listened to music I never heard before and tasted dishes I never knew of. In that elevated house which will always stand as the pillar of love in my memory I celebrated my birthday, danced like crazy, got drunk to death, and quarreled about politics like a hyena. In all those cases, I was received with patience and love.

For me, this is what I saw in the IWP: the spirit of love and warmth and giving.

²⁰ Sahar Khalifeh, fiction writer, is deeply involved in women's studies. The author of several novels popular in Palestine. Among her books are: CACTUS, FUNFLOWER, MEMOIRS OF AN UNREALISTIC WOMAN, WE ARE NOT SLAVES ANYMORE. Her books have been translated into Dutch and German. One of her novels was filmed and shown at the Cannes Film Festival.

A FERRY, A WINDOW, AND NOW A BRIDGE

XIAO QIAN
(China, 1979 IWP)²¹

It is always painful for any people to be separated not by their own wish but through circumstances beyond their control. Such had been the case with relations between the Chinese and American peoples since 1949. After President Nixon's official visit to China in 1972, some contacts were resumed, but none between the common people. The traditionally warm and close relations between us were not restored until 1979, when the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa extended an invitation to the Writers Association in China. It was an honor as well as a privilege for me to be one of the first two to be sent. We were the very first writers from People's Republic to visit America in thirty long years! Although it was not my first trip to the States -- I had been sent to America from London in March 1945 while serving as a Chinese paper's correspondent in London to cover the San Francisco conference -- the 1979 trip was even more impressive to me than the first one. I should call that visit a double reunion.

When our plane circled over San Francisco, I was thrilled to see the Golden Gate Bridge again. In rural Iowa I found the people to be just as friendly and hospitable as before. The wooded area across from our Mayflower residence hall was so tranquil that one could even hear the jumping of squirrels and the falling of maple leaves, but I was a little scared and enthralled to read signs along the highway which read, "Beware of deer crossing the road!" The prairie of the Midwest was truly Elysian to me.

Still more thrilling was the other reunion. As writers from Mainland China, we met our colleagues from Taiwan -- also for the first time in thirty years! Presided over by Hualing Nieh Engle in a hall at the university, an occasion called the "Chinese Weekend" was inaugurated, at which writers from both sides of the Taiwan Strait were to speak. I spoke for the mainland, as requested by the IWP prior to our departure for the States. Frankly, I felt more nervous for myself than for the deer crossing the highway, and also more enthralled. Would we stare at each other with hostility? Would there be rows and quarrels?

²¹ Xiao Qian, fiction writer, editor, became famous as a China correspondent in London during the World War II blitz and as a journalist with the American army in Europe. His books in English: *ECHING OF A TORMENTED AGE* (a collection of criticism), *SPINNERS OF SILK* (stories stories), *CHINA BUT NOT CATHAY* (essays), *HARP WITH A THOUSAND STRINGS* (anthology). Among his numerous books in Chinese are a novel, *THE VALLEY OF DREAM*, two collections of short stories, two books of essays, and a travelogue. He was branded as a "rightist" and sent to a village to be "remodeled" for 20 years. He was the first writer of China Mainland to participate in the IWP, shortly after he was rehabilitated. He is the President of the National Institute of Culture and History in China, enjoying the respect he deserves; he spent several years translating *Ulysses* with his wife, and the publication of the two volumes in Chinese translation was a sensational event in China.

No, none of that. Instead we embraced each other almost in tears, just like Sebastian and his sister Viola in TWELFTH NIGHT. The feeling was just like finding some long-lost relatives. We felt as if we had been apart for ages. Strangely enough, it also seemed as if we had parted only yesterday. There was no trace of hostility, none whatsoever, only tears of joy.

The meeting was followed by an after-dinner discussion at the Engle home which lasted till the small hours of the following morning. Again we found more about which to agree than to disagree. Both sides took pride in the May Fourth Movement of 1919, in the birth of our modern literature, and in what we had achieved thus far. We all believed in the importance of keeping abreast of literary developments abroad. This led us naturally to the subject of translation. We all denounced the verbatim but unreadable sort of translation and agreed that a translator's foremost duty was to convey the spirit of the original and render the work in faithful and fluent Chinese. To our dismay, we found that much effort had been wasted through overlapping and duplication: we were translating the same works on either side of the Strait. For instance, my wife, an editor of Japanese literature, was editing a translation of Lady Murasaki when I learned that this classic Japanese writer's work had long since been translated in Taiwan by a very gifted writer. How much better if we could only combine talents.

At the invitation of John Deere Company, we spent a day on a boat floating down Mark Twain's Mississippi. We danced and sang. At the singing of "My Home on the Sunhua River," the most popular song during the Sino-Japanese War, many broke into tears. Otherwise, mirthful laughter prevailed on the deck. I thought then and now that for that memorable weekend alone, Paul Engle and Hualing deserve a medal from both sides of the Taiwan Strait. It was a titanic job to organize a weekend such as that, but they did bring Sebastian and Viola together after all the violent storms and shipwreck, even if just for three short days.

That was not all. While in London during World War II, I was a member of the PEN Club there and frequently met foreign writers from all parts of the world at receptions and in discussion groups. With some, like E. M. Forster, I became close friends. The club's president at the time was H. G. Wells, and there were refugee writers from occupied and unoccupied (e.g., Franco's Spain) Europe and, of course, writers from the Americas such as Thornton Wilder. Each occasion was an intellectual feast to me.

Alas, since 1949 I had met hardly any foreign writers, for I was completely isolated. This isolation of mine was broken in Iowa City. During the hundred days I was there I had the pleasure of meeting and talking to over thirty writers from some twenty-odd countries. We not only met at formal sessions but also lived together in the Mayflower Apartments on the bank of the Iowa River. I shared a suite with an Italian writer, Aldo Rosselli. We used the same kitchen and ate at the same table. I came to know Italy much better, and I believe his knowledge of China has also improved somewhat since. The Engles sometimes threw parties on their long veranda, where writers of sundry nationalities gathered. We used to call that veranda the United Nations of the literary world, though there was no veto for any

one of us, no intrigue behind the scenes, no bargaining. There were writers from the Arabic world and from Israel, writers from various parts of Africa and from the two Germanies. The gentle and peace-loving Muse seemed to be governing us all, and candid opinions were exchanged at meetings, which only improved our mutual understanding. Throughout the session I found myself hoping that all the world could behave like that: sitting together with open hearts toward one another.

Since 1979 the IWP has hosted many distinguished writers from mainland China, including the poet Ai Qing and the late novelist Ding Ling. We have flown to Iowa City to gain a taste of internationalism. Upon our return we have written articles and books, giving our impressions both of America and of world literature in general. Our experiences have been shared by hundreds of thousands of our readers at home.

Flying to Iowa in 1979 was to me like opening a window. It gave me a glimpse of the outside world. It was also like a ferry because it broke my insularity. Now, after eight years, the annual invitation extend to mainland Chinese writers to attend the IWP in Iowa City has become a solid bridge. It is for future literary historians to say just how important an influence the program has exerted on contemporary Chinese literature.

Beijing.

POETRY AS A POSSIBILITY OF LIFE

JOUNG HYUN-JONG
(Korea, 1980 IWP)²²

Contemporary poetry has introduced freedom in the very body of the language. As a result, poetry appears as a phenomenon of freedom.
---Gaston Bachelard

Many Korean poets and critics agree that the traditional and remarkable quality of Korean poetry is what we call in Korean *han*. The meaning of the word *han* is so complex that it can hardly be translated into one English term, but it has such meanings as grudge or resentment, regret, discontent, resignation, frustration, and lamentation. Nevertheless we Koreans understand the meaning of the word almost intuitively in its historical, cultural context. This *han* also dominated modern Korean poetry since the 1920's when Korea was under the Japanese colonial rule, and it has penetrated not only into some works of the poets of the forties but also those of young poets. And younger poets and critics agree that *han* in Korean poetry is something that must be transcended. What is *han*? Why must it be transcended? How are young poets trying to go beyond it?

There is an expression in Korean which can be roughly translated, "to bear *han* in one's heart." The cause of "bearing *han*" may lie in the personality or the growing process, but it is not easy to locate the cause thus because a person is organically connected with the society to which he belongs.

Clearly, I think, *han* is a product of a closed society. It occurs when one, as a free and independent person, is limited in his possibility of life by external powers, and occurs in the state which prohibits any effort to better the conditions of human life.

Han has no relation to man's struggle for freedom, independence and happiness. So it can be said that it is a betrayal of life. *Han* may stem from the occupation by alien powers, or an unjust political system or ideology of a country. It seems only human and natural that one bears rancor, hate or grief in the condition of oppression in a closed society. But one is dominated by *han*, and consequently the possibility of life or creative power is thwarted, and he will fall into a mean sentimentalism or all forms of human perversion. In such a society as is characterized by the relation of the ruling and the ruled, one may form the habit of submitting to destructive powers which restrict and threaten us, so that human liberation is not

²² Joung Hyun-jong has published several volumes of poetry, and translated Yeats, Frost and Fitzgerald into Korean.

possible. Instead of bearing *han*, we have to live in creative tension in which we must see and contemplate our experience with clear consciousness.

(Bachelard says, when he talks about poetic reverie, that “in poetic reverie the should keeps watch, with no tension, calmed and active.” This word shows another nature of tension. As Wallace Stevens discerns the two phases of imagination, tension also has two phases: tension as metaphysics and tension as a power of the mind over external objects.)

Objects in the modern world oppress, frustrate and irritate us. We may become their slaves and lose our dignity as men. Yet we cannot do without them. We must learn to maintain creative tension vis-a-vis objects.

Han is given full rein in one poem and it is controlled in the other. There may be many different causes: differences in personality, intellectual ability and the quality of emotions, linguistic sensibility or history, and the poetic talent resulting from these differences. Yet I think -- in spite of my oversimplification -- it depends on whether a poet has a way of maintaining creative tension with the objects which provoke and oppress him or not.

Korean poetry since the 1930's, though there are such distinguished poets as Han Yong-un (1879-1944), Joung Ji-yong (1903- ?), and So Chong-ju (1915- ?), has been mainly characterized by *han* or the distorted state of *han*. For example, I would like to cite a famous and widely-read poem in Korea -- “Azaleas,” by Kim So-wol (1902-1934):

*When you go away
Sick of me
I will gently let you go in silence.*

*I will gather
An armful of azaleas
At Yaksan, Yonbyon.
And scatter them on your path.*

*Tred gently
Step by step
Upon the flowers as you go.*

*When you go away
Sick of me'
No tears I will shed
Even if I perish.*

The central emotions of this poem, I think, are regressive resignations, feminine submission and tears imprisoned in the broken heart rather than gentleness or kindness. It is apparent that the grief, resignation or resentment is one of our natural emotions, and it is not impossible to have an emotional leaning that may be called feminine, but is important to ask what it is for. Greif for the sake of grief, resignation for the sake of resignation, etc., is but an obstacle to our realization of life. Needless to say, that is a sentimentality -- a failure of feeling.

Han is a relative conception; it acquires meaning only in relation to some precedent causes. So it is important to know how to “receive” poetic objects and make a song, and then this means nothing but that the poet must know how to “receive” himself and express himself. Words are, I believe, they very field of our life, and words, or the space of imagination, have the energy to open up the new being.

No objects can oppress, devastate and atrophy the poet’s mind or feeling. He would live in the freedom of mind – as continuously as possible. If he does not liberate himself, nobody can liberate him. And only the free mind can make others free, liberate them into truth, thereby increase the joys of happiness of life.

In contrast to Kim So-wol, Han Young-un, a devout Buddhist monk, activist, and poet, said, “Parting a creation of beauty”:

Parting is a creation of beauty.

*There is no beauty of parting in the ethereal gold of morning,
in. the seamless dark silk of night, eternal life without death and the blue
flowers of heaven that withers not.*

*My love, without parting I cannot die and be born again in tears. Oh
parting!*

Beauty if a creation of parting.

This poet wasn’t overwhelmed by *han* at or after parting, and the paradox of the poem reveals his positive understanding about his painful experience. Perhaps we may call it “ultimate yea.”

The poetry of young Korean poets shows two tendencies as a whole. One tendency insists on maintaining a critical attitude toward the contradictions of political and social reality, and the other is attached to the inner space of man, which may be called a surrealistic space. The former is concerned with a public world in its outer-directedness, the latter is concerned with the world of the individual. If the political poet’s moral passion expresses itself, however, as the raw stuff of hate or grudge, it gives us unpleasantness instead of moving us. The inner-directed poem is liable to become an empty soliloquy if it hasn’t any inner necessity. In either case the uncontrolled expression of *han* diminishes the reality and effect of poetry. Without the spiritual discipline of multiple thinking and distanced emotion, it is doubtful that good poetry would come to us.

In the following poem, “Notes of a King”_ by Hwang Tong-ku²³, for example, hate or resentment is controlled by intellect:

*Sometimes a king is but a shadow of his subject.
When you, my lords, rise to raise me
as I kneel below the throne,
and lead me through the back garden*

²³ Hwang Tong-ku, a member of 1970-71 IWP, teaches literature in the Department of English, Seoul National University, Seoul, Korea. He has published several books of poetry, translated GULLIVER’S TRAVELS into Korean.

*blooming with peonies,
I will not see
the morning or evening papers
or the telescopes
but I will roam among the lonely flowers.*

*There comes a time a king should know when
to depart. Like the chief of a tribe and
his sons who burn themselves in a lean year
(they shout, but with no sound,
no cough, no illness, no thatched houses),
he should know when to depart.*

*No unhappiness, no life.
Surely there will be a time
when someone will remember them,
the wishes suspended over our twists and
turns? In the dark sky burning clouds fall
here and there, and darkness comes to every corner.
Kneeling, I want to fall,
fall like a lump of clay during the thaw
and float along the east sea, the south sea,
the west sea, and be caught somewhere,
my body changed into their ecstasy.
The wind blows.*

In this poem we can find “objective correlatives” or indirect substitutions that represent the poet’s emotions and consciousness.

The sensibility of the poet feels, like an antenna, the pain of his age most keenly. If Korean poets have pained hearts, it may be because they live in an age of distress.

The place of poetry is at the point of contact between man’s inside and outside. The poet speaks on the threshold of being. Isn’t it merely a private *han* if, in poetry, individual experience is not sublimated into universal truth? The poet must represent the whole of life and must live in us as a total man; we want the convincing identity of a poet.

Therefore the poet must move to an impersonal strength, then work will become a bright spiritual heritage for human society. And the impersonal strength will come into being when the poet searches for a persona, a public personality: the mask presented to satisfy the demands of the situation or the environment. In other words, persona means the politics of love.

Poetry is an art of possibility, that is, the world of imagination. And that imagination is the very phenomenon of freedom. The poet, as a total man, as a man of imagination, or a dreamer, embraces our life to his innocent, vital should.

Translated from the Korean by Kim Woo Chang

THE STORYTELLER, MAYFLOWER

ANTON SHAMMAS
(Israel, 1981 IWP)²⁴

As for me, I doubt I would have gotten to Iowa City were it not for *My Antonia*, the first novel I ever read: “Last summer (that’s how the book began, as I knew by heart years later) in a season of intense heat, Jim Burden and I happened to be crossing Iowa on the same train. . . .”

In Chicago we were wait-listed for the flight to Cedar Rapids, north of Iowa City. We sank into two red plastic seats, closest to the airline reservation desk. Bar-On was alert and full of vitality after his good sleep on the plane, and he delved into his notebook; I, my hours jumbled, sank into a twilight slumber, to the extent the hard

²⁴ Anton Shammamas is an Arab who writes in both Arabic and Hebrew. He is a producer of Arab programs for Israeli television and founder and editor of *A-Sharq*, an Arabic literary magazine. He is the translator of the works of Amos Oz, Yehuda Amichai, and A. B. Yehoshua, who attended the International Writing Program in 1967, the first writer from Israel. Shammamas is a Roman Catholic of Arab parentage. In recognition of his work as a writer and translator he won the Tel Aviv Prize for Literature and Art twice, the New Outlook Peace Prize, the Israel Interfaith Committee Prize, and in 1981 the Prime Minister’s Prize for Creative Writing. His novel, *THE STORYTELLER*, excerpted herein, was published by Harper and Row and was well reviewed. He wrote Paul Engle on Paul’s birthday in October 1985 from Jerusalem, Israel. It talks about the novel, which includes the chapter, The Storyteller, Mayflower:

It’s been a long time since you last heard from me. However, it’s about this time every year that I decide to drop a line, among other things - simply to say a warm Happy Birthday I hope you’ll celebrate this year’s in a good, a real good health, and that there is still a vast expanse of Engle Country, yet to be lived, ahead of you.

I haven’t written for a long time, but that doesn’t mean you were not in my mind during this past year. I came to Iowa, at the time, mainly as a poet, but I was actually planning for my first novel, a chapter of which had been written a few months earlier that year. My agent was hoping that I would find in Iowa City the time and the peace of mind required for the job. I found them both alright, and a lot of some other things which seemed to me more important than confine oneself within four Mayflower-falls and simply write. I’m sure you know what I’m talking about. The original novel, as planned, was to be some sort of a concise ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF ARB SOLITUDE (modest me): the story of my family in a small village in the Galilee, fortunately saved the fate shared by thousands of Palestinian families who strayed into refugee camps, but yet connected to it by hidden threads. In Iowa City I was writing a diary of a sort, and didn’t know by the time that these apparently parallel lines, the novel’s and the diary’s, would ever meet. They did, eventually. It took me some time, after I came back, to realize that I simply had to go as far as Iowa City for me to SEE my village. I loitered over the novel ever since, but I’m working these days on its final, authorized version. It will be published early next year by Harper & Row. They read the Hebrew version a couple of months ago and decided to take it (it’s written in Hebrew). So I don’t have any reasons for complaint. You will identify some of the characters portrayed in the Iowa part (which is actually a frame-narrative for the “main” novel) - mainly yourself and Hualing. Some of the others are sheer fiction. I hope you will both like it. (I’m afraid, though, you have no choice.)

Otherwise, I’ve been fine. Being busy for the last months working on the novel, I managed to screen myself from the crazy country I’m living in, occupation, inflation and all. I even stopped writing a weekly column in two local newspapers a couple of months ago (in Hebrew), very controversial for that matter, since I really think that this country, in its present form, is an intolerable place to live in.

Oh yes, Ersi had a daughter early this month. She left Rome and is living happily with her second husband in Athens.

I hope Hualing is well. Please extend her my warmest regards. Yours, Anton Shammamas

seats permitted. Half asleep I heard the tapping of high heels coming closer, and as one man we whipped around to gaze in the direction of the tapping, he from his notebook and I from my slumber. Bar-On stretched, clutching his knees, and his eyes glistened with enthusiasm. “Let’s hope that she’s also going to the International Writing Program,” he said.

There was in her something distant and inaccessible, something that tautened her body like a bow from the torrents of her hair to the tapping of her heels. And the profusion of her body, trapped in a gossamer blouse and a severe skirt, threatened to burst forth at every tap of her heels and flood the terminal. “ ‘I placed a jar in Tennessee,’ “ recited Bar-On, “ ‘and round it was, upon a hill. It made the slovenly wilderness surround that hill. The wilderness rose up to it’... but clearly we’re talking about two jars here.”

“But only one wilderness,” said I, not unwickedly. And he smiled forgivingly at me, pocketed his notebook, and took out his pipe, as I sank back into slumber.

On the plane it so happened that I sat next to her, and Bar-On sat two sighs away across the aisle. As the plane took off her mouth gaped wide open as if she wanted to say something but changed her mind, and she just sat there with her mouth ajar. The stewardess approached her and asked, “Is there anything I can do for you? “Uuhuh,” she said with her mouth open. When the stewardess went up to a passenger a few rows ahead of us who, even before the captain had turned off the No Smoking sign had lit a cigarette (the smell of which raised a great many eyebrows in the seats nearby), the woman replied to my curious glances with an apologetic look of her own. “Air pressure problems,” she said.

I looked out the window. Precise golden-yellow squares, endless cornfields with a neatly-ruled warp and weft between them, and not a hint—at least from a plane’s-eye-view—of the red grass the color of wine stains.

Two friendly young men were waiting for us at Cedar Rapids. Bar-On was a bit disgruntled by the casual reception and threw withering glances at the cocky man in a tight summer suit who was waiting for the air-pressure woman and hustled her out of the airport. It turned out that several writers had indeed been on the same flight with us. A Palestinian writer, and the perfume haze of Paco Rabanne that escorted him, shook Bar-On’s hand with obvious reluctance. Liam, a restless young Irishman, observed this encounter with great amusement and asked what was new in the Middle East. And out of the pocket of his tight trousers a Filipino poet drew a pack of cigarettes and offered everyone a soothing smoke that relieves all enmity, real and imagined. Paco remained reluctant, Bar-On kept faith with his pipe, and Liam and I were ex-smokers. The passenger lounge blurred in puffs of clove instead of the old familiar tobacco.

Night fell in the meantime, blanketing the midwestern prairies spread outside the window of the minibus into which we squeezed, valises, suitcases, and all. We rode to the Mayflower, the eight-story student dormitory, at the northern edge of Iowa City, a huge, reversed lower case h lying on its side along North Dubuque Street stretched alongside the left bank of the Iowa River, amidst lawns and maples for the most part. That night they brought us to the back entrance of the building, to make it

easier to unload all our suitcases, except for the small and compact duffel carried by clever Liam, who hadn't come like the rest of us laden with all the baggage of the Third World. When the back door opened our noses were assailed by the smell that is the smell of most houses in the Midwest, as we later learned. But here it was still fresh and sharp and piercing: the smell of synthetic wall-to-wall carpets, and the smell of the glue that sticks them to the floors and scorches whoever happens to touch it, vaporizing to invisible fumes. Bar-On stood on the threshold and said: "Fine. I'm going home." Mary Nazareth, who greeted the newcomers and cast a net of warm smiles under them in order to soften the impact, asked what he had said, and he said it again, but in English. "Welcome aboard," she said to him. "You're the twelfth writer who has said that today. The twelfth of thirty-three."

Around midnight all the newcomers gathered in the Nazareths' home, on the first floor of the building, for a late supper and preliminary briefings. I tried to convince Bar-On to abandon his plan to leave, which seemed at first like the instinctive response of a pampered person, but subsequently he got a firm grip on his intentions. In any case he should think about it for a few days. But his spirit warped and he sank into complaints about the nature of the place we had gotten ourselves into and the bare walls that gave rise to painful longings for his own four walls. And deep in my heart I felt something a bit like relief that I was going to be free of the grasp of the Hand recording notes on the fateful parchment and of the stern Eye examining, from without and from within, the heart, the kidneys and the stomach chambers of his Arab hero. Therefore the ardor of my attempts to convince him cooled, until Mary joined the conversation and stirred up the embers: "Next week you'll feel so much at home that you won't want to go back to your country in another four months."

All of a sudden a rising and falling wail sliced through the space of the room. The smoke detector had not withstood the burden of the burnt cloves.

The next morning on the stairs leading to the entrance of the Mayflower all the members of the program stood around in groups exchanging names and first impressions. Across North Dubuque, on the banks of the river, workmen in blue overalls laid strips of sod over the black earth with muscular and precise movements. Along the street to the center of town are white houses on either side, their tiled roofs sharply pointed, beyond sidewalks bounded by strips of grass with narrow paths for pedestrians stretched across them to the street, with squirrels rushing about at the feet of the trees, their tails erect with midwestern pride. "The Moral Majority," said Liam. We ride alongside the river, which flows serenely southward like someone who has been assured that sooner or later he will meet the Mississippi. And the floating names begin to attach themselves to the right faces, faces of every hue and race and age, a Tower of Babel of confused grace. Bar-On, who has attached himself to me, mutters a few parsimonious words of surprise at the quiet beauty of the town and the serenity inherent in the white houses; I sense the hairline cracks in the shell of his resistance gaping wider and the reconciled acceptance beginning to permeate them. Only the Palestinian worries him, and it's clear to him that their first clash is only a matter of time. And I worry the Palestinian who worries him. But then

again, it seems the three of us in any case are still under the influence of the haze of Paco Rabanne that blurs our senses and accompanies us like a mysterious nimbus from the East when we go into the First National Bank on the corner of Washington and Dubuque. The vice-president of the branch personally attends to the new clients as we open accounts, and he showers us with his cards. Like an incantation, he spells his name “Mister Sevick, Vee, I, Cee, Kay,” with unrelenting friendliness, and ceremoniously, as if we were being inducted into a secret order, he allows us a glimpse of his golden heirloom watch with the name “Old Abe” engraved on it.

A winding path leads to the hilltop, and the maples on either side accompany the falling night with dried pods that spiral down and land with gentle murmurs on the first blankets of red autumn leaves, which had begun to cast their spell on Bar-On and muffled the plans for departure that had been pecking at him like woodpeckers in distant lands. Liam speaks of his first long walk today in City Park across the Iowa River from the Mayflower. They have extraordinary mosquitoes there, he says. He’s never seen anything like it. But the water is fine, and some local folk whom he met invited him to have a glass of wine with them. He wants to organize a rowing trip down the river, he and Björg, the Norwegian writer who had just arrived today and now as she walks up the path she says she hopes the autumn here isn’t contagious. And from afar we hear the voices of the local guests who had already arrived, and we see the house at the top of the hill where the reception is, the home of the Engles, who host the program and conduct it, writers and all. The two-story house, an ark on the flood of red maples. Every squirrel’s dream, says Björg.

At the entrance of the house, in the dimness of the forecourt, Paul Engle and his wife Hualing Nieh stand and greet the guests as they ascend two-by-two from the enchanted wood for Edwin, hence-forth Ed, to present them to the hosts. And Ed, in a high, melodious voice already fluent in the minutiae of the guests’ biographies, pronounces the name as he stretches his body upwards on tiptoe. Upon landing, he proceeds to outline with carefully selected high points, as if he were a Chinese painter who all summer long had been making preparatory sketches of the characters, and now with a few swift strokes of his brush captures the calligraphic essence of each one. Each of these portraits would float up, up into the canopy of leaves above the forecourt, eliciting great delight from the Engles, and land at the feet of the squirrels rushing about here and there in the twilight that had invaded the woods. Paul Engle, high of stature and voice, in an embroidered silk shirt, puts on his face the mask of a sharp-horned gnome, and presents his wife as if he were showing a treasure. A woman elegant in a red silk robe, restrained in her delight, as if she were the Chinese definition of art.

A thickly carpeted wooden staircase creaks and crackles up to a huge salon on the upper level. And the smell of the Midwest hangs in the air, along with the scents of exotic cooking, murmurings, and embarrassed giggles. And the length and breadth of the walls are covered with a rare collection of masks, of all colors and races, from India even unto the Land of Cuh, from China even unto Peru. Masks that had been left behind by participants in the program from years past, recalled now by Paul as he displays the masks of the past to the newcomers. Next to the fireplace is an antique

Chinese tea-table, with a carved woman tripping down a garden path, and over the unlit fireplace, on the mantelpiece, a large tray, inlaid with mother-of-pearl, flanked by Chinese demons in a multitude of colors, ivory, and gold-mute sentinels of some occult secret. All around voices intertwine, languages blend, hesitating near one another, sorting and fingering and touching first acquaintance.

Björg asks what brings me to this out-of-the-way place. “Willa Cather,” I say. Hualing passes urgently in front of us to the far side of the room and returns with Paul Engle in tow. “Look what a coincidence,” she tells him. “Willa Cather, whom I translated into Chinese, has brought this nice Jewish writer to Iowa City!” “You know,” said Paul, “I was born in Cedar Rapids, and when I was a boy I was a *Shabbes goy* for some of the Jewish families there. I got fifteen cents a Saturday.” And I excuse myself and hurry to the other end of the salon and extricate Bar-On from a noisy group and bring him to Paul so he can hear. “It’s a bad habit of mine,” Paul says after I explain his error. “Again I’ve wasted a good story on the wrong person. When I turned fifty, which was many days ago, my first wife said to me one morning, ‘Look, what in the hell have you done? In fifty years you have gone from Cedar Rapids to Iowa City, twenty-five miles. Half a mile a year.’ What do you think of that? “That’s almost as fast as Jews move,” Bar-On replies. “It took my parents two thousand years to get to the Land of Israel.” Paul Engle excuses himself, asking if anyone would like a refill, and goes over to the bar feeling he’s wasted a good story on the wrong person. Again.

I go over to exchange a few polite words with Paco, a charming fellow from Nablus, and Beardy, the writer from Egypt. “My dear lady,” I hear Athol, the South African writer, bombard a dazed woman writer. “I can assure you from personal experience that an electrical shock to the testicles does not make a man impotent.” Henk, the Dutch writer who has been living in London for several years, would like to discuss with me, briefly, this schizophrenia, that Bar-On and I are but two faces of a single person. And Björg says, “They haven’t decided yet who is the ventriloquist of whom.” “Around here you’ll see a lot of pigs,” Paul says to a couple from India. “Then you’ll go home and write poems. Hogs and poetry, both of them strong supporters of human life.”

The rising and falling wail of a smoke detector turns all eyes toward the embarrassed Clove, my flat-mate, who spreads his palms in a gesture of innocence. This time it was only a burnt Chinese delicacy, and the Filipino had a perfect alibi.

Paco is telling Beardy about the novel he has been writing. “How many words have you got in it?” Beardy asks him. “I haven’t counted,” says Paco. “Approximately,” insists Beardy, and when he hears the reply he says, “It’s not a novel that you’re writing, my dear boy, but a novella!” Paco smiles and blushes, his eyes red from lack of sleep. “A classic case of Palestinian jet lag,” Liam diagnoses into my ear.

At the far end of the salon, Bar-On is deep in conversation with someone whose face is honeyed amber. “And that woman over there is a Jew from France, born in Alexandria,” Beardy says to me, following my gaze. “She’s called Amira.” The name suits her, I think; a princess. And Amira looks at us and smiles. A clapper

sounds, and Paul announces that he wishes to propose a toast. “Hualing and I would like to welcome our wonderful guests who have gathered here from all over the world, the largest group that has ever come to the International Writing Program. And also the largest number of women. But do bear in mind what was written in the welcome letters sent to you: Please, no children! David Lodge once said—and I wish that I had been the one to say it— ‘Literature is mostly about having sex and not much about having children. Life is the other way round.’ Please remember then, that you are writers above all. In any case, Hualing and I, we’re both from the heartlands. She is from the very middle of China, and I lived in Cedar Rapids, the home of Quaker Oats. Every day her father was presented with a bowl of oats by a servant as a sign of status. God, I had it forced down my throat. . . . Times have changed since then; I love Chinese food and Hualing loves oatmeal. Lucky for you that I was the one who decided on the menu tonight, which is pretty rare around here, so please, gather ‘round the table and help yourselves. But first, let’s drink to the International Writing Program that has brought you all here tonight, to writing and to the metaphorical children of the future!”

I put my empty plate on the tea table. The faces of the carved women were flushed and radiant from the wine. They floated up among the empty glasses scattered about the table, and melted into the mixture of languages that enveloped the room, and vanished behind the masks hanging on the walls. Numbled by the wine I went out onto the unlit L-shaped balcony. A moonless sky spread to the horizon sparkling with distant lights, a moonless sky pierced with stars, and it seemed to me as if I hadn’t seen so many stars in the sky since I left the village. Uncle Yusef, at this moment lying on his deathbed, used to say that the only difference between the city and the village is the number of stars in the sky. And somewhere between the folds of the hills flows the Iowa River, in the darkness beyond the Mayflower. Shlomith, Shlomith, I whisper to myself, as a sort of spell against oblivion. And suddenly, beside me, that profile of ambered honey. “And are you thinking about a poem to Leila?” she smiled, with some wordplay in Arabic. “My name is Amira.” And she leans over the railing and unconsciously presses her décolletage to her chest. This gesture, I say to myself, would never occur to Bar-On.

“Yehoshua Bar-On told me that you passed through Paris on your way here.”

“Yes, for a day.” “What did you like there? What did you see?”

“I hardly left the hotel. I visited a cemetery.”

“Pere Lachaise? We could have met there. I have a friend, a photographer, who’s in love with the cemetery. Which tombs did you see?”

Suddenly we were washed in the light of a lantern hanging above us. Bar-On stood beyond the glass window of the illuminated, buzzing salon, his one hand still on the switch and the other wagging at us in a gesture of warning, with a sly smile on his face. Then he turned the light off, whipped out his notebook and began to write, smiled again at the spot where he figured we were, and retreated into the milling crowd. “What does he want?” asks Amira. “I don’t know any more,” I say. And Amira spread her arms, clasped her palms to the back of her neck and stretched her body backwards. “It’s getting cold. Let’s go inside.”

Many days later I would recall that scene, the palms pressed to the back of her neck, the tremor that took hold of her honeyed skin, under the light brandished between us, and the smile on Bar-On's lips as he abandoned us to the darkness. Something opaque and obscure, like the lights gleaming in the endless prairie landscape, the embers that were all that remained of the red grass. . . .

In room 821B of the Mayflower I move the desk from the narrow entry hall into the room, laboring under the delusion common to guests for a night, who believe that the rearrangement of this or that piece of furniture will grant them the feeling of being back home, surrounded by possessions that defend them from wanderings. I take out the papers and books and dictionaries I had brought with me and arrange them on the desk next to the Hebrew typewriter, under the delusion that if you haven't managed to write when you're sitting at your own table, gazing at the familiar landscape of your own books, you will be able to write when you are far from home. I inserted some K Mart paper, and started to write the first of many letters to Shlomith destined to fall in a month's time into the hands of her husband.

To describe a home to someone you love.

I never tried to describe the house where I was born. Because it isn't just the southern *window* —*bab es-sir* we called it—the chill of which is in the palms of my hands still, nor the *smandra*, the cupboard where we kept the mattresses and the blankets, which towered above our heads like a threatening castle, nor the emerald cat hiding behind it when she was in heat, nor the circles of light dancing on the concrete floor, nor the taste of the salty water dripping all night from the linen sack that held the yogurt for the *labeneh*, and here comes crazy Abla and drinks it, and the taste of it rises now from under my tongue, as the villagers say, here in the American Midwest. The house begins with the spoon knocking against the rim of the pot of lentil soup and it spreads like ripples in the village pond and licks the edge of the *duwarra* and floods the view from the southern window and touches your skin from within. And here I am sitting in Iowa City, more than twenty years after I left the house of my childhood, and for the first time in all those long years I feel that I can conjure up the house of my childhood in the village, the smells and the sights and the textures, that now for the first time I can describe it for Shlomith, who has never set foot there. "I had come away so far from it," as Amira would have quoted from the *Alexandria Quartet*, "in order to understand it all."

My new home has alleged walls. They tremble at the touch of a hand and at the touch of the echoing voices. Walls that allegedly give a sense of security and protection, but which would have reminded Yehoshua Bar-On, above all, of a poem by David Avidan: "The security situation of Israel/Is like a toilet without a lock/One hand keeping/The door shut from within." For this must thou know, and there doth Clove dwell and across the no-man's-land of the kitchen and the bathroom he sends me smoke signals, which seep under my door and envelop me like a saccharine melody that sticks in the memory and doesn't relent for four whole months. Without advance planning we would simultaneously open our doors to the bathroom. And since these doors cannot be locked, thanks to some obscure American logic, time spent in the bathroom will always be in a high state of alert, in anticipation of the

hand that will suddenly fling open the door and of the mouth that will emit an embarrassed apology in an unintelligible language.

To describe a home to someone you love.

You could start with the opaque orange drops redolent of cloves,
nonchalantly sprinkled over the toilet seat.

Excerpt from the novel ARABESQUE

Translated from the Arabic by Vivian Eden.

SO RICH AND YET SO TROUBLED:
---A Chinese Writer Views America

BINYAN LIU
(China, 1982 IWP)²⁵

As the Iowa farm fields, trees and ripe corn flashed by the car window, I could not help asking myself. "Am I really in the United States, or is this only my illusion?" This landscape bears such remarkable resemblance to that of the countryside of northern China.

As I walked along the peaceful streets of Iowa City, passing beautiful and tastefully designed, yet individual, homes, I began to wonder if I were in a fairyland. I had the same feeling when I visited Disneyland in California.

In China today, we are exerting all our efforts to change our poor and backward conditions. America is rich. Yet why have riches brought so many problems to America? As we visited the John W. Colloton Pavilion, a new addition to the University of Iowa Hospitals, we were impressed by the accommodations and exquisitely comfortable patient rooms. We were particularly impressed by the Pediatric Department, a place that enables a child patient to feel at home.

However, as soon as the thought of skyrocketing medical bills entered my mind, I began to feel sorry for those sick children. I am happy to hear that the American government budget for medical expense exceeds that of military expenditure. I do not understand, however, with the availability of Medicaid, Medicare and various kinds of health insurance, why Americans still have to pay so much at times of sickness and hospitalization. I am perplexed.

Perhaps the Pacific Ocean is too wide, perhaps American and China have been isolated from each other too long (more than 30 years). American society is rich in diversity and in complex contradictions. The two countries have to face totally different problems. While Iowa, as well as the rest of the United States, is concerned about how to dispose of excessive farm products and livestock, China is struggling hard to provide sufficient food for her people--four times the number of Americans--from products of her cultivated land, which is smaller in size than America's.

While the American construction business cannot turn beautifully and comfortably designed residential blueprints into reality because of a recession, the

²⁵ Binyan Liu joined the Chinese Communist Party when he was nineteen. In 1951 he became editor of the official organ of the Communist Youth League, *China Youth*. In 1956 one of his stories, *The Inside News of the Newspaper*, led to a series of debates when the Party encouraged writers to "intervene in life." Later this story was criticized as intervening in the Party and he was sent to do labor work in a village. Immediately after he was rehabilitated in 1979, he returned to write his mind. He mixed the technique of reportage and that of fiction, writing about the Party's corruption and abuse of power. His writing had such profound impact that he was regarded as the spokesman for the common people. *Between Man and Demon* led to a series of attacks from the hard-liners. It was at this time that he was invited to attend the International Writing Program in 1982. He would not stop writing his mind after his return to China. In 1987 he was expelled from the Communist Party. He came to the States in 1988 and has been in exile ever since.

construction companies in China are concerned about not being able to meet the designated number of houses to be built by the end of this fiscal year.

In any city in China it is necessary for the city council to budget the building of houses totaling from a few hundred thousand square meters to 2 million square meters in area. These houses are somewhat below the American standard, but residents do not have to worry about being expelled if they cannot afford to make the monthly payment.

This kind of difference is one of the many reasons I hold different opinions about my American friends. Let us look at the issue of freedom. I do not think that the American media are too critical. I uphold the kind of freedom enjoyed by American news writers. I also uphold the kind of freedom that provides opportunities to people such as Ralph Nader as well as outstanding journalists and writers who can in turn employ their ability and courage to serve in public.

Nevertheless, as a Chinese news writer makes use of his freedom, he also respects the freedom of other people. For instance, he will not publish the conversation with someone without first seeking permission, especially when the conversation was carried through an interpreter, which inevitably can result in error of interpretation.

When I am continuously subjected to commercials on a television program, I feel that my freedom is being violated, because I am unwilling to give up the freedom of budgeting my own time on account of the freedom of merchants to sell their products.

In the past, the Chinese people had to sacrifice certain personal freedoms in order to defeat an enemy much stronger than we were so as to secure national freedom. Now any Chinese can listen to the Voice of America six hours straight every day if he wishes to, although the Chinese government does not necessarily agree with a lot of the viewpoints broadcast. This was not permitted a few years ago.

Nonetheless, our government has to put a limit on certain kinds of freedom. For instance, in order not to allow the population of China to reach 10 times the number of Americans (which might solve the problem of overproduction in Iowa, and of farmers' not being able to balance their budgets), we have to sacrifice our traditional belief of "prosperity" and "the joy of having many children and grandchildren under one roof," thus restricting our freedom of child-bearing. This is the only path to a freedom from poverty and a freedom of more space for our future generation.

From the first day I arrived in the United States, I immediately realized that we lack mutual understanding. After two months of newspaper reading and purchasing of more than 200 books, I feel even more strongly that China has to increase her understanding of America. Our country is presently undergoing a social reform of immense scale. Certain qualities of the American tradition and the American way of life are worthy of our awareness and learning.

For example, there is yet much research and study to be done in the formation, development and future trend of our society whereas, in the United States, there are people engaged in observation, research and statistics backed by

scientific findings toward various issues in practically every field of American society. I am especially interested in the experience of The Des Moines Register, which was the first newspaper in America to deal with public-opinion surveys.

At the same time, another question emerged. As far as I know, ever since the '60s, the problem of crime has become a major issue in American society. Numerous reports and appeals have been presented through the media. Numerous experts and scholars have written articles and books on this topic. The government and the Congress have made special investigations on crime. Why has this phenomenon not subsided, but instead continued to grow at a steady pace?

I am told that the University of Iowa female students use mini-teargas devices, whistles and what have you as their weapons to fight against rapists. These devices may be cute and clever, but what is incomprehensible to me is: Why is a rich and strong country like America, why are brave and confident people like the Americans, so helpless in the protection and safety of their own people?

Is this the consequence one had to accept for not restricting the freedom of those who infringe on the freedom of the innocent? China will never allow private possession of weapons that can inflict harm to others.

Some people insist that Iowa is not typical of America. Indeed, many of the nice qualities of "the good old days of America" are preserved here. Iowa is one of the earliest states to express friendliness to China. During my contact with Iowans, from prominent citizens to the common people, I have experienced the development of this friendship.

The International Writing Program, supported and sponsored by various organizations and business, has provided Chinese writers the opportunity to understand America, thus enabling thousands and thousands of Chinese readers to achieve a better understanding of America, especially Iowa, through their writings. Since I am one of them, I find it my responsibility to reflect honestly and accurately to my readers the lives of American people.

This is not going to be another version of CHINA: ALIVE IN THE BITTER SEA (A book written by Fox Butterfield, reporter for *The New York Times*), although I can easily come up with 10 different versions of CHINA: ALIVE IN THE BITTER SEA on America.

---Reprinted from *Des Moines Sunday Register*, November 21, 1982

DON'T ASK ME WHAT TIME IT IS NOW

JOANNA SALAMON
(Poland, 1981 IWP)²⁶

Don't ask me what time it is now on the clock of history in Poland
 It know nothing. We have a different East European time.
 It is an uncertain time.
 It is a dark time because electricity is turned off.
 In the darkness you don't know who stays near you.
 It is a time between hammer and anvil.
 It is a time between hope and impossibility
 It is a time between the state of exhaustion and the state of emergency.
 It is a time when a wife begs her husband -
 "Don't get involved. We have three children."
 It is a time between many lines to shops and
 the official line of proceeding.
 In this time everything is possible -
 however, nothing is possible.
 It is a time when clocks can suddenly put back
 many years in a few houses.
 My young neighbor from the apartment on the left can
 kill my young neighbor from apartment on the right,
 or inversely.
 It is a time when clocks can strike midnight in sunny midday.
 In this time clocks are wound by somebody else and
 we don't control the situation.
 It is a critical time when the physician doesn't know
 what will happen to the patient.
 it is a time when a language of weariness and cold
 is stronger than language of words.
 It is a time when a poet asks himself
 what to do with beauty.
 Don't ask me what time it is now
 on the clock of literature in Poland.
 It isn't a time of poetry.

²⁶ Joanna Salamon, poet, qualified as a physician in 1956, specializing in pulmonology. Her first poems were published in 1969, and since then she has produced over a half-dozen volumes of verse, including *MEDITATIONS*, *THE A. B. C.*, and *ONLY THE IMPERMANENT CAN AFFECT US*. Apart from her own poetry she has translated several books from Serbo-Croatian and Russian. In recognition of her creative work, she received several grants, and was a member of the Cracow Branch of the Polish Writers and Poets' Association. After she left the IWP in the winter 1981, she lived in the Netherlands when Poland was under the Martial Law.

(Note: Written in English in a hotel room when visiting EXXON USA with five other members of the IWP, Hualing and Paul Engle.)

RECOLLECTIONS OF IOWA—SIXTEEN YEARS LATER

HANS CHRISTOPH BUCH

*(Federal Republic of Germany, 1967-1968, 84 IWP)*²⁷

MY days in Iowa were, as it so often happens in life, the opposite of what I had expected: more happened there than in the many weeks I spent in New York. It became a trip into the past: I spent time with Anna, who brought back the aroma of those years like Proust's madeleine dipped into a teacup; I visited the sites of my memory. Back then, in 1968, Anna had just finished high school and her boyfriend Rodney, a British poet, lived in the back room of a house at 317 East Church Street. I had rented a room on the second floor, the one that faced the street. We lived in adjacent rooms, but we barely exchanged a word. I remember now that I envied Rodney his young girlfriend. Now we met again at the farewell party of the International Writing Program, where Anna worked as an assistant to Paul Engle and Hualing Nieh. Nothing had changed in the meantime. Everything was the way it was sixteen years ago when I went to the good-bye party in Iowa City: the fifths of scotch (Johnny Walker) and vodka (Smirnoff) from the local liquor store; California white wine and bourbon from Kentucky in great gallon containers; salted nuts, celery sticks, and carrots; paper plates, plastic knives and forks, and styrofoam cups. Even the noisy crowd of foreign poets, among them the Asians, and among these in turn the Chinese from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the People's Republic of China who formed distinct groups—the union official from Shanghai who spoke only in Chinese, and the best-selling author from Peking with whom I spoke Russian and her business card, with Chinese and Latin characters, on which she wrote her private address and telephone number for me in Cyrillic letters, since the printed ones were only for official business; the poet from Argentina who spoke of love and the poet from Columbia who spoke of revolution; the Hottentot who asked me whether I knew Peter Schutt; the West German author of radio plays who railed against America and the East German author of children's books who defended America, the corduroy jacket of the former and the leather jacket of the latter; Hualing who greeted guests and Paul Engle who gave a speech drowned out by streams of liquor—I proposed a toast in his honor—and laughter.

We talked about the old days and I found out what had become of the authors of my generation, the participants of the Program of 1968: U Sam Oeur from Cambodia, who described the Vietnam War in his poetry, was murdered by the troops of the Red Khmer shortly after his return; Daniachew Worku from Ethiopia—who took a loaded revolver with him whenever he went to town and who would threaten with suicide every white woman who rejected him—disappeared in the

²⁷ Hans Christoph Buch did German and Slavic studies in Bonn and Berlin and has written fiction, essays, reviews and criticism. Among his books are KRITISCHE WALDER, UNERHORTE BEGEBENHEITEN, AUS DER NEUEN WELT, DIE SCHEIDUNG VON SAN DOMINGO..

Ethiopian revolution. By studying in the U.S.A. he had, like U Sam Oeur of Cambodia, given up his life. Shanka Gosh is now a professor of Bengali literature at the University of Calcutta; his friend, the poet Dee Pak, opened a socialist restaurant (whatever that is) on a houseboat on the Ganges river. Political enemies sank it with a torpedo: “Help, they have torpedoed my restaurant!” he is said to have cabled to Paul Engle. Hatsuyosh Tauchi is a writer in Japan. Wang Ching-lin is a poet and publisher of a literary magazine in Taiwan; another Chinese poet, Wan Kim-lau, died of cancer the same year Nicolas Born did.

Iowa City is the secret capital of China: at the farewell dinner on the last evening, to which I was the only non-Chinese to be invited, the peaceful reunion of Hong Kong and Taiwan with mainland China was celebrated with many a *hen how!* and *gampai!* over sea cucumber salad and duck-stomach ragout. The host, a wealthy Chinese immigrant who opened a restaurant in Iowa City, owns books by all the poets present—he was financing their stay—in three copies each: one copy to read, one to look at, and one to give away. The next morning at the airport the poets from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the People’s Republic of China who just yesterday were loudly proclaiming brotherhood, suddenly no longer acknowledged one another in front of the cameras of press and television. Two of the many faces of Asia: this after the writer from Peking, just the night before, told me that the Chinese make no distinction between the private and the public realm.

Seen on a walk with Anna across the campus and through town, on the tracks of 1968: *English-Philosophy Building*: home of the Writers’ Workshop and the International Writing Program, a red brick building behind the railroad tracks that cross the river here on a wooden bridge. Not until I stepped out of the back entrance into the parking lot reserved for faculty members, where I used to leave my black Oldsmobile (and later the Blue Rover) every day of the winter of 1967-68, did I recognize the long forgotten places where I used to spend so many hours and which, since then, have returned in my dreams as *déjà vu*.

Old Capitol Building: a classic-style building modeled on the Capitol Building in Washington, D.C. It housed the government of Iowa before Des Moines became the capital. On the lawn in front of the building, under the windows of the presidential office, hundreds of students gathered in November of 1967. Anna and I were in the crowd and watched as draft cards were burned.

Student Union: student government offices, cafeteria, and central location for public lectures. Even now the same trashed-out Coke and candy machines where broad-shouldered athletes wearing baseball caps and toting tennis rackets loiter while other student lounge in easy chairs or padded benches, engrossed in thick paperbacks. In February of 1968, recruiters of the U.S. Army set up tables for the war in Vietnam. They were beleaguered by outraged demonstrators, who themselves were kept in check by the National Guard, flown in from Des Moines and equipped with wooden clubs and police dogs, while outside on the street war resisters lit an effigy of President Johnson wrapped in the Star-Spangled Banner. I can still smell the stench of burning plastic. It was then that I heard the expression “hunger strike” for

the first time; a group of students had pitched a tent on campus in the dead of winter, in which, at subzero temperatures, they remained for weeks, refusing all food, to express their protest against American policies in Indochina. I admired the personal courage of the demonstrators and their willingness to make sacrifices. Many of them paid for their commitment with years of exile or prison. But if someone had tried to tell me back then that it would one day end the Vietnam war, I would have told them they had lost their minds.

The white wooden house at 317 East Church Street: the same mountains of dirty dishes in the kitchen, the same stained wall-to-wall carpet in the living room, where you would trip at every step over toys the children had left lying around, the squeaky voice of Donald Duck or Mickey Mouse emanating from the color television set. It was as though Brian and Margie, Elisabeth, Anna, and Rodney had just left the house ten minutes ago, the house where a friendly new woman led me through her messy rooms sixteen years later: the narrow kitchen in which Brian and Margie fried eggs and bacon every morning, brewed coffee, and made up a batch of orange juice as if they were inhabiting a short story by Steinbeck; the dark basement where ghosts lived and where Elisabeth was afraid to go unless I took her by the hand and went in with her with a burning candle and a flashlight; the backyard where we had barbecues on nice days, where we played soccer and repaired our broken cars; the little front yard in which we tried, one day, to catch the tennis-ball-sized hail that fell from the sky—ice to cool our whiskey; the wooden porch where Brian sat in the middle of a snowstorm, wearing a hat and coat and leaning over his typewriter working on his endless short story about the rug in his grandfather's home; the bathroom you needed an appointment to enter; my bedroom and study in one, where I read Bertrand Russell's *PRINCIPIA MATHEMATICA* and wrote my *REPORT FROM A BESIEGED CITY*.

The angel of black marble: or was it bronze? This figure in the Iowa City cemetery turned up as a metaphor in many of the poems written for the Writers' Workshop. It was a grave marker commissioned by a Czech immigrant for his wife who died too young. We went on summer picnics in that cemetery.

The little coffee shop at the Greyhound bus station: a hamburger used to cost twenty-five cents and a cheeseburger thirty-five cents. In its place today is a giant shopping center that contains an adult bookshop and a supermarket.

It's no use trying to remember; the view of the past is obstructed by cement and concrete.

We the willing
 led by the unknowing
 are doing the impossible
 for the ungrateful.
 We have done so much for so long
 with so little
 so quickly
 that we are now qualified

to do anything
with nothing
overnight.

—*Inscription on the blackboard of the Mayflower.*

Translated from the German by Margitt Leibert

RICHNESS OF VARIETY

INKERI KILPINEN
(Finland, 1986 IWP)²⁸

The International Writing Program acts as a literary centripetal force. There is no need to travel around the world to meet writers; the writers travel to Iowa. There different languages, cultures, religions, and manners meet -- different styles of writing, different ways of capturing the world and people's thoughts on paper, different means of conceiving ideas and humanity. This also happens at many literary conferences, but they last only a day or two, sometimes a week, which is far too short a time for the facade to fall away. The IWP, on the other hand, lasts three months. All that time the participants are living on the eighth floor of the Mayflower residence hall, as at a camp. Everyone can lock the door of his or her own room and be alone when necessary, but there are also a common corridor and the cozy office of the housing assistant Mary Nazareth, plus a great number of events and invitations. These offer -- or demand -- participation, and in that way official manners and habits disappear and the humanness starts, if not to shine, at least to twinkle in everyone.

Sometimes arguments burst into flames and continued past midnight. As a Western Woman, I couldn't understand at all what the Brazilian macho man was talking about when he tried to assure us that the women in his country are perfectly happy to concentrate only on serving their husbands, "their lords," and their children. Western freedom is completely disregarded by them. The macho man thought that perhaps the Western woman was no woman at all but instead more like some kind of ghost, a bloodless papier-mache creature. And when this papier-mache creature said that she had children and even a husband, the macho man, because he was too tired to raise his voice any louder, shook his head and thought that this kind of Western culture must be an indication of the end of the world.

Of course I, the Western woman, am aware of all the harmful aspects of my life-style. I remember how difficult it was to take care of the children and the household and my career at the same time. There were no organized day-care centers or summer camps for the children's summer vacations. One just had to find solutions virtually out of the air. As the macho man continued to describe his

²⁸ Inkeri Kilpinen, a major playwright in Finland, has produced plays: ATLANTICA, THE UNKNOWN PATIENT, MR. DIRECTOR, NUTHER WORLD, EINO LEINO THE POET, VERILY, VERILY, WHITE ROSES ON THE TABLE, LALLUKKA, DEAR LOTTA, RISE UP INGRIA. THE UNKNOWN PATIENT (National Theatre 1964) was hailed as the greatest success in the postwar Finnish theatre. The idea of the play is tragic, but the playwriting made it into a farce comedy. So far the number of the performances in different theatres has been over one thousand. It has also been performed on the radio and TV, making the total audience of about two million, nearly half the people of the country. WHITE ROSES ON THE TABLE was performed at the University of Iowa's Reading Theater 1986, translated into Chinese and performed in China in 1992. Inkeri Kilpinen's plays have been translated into many languages and performed in Sweden, USA, Canada, Russia, Iceland and Estonia.

wonderful family life, the delicious meals which his wife prepared, and so on, I of course remembered that I had once planned to put an ad in the paper reading “Wanted, a mother for our family.”

After our fiery discussions, both the macho man and I pondered these topics for a long time. In general, even if discussions were sometimes of impetuous disposition, there were never any intentional insults. Politics, a real devil in our mass-media age, was left in silence at the IWP. In our group there were members from politically opposing sides, but political fanaticism didn't live on the eighth floor of the Mayflower.

One of the invisible but important aims of the IWP is simply peace. This is of course due to the Program's founders and directors, Paul and Hualing Nieh Engle (who were nominees for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1976). When one meets these cordially smiling, helpful and hospitable people for the first time, one can make the mistake of presuming that they have never gone through any trouble themselves. The truth is completely the opposite. Hualing had no peaceful days during the first twenty-four years of her life. China suffered first through a civil war, then the Japanese conquest and the Japanese war, and finally the Communist Revolution, during which Hualing's father was killed and she became the provider and caretaker of the family. When Hualing was finally able to get to Taiwan in 1949, she was almost arrested for criticizing Chiang Kai-shek's government in the magazine she edited (in addition to her writing). She was spared only because the government learned that Mao's followers had killed her father.

Knowing this, one can understand the deep love for peace which underlies the IWP, starting with Hualing and Paul's way of selecting each session's participants. The Engles also respect each person's convictions without trying to influence them, hoping that through human contacts and discussions the world will, by and by, change from a state of war and peace to one of word and peace.

The Engles's home, high on the bank of the Iowa River, is like the whole world in miniature. There are pieces of art, music, and memories from all the continents. Paul and Hualing invite program participants there sometimes for a cozy little lunch, sometimes for a dinner, sometimes for a big part or an informational event. There was always a warm and simultaneously solemn feeling.

The Engles' special love story is still in the air: two mature writers meet during the 1960s, one from East and the other from the West, representing different languages and different cultures, both married and with children of their own. The difficulties seemed insurmountable, but an all-powerful love prevailed, and now the two are married and share their beautiful home with people from all over the world. Their presence gives to the whole Program a warm and very human spirit.

For me, as a playwright, the IWP provided a particular joy and benefit: one of our first visits was to the Theatre Arts Department of the University of Iowa and to its new and modern theatre building. I sensed the familiar theatre atmosphere right away, as a horse smells a trotting course. I grew inspired, charmed, and alert. The official who took us around the facility spoke about the drama school's program and of course about the pride of Iowa City and its university, Tennessee Williams. On

Sunday evenings the drama students would read and discuss one another's plays as in Williams's era fifty years ago. All the playwrights in our group became excited. "You are very welcome at these Sunday sessions," said our guide.

Just like that! So clearly! So plainly! It certainly wouldn't happen in the universities of Europe; but it worked in Iowa City, and the playwriting class suddenly had several new members: Leonard Koza from South Africa, Hugo Carrillo from Guatemala, Kwame Davis from Jamaica, Antonín Přidal from Czechoslovakia, myself from Finland, and for a short while Bole Butake from Cameroon and Femi Osofisan from Nigeria (who had to leave much earlier than the others).

We soon had set up our own playwrights' subgroup of the IWP with the unforgettable help of two young assistant professors in the Theatre Department, Shelley Berc and Kate Burke. We met often and soon had developed a plan to have our own plays read in the theatre with the help of the teachers and students. If one didn't have a suitable play already translated English, the Program found someone to do the work and also funded the service. Everything happened so quickly, as in a speed-up film, and so many play-reading nights remember this and very thankful for the cooperation, the translations, and even the posters which the IWP office produced without delay and displayed on the walls of the theatre building as well as around the university campus.

I couldn't take part in the Program as fully as I had wanted, because of the unexpected illness and death of my younger sister in California in October. My life in Iowa was overshadowed by this sadness. Still I remember so many things: the early morning when I was up before the others and walked in the corridor as if trying to find out whether all was well in our camp. Then I started banging on my typewriter, waiting for someone else to do the same. Soon Marra from the Philippines began, and then others. We were like a typing chorus, everybody singing in a different language.

Many other pictures go through my mind: the day when a deep voice from the corridor called forth, "A curse on everybody who doesn't respect the ancient will of the spirits. The spirits of the water rise up and ..." I peered into the corridor. There was Bole reciting dialogue from his latest play about an unexpected upheaval of nature (the devastating explosion of lake gases, which occurred in the northern region of his country shortly before his visit to Iowa) and also the collision of the missionary's message with his own African culture.

I also remember the nights when Kwame from Jamaica and Luiz Berto from Brazil were playing and singing. There was enormous joyfulness and liveliness and skill in their music, and if they got a drum, one couldn't help but wonder why their fingers, palms, and the edges of their hands were not bleeding. And when Leonard from South Africa started to dance with such nimbleness and untiring zeal, the Western life-style started to look very pale. Now I almost felt like a papier-mache creature.

Just as if it had happened yesterday, I can recall the discussions with Gonzalo Santonja, who came from Spain, representing the small but very tough nation of the Basques. He shone with the determination of independence for his people, like a flag

flapping in the wind. He spoke of his people's mysterious culture and of his language, which has not relative in any known linguistic family.

With gratitude I remember one morning when Edwin Thumboo, a poet and professor from Singapore, helped me with a translation. It was only of hour before his departure, and all his unpacked papers and clothes were helter-skelter in his room as if a hurricane had just hit. Still, Edwin the Friendly was deeply engrossed in my subject, as though he had all the time in the world on his hands.

And how could I ever forget the dance performances by the Indian author Sivasankari, how she would decorate herself skillfully and let her eyes and agile limbs convey the beauty of the Indian dance? And I remember all the visits and concerts, our panel discussions, and the Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o's visit and effective matinee performance, followed by the very interesting discussion about African writing. I remember our visit to the Amana colony on a blazing hot day, the visit to Hemingway's farm with the turkey dinner and the mountains of corn in storage, and also the many parties at the homes of the IWP staff members. And who could forget the production of Beckett's COMPANY, so difficult that I was not the only one who didn't understand most of it. More understandable was Nikolai Erdman's rarely performed play THE SUICIDE.

After I had written the draft for this piece, I slept very restlessly the following night. "Don't forget it," said a voice in my dream, over and over again. "It doesn't belong here," I answered. But the voice was firm: "yes it does. Yes it does." "It" was this: as I was looking down from my window toward the Iowa River, I saw with my soul's eye the people who had once lived there. I never once turned on the television set in my room during my few leisure hours, because I was looking directly into history. I saw the herds of buffalo, the campfires on the riverbanks, the silent and wise tribal chieftains -- one more culture in addition to those of my writer colleagues. This richness of variety was my greatest gift from Iowa. The field of my mind was plowed, fertilized, and watered; many seeds were sown into it. Now it is my task to work to make them grow and bear fruit when the time is ripe.

Espoo, Finland

WALKING WITH MIKHAIL

CHUKWUEMEKA IKE
(Nigeria, 1987 IWP)²⁹

My phone rang as I was setting up my cassette recorder. Dwi (from Indonesia) said there was a little advert he wanted me to see, and asked if he could disturb me for a minute.

The advert came from Murdoch Funeral Homes. It asks you, the reader, to stop in a Murdoch Funeral Homes today and pick up a pamphlet which will tell you how to make saving of up to 55% on your funeral expenses. The big offer enables you to freeze your funeral costs at today's prices, and save your dear ones the problem of making a difficult decision on your behalf after you are gone. Make hay while the sun shines, it counsels.

"Do you have such adverts in Africa?" Dwi asked, quickly changing Africa to Nigeria.

"Not yet," I replied.

"You see what civilization is doing to these people? You think they are okay here?" He jerked a finger at his head. Before I could answer him, he had slipped away, apologizing profusely for taking up my time.

Was it Wilfrido or Ojok who reported picking his telephone on one occasion and hearing the person at the other end ask if he had taken care of his remains? When he sought clarification, the caller asked if he had taken an insurance to cover the cost of his funeral whenever he died!

That's western civilization for you!

In one of my earlier cassettes, I gave you a brief description of Mikhail, the Soviet writer in our group. I commented on his American outfit, including his Eugene O'Neil Theatre Centre windcheater, blue jeans, and Roebok tennis shoes, and said how I wished I could know him better, to learn something about life in the Soviet Union, but lacked the guts to cut the ice.

²⁹ From the book, *TO MY HUSBAND FROM IOWA*, published by Malthouse African Fiction in Ikeja, Lagos, Nigeria in 1996. Excerpt from the first letter the author wrote her husband from Iowa, dated 3 September, 1987:

My One and Only:

Everyone here says I am the luckiest woman on earth, to have a husband who would gladly offer to look after two kids, one of them only twelve months old, to free his wife to participate in a three and a half month international writing program in faraway America.

I don't require an outsider to tell me what I have always known: that I have a husband who believes that marriage should not bar a woman from attaining optimum intellectual and professional self-fulfilment, and one who creates the ideal atmosphere at home to facilitate this. How else would it have been possible for me, at the age of thirty-two, to attain fulfilment as a woman, as a professional, and as a published creative writer? I always count you as God's greatest gift to me, and if I were to start life all over again, I'll end up marrying you...

Mikhail continued to sport his Eugene O'Neil windchester, blue jeans, and jogging shoes, with his hands usually buried in the windchester pockets. When he wasn't in the windchester, he wore a grey turtle neck sweater with long sleeves. Each time we came across each other, he would smile a sweet, shy smile and touch the peak of his cap, and I would reciprocate with a smile and a "Hi!"

The night the IWP organized a big 20th anniversary cocktail party, Mikhail wore an ash-coloured lounge suit, with a white tie and black shoes, but with his blue sports cap retaining its place on his head. I observed, to my surprise, that he opted for Scotch and water, even though a bottle of Vodka was within sight. I also observed that he kept close to me rather longer than I would have expected, especially as neither of us had spoken to each other beyond the initial exchange of "hi". Was this the opportunity I had longed for, I wondered.

"I cannot find my English," he suddenly blurted out, as though he had read my thoughts, gesticulating his disappointment with his shoulders, his free hand, and his head.

"But I can understand you," I goaded him on.

"Can you?" He was visibly pleased.

"Yes. Please tell me about the Soviet Union." I could not hide my excitement.

Mikhail gesticulated with his eyes before shrugging his shoulders. I agreed with him that the party was not the ideal setting for such a conversation. We agreed to talk the following day, and I accepted his suggestion that we would walk back to Mayflower after the public reading by a visiting Irish poet (and Nobel Laureate), Seamus Heaney, at the Communications Studies Building on the main campus. (I would normally have hopped into our Dodge Ram bus, if it was available, or taken the first Mayflower Cambus.)

I was glad I took that walk for, apart from the things I learnt from Mikhail about his country, it revealed to me that I had been blind to, the beauty of nature in early Iowa fall.

The trees on the right hand side of Madison Street resembled the work of a master painter. Mikhail, wanting to capture some of the colour, pleaded with me to pose beside a tree with yellow flakes as leaves, the Old Capitol building in the background. When I offered to take a snapshot of him with his camera, he chose a tree close to Iowa Memorial Union (the students Union complex), a tree whose leaves had all turned purple.

After tactfully correcting his pronunciation of Nigeria, I went on to ask him to tell me something about life in the Soviet Union. What was life like generally? How did people feel as Soviet citizens?

Mikhail said it was difficult to know where to begin. Perhaps one thing which more than others made the Soviet Union different from America and Western Europe was the closely regulated nature of the Soviet society, the manner in which the machinery of state government impinged on the everyday life of the citizen. There were, for instance, strict government regulations on what you, as a citizen, could buy and how much property you could acquire. You could only own one flat in an urban area and one country house, no more, even if you had all the money in the world.

You couldn't buy a car easily, even if you had the money, because of a deliberate policy to keep down the number of cars in the Soviet Union. When cars were in stock, they were made available for purchase through the unions (such as the Writers' Union). You could not purchase foreign exchange, even from the banks, nor foreign air tickets.

As a matter of fact, you were not permitted to travel out of the Soviet Union without the prior permission of government.

The outcome of all this, Mikhail went on, was to play down on the importance of money. There was little point killing yourself to acquire plenty of money when there was pretty little you could do with it. (Wouldn't Nigeria become a much healthier country to live in if we could similarly play down on the importance of money?) I was particularly struck when he added that what determined the Soviet citizen's rating in society (or his social status) was not how highly placed his official (that is his government) post or title was, but his contribution to society.

Was this his first trip outside the Soviet Union? I asked. No, he had on previous occasions travelled to the US, Canada, and Europe. When I asked whether that meant Soviet writers could travel freely out of the country, his answer was a definite NO. Many Soviet writers longed for the opportunity to travel to other countries, to interact with writers of those countries, but the government would not let them. He had been fortunate because his poems had been published abroad and some of his plays staged abroad. The overseas travels he had been permitted to undertake had been in response to personal invitations sent to him from those countries

"Are you free to stage your plays within the Soviet Union?" I asked.

There had been a shift in government attitude in recent years, Mikhail replied. Government had become more reluctant to ban plays and books formally as it did previously, recognizing how its detractors (especially in the West) would capitalize on that. That did not, however, mean the end of strict government censorship. What they had done was to adopt subtle but more effective methods. An author could, for instance, be informed that it would not be in his best interest to stage his play. If he insisted on doing so, he would discover that no theatre group would accept to put his play on the stage.

"How is that possible?" I asked.

Mikhail smiled. I had noticed that his eyebrow was scanty. Could it be that eyebrows go bald, or that he has had a scanty eyebrow all along? Actors in the various theatre groups were employees of the State, he informed me, and they knew they would jeopardize their salaries if they acted in any play not approved by government.

By this time, we had crossed the foot bridge across the Iowa River, and were walking past the magnificent Hancher Auditorium, towards Park Road.

Considering the general lack of freedom back home, would he consider staying on permanently in the US?

Mikhail's answer came as a surprise. He enjoyed the freedom in America, and the much more relaxed life style of the people. But he confessed he would find it

extremely difficult to settle outside the Soviet Union as an exile. Life in Russia, he said, made it difficult to enjoy living in another country, on a permanent basis. To illustrate his point, he mentioned how difficult it would be for him to adjust to the all-important quest for wealth. He went on to describe his embarrassment when he learnt of the amount of per diem the USIA would make available to him on the trip; what, on earth, was he to do with so much money?

Save it, and take it home, I suggested. After all he had said nothing to suggest any restriction on the amount of money Soviet citizens could own. There was no restriction on how much Soviet money—the rouble—he could own. But there were strict regulations on foreign exchange. He must hand over any foreign exchange he brought back, so what was the point? The only thing he could do was to buy any articles he would use back home.

He stopped to take a picture of the Iowa River.

What did he think of the current relationship between the Soviet Union and the US? Mikhail's answer was brief: friendly, and rightly so. The two sides needed each other.

I next asked how conditions were in Cuba. He said he was initially surprised, when he visited Cuba, that the Cuban leader, Fidel Castro, was more popular abroad than at home. He soon discovered why. His policy of excessive centralization had brought suffering and hardship to the people. Whatever progress the country had made under Castro was not readily noticeable. On the contrary, poverty stared you in the face everywhere. The Cuban government provided the people with food, so nobody could talk about mass starvation; the problem was the poor quality of the food.

One curious thing about Cuba, Mikhail went on, was the way government took much better care of the intellectuals. That notwithstanding, he was certain that many more Cubans would have left the country but for heavy government expenditure on security measures aimed at stopping large-scale emigration. He recalled how the widely acknowledged tactician, Che Guevara, became disenchanted with Castro, but made the fatal mistake of disengaging himself from Castro and paid for it with his life.

When I raised the issue of Soviet presence in Afghanistan, Mikhail admitted that his country should have learnt a lesson from American experience in Vietnam, but refused to do so. He considered it unfortunate to send Russian soldiers who knew next to nothing about the terrain to fight against soldiers who were part of the terrain, and was certain that his people were fighting a battle they could not win.

My next foreign relations question touched on Soviet relationship with Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and Poland. We had writers from the first three of those countries in our group, and as far as I could see, Mikhail's relationship with the three writers had been neither warm nor cold. What is the nature of the relationship between the Soviet Union and Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and Poland? I venture, conscious of the need to tread cautiously.

Mikhail thought that was another area requiring serious review. Those countries hated the Union because of Soviet politics. They resented Soviet controls

over them. Yet the Soviet Union continued to spend huge sums of money on them, money that could be more profitably spent improving the lot of the Russian citizens.

I suspended the interview as we crossed the 4-lane bridge over the Iowa River. Safe on the pedestrian walk at the far end of the bridge, we continued the walk towards the busy Park Road/Dubuque Street junction. When Mikhail again held up his camera, I looked at what he wanted to photograph. I had never seen such a colourful landscape in my life. The fall had turned commonplace green leaves into colourful flowers, and practically all the usually flowerless trees in the thickly wooded hillside face us into flower-laden trees, some dominantly yellow, some brown, some god, some scarlet. There was the occasional tree in the casuarina family stubbornly retaining its green colour, but then, as if deliberately set aside to compensate for this, a line of low growing shrubs stretching down the far side of Dubuque Street had turned all scarlet!

As I sipped in the beauty, something was crystallizing in my mind. I remembered Kwashiorkor, the disease we came face to face with in Biafra during the Nigerian Civil War. I remembered how this protein deficiency disease turned the victim's hair from its natural (black) colour to a shade of gold or brown.

Mayflower Residence hall was now in sight, so I had to conclude the interview. Khrushchev was a man who fascinated me. I don't know why. I asked Mikhail what kind of man Khrushchev was, and how the present Soviet leader, Gorbachev, compared with him.

Mikhail thought Khrushchev an interesting man in many ways. Did I, for instance, know that Khrushchev had a farmer friend in Iowa? Although his regime took a hard line on dissenters, those who knew Khrushchev well knew he was the Number One dissenter himself!

Mikhail went on to elaborate. Khrushchev and the Communist Party under him stood out against impressionistic art. He dismissed a great Soviet artist for becoming impressionistic. Yet when he ceased to be in power, he took to impressionistic art himself. And after his death, his family commissioned the artist he had dismissed for his impressionistic art to design his tomb. The artist's design--the two-faced figure of Janus--brought out Khrushchev's two-faced nature in his lifetime.

Because he was stripped of his office, Mikhail went on, Khrushchev became the first Secretary of the Communist Party not interred in the Kremlin. He was buried among ordinary people, but not far from Anton Chekhov, the literary colossus. Mikhail thought Khrushchev might have welcomed that. He liked intellectuals--the young ones--and had on one occasion invited Mikhail for a discussion.

What about Gorbachev? We had crossed Dubuque Street and now stood on the lawn in front of Mayflower.

Mikhail said they were watching Gorbachev, to see whether he would move from being a darling in international circles to being a genuine reformer at home. For the moment, all Gorbachev had accomplished was to whitewash the situation at home. With reference to Gorbachev's claims that the repressive laws in the Soviet Union were no longer enforced, he admitted there had been a measure of relaxation

but wondered why the government had refused to abrogate the laws. Why talk about relaxing them? Why not abrogate them?

Inside the warm Mayflower lobby, I offered Mikhail a drink in my apartment. He asked whether he could take the offer another time. A translator who could speak Russian was waiting at the Old Capitol building to show him around the Museum of Art. He must get back to the main campus right away so as not to keep the translator waiting indefinitely.

As I watched him walk briskly into the cold outside, I thanked God for the courage to meet Mikhail. How else could I have imagined that a Russian citizen, a man from behind the Iron Curtain, would be so understanding, so pleasant, so plain, so undomineering, so human?

IOWA CITY, SIX YEARS LATER

GYORGY SOMLYO
(Hungary, 1981, 1987, IWP)³⁰

We had tickets to fly Budapest-Paris-Mexico City-Chicago-Dedar Rapids. While still in Budapest we had quite a bit of fun over the fact that we were heading for a place that might not even exist at all. Neither of us had ever heard of a city called Cedar Rapids. It was the same story when we sought information for a friend who had just returned from New York. Cedar Rapids. Did cedars float down rapids there, or what? Could such a place exist anywhere but in a fable? But wasn't this whole trip like something out of a fable? Shortly after receiving the invitation to participate in the International Writing Program, I received another invitation, this one for the poetry festival in Morelia, Michoacán, Mexico. The dates also worked out in the best way imaginable. The festival ran from the 13th to the 31st of August 1981; the first day of the 1981 IWP session was 1 September. It was as if everything had been worked out ahead of time, according to the arithmetic of fables.

On the way we spent one expense-paid night in Paris at a posh little hotel on a quiet little street in the seventh arrondissement, compliments of Air France. The next day at Roissy the hanging corridors, like the gardens of Semiramis, took us all the way inside our enormous Boeing. Later we enjoyed two wonderful weeks in Mexico, spent with friends both old and new: Vasko Popa and Tadeusz Rozewicz, friends of long standing; Cintio Vitier, and acquaintance from Cuba; Alen Ginsberg, whom I had met a year before in Budapest; and above all, Octavio Paz, with whom I had been corresponding for many years -- ever since the publication of my translation of his *PIEDRA DE SOL* (1957; ENG. *SUN STONE*, 1962) -- but whom I had never seen before. Among the new friends were Homero and Betty Aridjis, the festival's generous hosts; other Mexican poets, especially the young Francisco Segovia, who, from the time of our meeting him, became our friend and my translator; and so many others. Finally, like wonderful birthday present, there was the great Jorge Luis Borges himself. He had come to accept the Ollin Yolitzli Prize and, completely blind (as he had been for quite some time by then), autographed my copy of the Emece edition of his *ANTOLOGIA POETICA*.

On one of our last days spent in the Presidente Hotel, we went to the local Air France office to reconfirm our reservations. We learned that there was a slight problem: our direct flight from Mexico City to Chicago had been canceled. Indeed, this was all happening during the big air-traffic-controllers strike in the United States. Air France told us all they could do was give us two seats on a flight to Dallas, where we would surely (?) find "puddle jumpers" headed for Cedar Rapids. After reaching the Dallas airport -- it was in an uproar which was not to be believed -- and after quite

³⁰ Gyorgy Somlyo, poet, translator, is the chief editor of the international poetry almanac *Arion*. He was educated at the Budapest Faculty of Arts and the Sorbonne. Among his works are: *ARION ENEKE*, *KOKOROK* collections of poems. Between 1977 and 1980 he compiled three volumes of collected essays: *AN INTRODUCTION TO MODERN POETRY PHILOKTETESZ SEBE*.

a few complications, we did finally locate a flight going to Cedar Rapids by way of St. Louis. The weather was infernal. Flying in the dark toward this mysterious Cedar Rapids, we couldn't even make out the wings carrying us, and our little plane bounced around in the gray sky like a drenched bird which, often tiring, would swoop down to rest on a branch. Toward the end, the plane landed every fifteen minutes. Davenport. Moline. Des Moines. It was like a commuter train making all local stops. Finally came Cedar Rapids. Were the only ones inside the tiny airport, which was hardly surprising, considering the weather. We stood there all alone. At our feet were our enormous suitcases (which I loathed), full of things both essential and utterly useless for a four-month stay. We were all alone with no idea where we were. It was as if we were at the end of the earth. Suddenly a tall blond guy materialized before us seemingly out of thin air. He was very Yankee and quite young.

"I'm Steve," he said in a low, casual drawl. "You're George and An? Hi. Let's go to the car."

He picked up our suitcases (at least the heaviest of them), put them in the minibus (which was to serve as our means of transportation over and over again for various errands in the city and surrounding area, always in the company of members of the program and other friends), and then we were on our way. Leaving Cedar Rapids behind (to the point of forgetting that it even existed), we headed for Iowa City in a night made dark by the unfamiliar Midwestern rain.

His eyes on the road, Steve said, "Paul and Hualing are waiting for you; so are Peter and Mary, you know."

No, we didn't know. Naturally, our previous correspondence with the Engles had already made them familiar to us, but we had never heard of Peter and Mary. Still, the way Steve mentioned their names practically made us feel we knew them well. Everything made it seem as if we had come to see relatives, distant relatives about whom we knew little, to be sure, but who belonged to us all the same.

Steve wasn't talkative or even particularly friendly. He was simply a *friend* from the very first word he uttered, whatever it might have been. In the months to come we encountered so many equally friendly people and things we had never seen before in many different places: in the Mayflower, likewise in Paul and Hualing's home, in Peter and Mary Nazareth's little apartment, in Steve's minibus, in the building housing the University of Iowa's English Department, where the IWP's little offices along with its coffee machine -- ever busy during the day -- and its copier (which was at our disposal) were to be found. As I said: something out of a fable.

The huge living room/kitchen on the first floor of the Mayflower was packed like the waiting area of a small-town train station in Central Europe. People who had recently arrived from all parts of the globe could be seen sitting and standing, apparently done in by the long flights they had just completed. Now they looked tired as they waited to be put up for the night. Barely a moment after we arrived and without even being properly introduced, Mary kindly took care of us. It was as if we had in face known each other for many years. Then came a bourbon and a plate of Indian chicken. For the sake of introducing us, as if fates had already determined that we should be near one another, I started talking to the young man sitting next to me

on the couch. The usual: name, nationality. The young man was very dark (just like Anna and myself) with Mediterranean features, glasses, and a book written in English on his lap – he had no doubt been reading it on the plane from?

“Anton Shammas, from Israel,” he answered rather unenthusiastically.

Perhaps because it was the easiest way to continue the conversation, I said to him without much thought, “We’re Jewish too.”

“But I am not.”

In a no less curt, sullen way, he explained that, although he was an Israeli citizen, he was an Arab by birth and a Catholic.

I didn’t know what to say. I really should have told him that that was better yet. Is there anything more like being Jewish almost anywhere in the world (except Israel) than being an Arab Catholic in Israel? Anton later turned out to be like something out of a fable as well. He was a bilingual poet (that rarest of beings) who wrote poems in both Arabic and Hebrew and also translated Arabic poetry into Hebrew and Hebrew poetry into Arabic. Later he invited us up to his room for a remarkable Middle Eastern dinner to pay us back for our “gnocchi goulash.” A friendship’s getting off on the wrong foot turned out for the best.

To my great regret, I still have not gone to Israel, nor has Anton had a chance to come to Budapest. We merely trade postcards or manuscript versions of poems from time to time. On the other hand, Ersi Sotiropoulou, the Greek poet who was so sweet and looked like such a little girl but was a hard, strong writer and spoke her mind, did indeed come visit us at our home in Budapest. She published her translations of several of my poems in that wonderful Athenian journal *The Word*. We also went to stay with her in Rome, where she was acting as cultural attaché for the Greek Embassy. Björg Vik, the Norwegian novelist, also came with her architect husband Hans Jorgen to see us and to see the Danube from our large terrace. I am very sorry that I was in Paris when I received my Uruguayan friend Jorge Arbaleche’s letter saying that he would soon be Budapest. He saw the city without us; we would have to get together another time. As for the others like Joanna Salamon, the Polish poet-sorceress who loved to predict the future, or Shunil Gangopadhyay, the Bengali poet, we exchange occasional cards or run into each other unexpectedly somewhere in the world. There are “Iowans” everywhere.

That’s the way it is. Friendships forged at the Mayflower prove stable and lasting in this unstable world which may not last, in this devastated world, in this devastation of the world we inhabit.

So the IWP provided a friendly atmosphere (for some, of course, the atmosphere proved to be more than friendly, but that is part of the order of things), but it also provided a working atmosphere. I have rarely seen, or lived in, an atmosphere more conducive to the writer’s craft than the one there. You could establish the balance – a delicate problem for all of us – among your “literary,” “social,” and working lives in any way you liked. You could always lock yourself up with your work, but there was always the chance to run away from it as well. Each condition was as important as the other.

For me it was also a chance to indulge a long-standing nostalgic desire. I was born in a small village on the shores of Lake Balaton, where I also began my schooling. Ever since then, however, I have always lived in big cities: Budapest for several decades, and a few years in Paris. Small towns would always haunt me whenever I stayed in one or merely passed through. Their utterly predictable dimensions, the way the whole place was so livable, their clearly marked borders, their finite nature which doesn't make your head spin the way an infinite metropolis does; they're like a small, unimportant poem that's well done all the same. I found all that in Iowa City. Is it a pretty town? An ugly one? I couldn't say. That question strikes me as too European to be asked of it. It doesn't have the great or even the average beauty of the many small towns in all parts of Western, Central, and Eastern Europe, nor is it as ugly as so many backward, poor, insignificant European small towns. It is pleasant and livable, easy to come to know. And I did my best to familiarize myself with it, to know the supermarket (and the special way of using it, with the help of the minibus driven by Steve) and the university library, with its facilities allowing you to find what you are looking for all by yourself as well as things you never thought to look for in its open stacks, down to the campus squirrels and the students on the Cambus, who acted like friendly, happy little squirrels themselves, or the length of this "main street" -- North and South Dubuque, running from the exotic Engle household to the equally exotic liquor store with its gallon bottles of whiskey and California wine -- or the famed Midwestern Indian summer, going on as if it would never end, like a performance of an Indian drama.

What was I doing there? As I have already said, I was practicing "peaceful coexistence" in the midst of this free yet well-oiled ensemble that was like a theatre company, an all-star group recruited from the most varied of the world's many hotbeds of acting, but who played best together. The group had little spats but survived under an alliance forged from tact and the caliber of each member, as well as the tack and caliber, both intellectual and human, of Paul and Hualing, who formed an extraordinary little theatre company unto themselves in all the program's "settings": first and foremost that of their home, which served simultaneously as stage, hall, commissary, and dressing room. There you could be whoever you wanted to be, taking on the role of actor or spectator, or even wearing a negligee and putting on makeup before making your entrance, or simply going up to the bar and helping yourself to a scotch or bourbon, a gin and tonic, or a vodka. Paul and Hualing are the very essence of important people in an unimportant small town.

What about work? While there I started my novel "The Ramp," which had gone through several abortive beginnings during the previous few years. It was published in 1984 with the image of the man who was Raoul Wallenberg like a phantom at its center. I see myself writing in the Mayflower, at my desk facing the window looking out onto City Park, and stopping between two sentences to look at the highway making an S-curve before leaving Iowa City. While there I also translated Borges poems out of books borrowed from the library; from time to time I even

wrote a poem myself, a rare thing. A not insignificant amount of work for three months and change I had spent there.

I can only conclude this (perhaps overly) subjective memoir in a way which is even more subjective. Together at Iowa, Anna and I are now separated. “Es ist eine alte Geschichte,” goes the Heine song; this “old story” happened to us as well. As I write these lines, I imagine that it is in Iowa and in the memories of the people there that the image of us as a couple still remains. Perhaps I will even go back there myself to see that image once more in the mirror of the Iowa River, where we looked at each other so many times.

Budapest, 1987

Translated from the Hungarian by David Kornacker

BORROWING A DIRECTION

BEI DAO
(China, 1988 IWP)³¹

a fish's life
is full of loopholes
streamwater's loopholes ah bubbles
that's my way of speaking

borrowing a direction
the drunk passes through his echoes layer by layer
but the heart's a watchdog
forever facing the lyric's essence

music driving forward
gets shattered in the accident
skies cover the other
side of our emotional life

borrowing a direction
migratory birds break out of my sleep
lightning strikes everyone's cup
the speaker's innocent

UNTITLED

in waking there is freedom
that contradiction among stars

doors resisting the years
silk carried screams away
I'm the identity you deny
lamp switched off in the heart

this fragile moment
hostile shores

³¹ Bei Dao was one of the avant-garde modernist poets in China. He started the literary magazine "Today" in the mid-1970s. It was closed down by the government after two years of publication, and went underground. He has been in exile since the Tiananmen Square Incident. He was on the short list for the Nobel Prize in Literature several times. An honorary member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Two volumes of poetry were translated into English, published by New Directions: FORMS OF DISTANCE, 1994 and LANDSCAPE OVER ZERO, 1996. The two poems, Borrowing A Direction and Untitled are from LANDSCAPE OVER ZERO.

wind folds up all the news
memory's become master

o vintage wine
changing color for clear expression
coal meets the miner's inevitable lamp
fire cannot bear witness to fire

Translated from the Chinese by David Hinton with Yanbing Chen

ADVENTURES IN INTERNATIONAL WRITING

PETER NAZARETH

(Uganda, 1973-74 IWP, Advisor to IWP since 1977)³²

I left Uganda on 19 January 1973 with my wife and two daughters to accept the Seymour Lustman Fellowship at Yale University, granted for my first novel, *IN A BROWN MANTLE*, issued with full publicity in July 1972 by the East African Literature Bureau, which belonged to the state of Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda. A few days later Idi Amin announced the expulsion of Asians, fictionally prophesied in my novel. Some people said Amin must have read the novel (though he did not read). The work also prophesied the coup -- albeit fictionally, as a warning -- but unfortunately the coup took place while the manuscript was with the publishers. At the time I was a senior finance officer in the Ministry of Finance. My Ugandan citizenship was taken away, not for my novel but on a technicality, because I was an "asian." I was trying to stay on in Uganda and was exempted from leaving because of my job. But how could I turn down a fellowship to Yale? What would happen if Amin found out what was in my novel? I could have had the best publicity in the world by showing the work to the BBC reporter covering the expulsion, but chances were that I would not be around to write a second novel. How long could I keep working for Amin's government and still say that my hands were clean?

So I left with my wife and daughters to go to Yale, my first American university, in New Haven, my first American city. Soon, though, my fellowship was about to end, and Amin was still in power. I was in the U. S. on a British passport, obtained so that I could come here and go back. My reentry visa had expired because it had been granted only for the period of my earned leave, not my unearned leave, since I was legally no longer a Ugandan citizen. Where could I go?

"Iowa City is the place for you!" said a man bumped into on the streets of New Haven. This was confirmed by Charles Davis, chair of Afro-American Studies, who had come from Iowa City the year before and who, unbeknown to me, had read my novel and recommended me for the Lustman Fellowship. Davis wrote to Paul Engle, who invited me to come to the International Writing Program in the fall of 1973. Since I was already in the country, I could not receive USIA funding, unlike most of the participants in the program, who come directly from their respective countries under the auspices of the U. S. ;embassies. The program could not offer me much out of its own resources, but it made up a reasonable financial package by arranging

³² Peter Nazareth, Professor of English and African-American World Studies and Advisor to the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa, was born in Uganda of Goan parents. His books include *THE GENERAL IS UP* (Toronto: TSAR, 1991) *IN THE RICKSTER TRADITION: THE NOVELS OF ANDREW SALKEY, FRANCIS EBEJER AND ISHMAEL REED* (London: Bogle-L'Ouverture, 1994) He received national and international media attention for the class he invented: "Elvis as Anthology," leading to "my best piece, a transforming gumbo" published in Vernon Chadwick, ed., *In Search of Elvis*, Boulder: Westview, 1997.

with Dr. Darwin Turner for me to teach African literature in the Afro-American Studies Program.

So it was off to Toronto to visit our relatives, who had moved there a few months earlier as a result of the Asian expulsion, then on to Iowa City by bus. At the time we felt we were being driven to the middle of nowhere. I had grown up on country 'n' western music in Uganda -- there was something in common between country music and both East African and Goan music -- but I had not realized just why it had the word country in it. Everyone who travels in the U. S. for the first time is amazed by its sheer size. So it was with some trepidation that we entered Iowa City on 27 August 1973.

I had confused the International Writing Program with the Writers Workshop. The reason for this confusion was that Paul Engle was the driving force behind the Workshop (the popular name of the Creative Writing Program) and was also the founder, along with Hualing Nieh, of the IWP. The Writers Workshop had courses for students leading to a Master of Fine Arts degree (Taban lo Liyong of Uganda was the first African to receive an MFA from the Workshop). The IWP brought published writers from several countries to Iowa City, where they gave readings and presentations, exchanged ideas, relaxed, traveled, wrote, et cetera. At that time the program lasted two semesters; no it is shorter --three months in the fall -- and therefore more intense.

What were my concerns when I arrived? First, survival: I wanted to have a place for the four of us to stay, and I needed to earn some money so that we could live. Second, in spite of my fear of violence in America, I wanted to continue discovering this vast and complex country, where anything one saw could be juxtaposed with its diametric opposite. Third, I desired to keep on writing.

This last wish was not the least. After a long dry spell, I had, in 1972, come out with my first novel, my first book of criticism (*LITERATURE AND SOCIETY IN MODERN AFRICA*, EALB), and also my first three short stories. That was an exciting year, what with my being sent to Egypt for a four-week seminar in April on the role of the public sector in the economic development of Africa -- yes, sent by the Amin regime, in time to protect me from a Goan family who thought my story "Dom" was about one of them and had ruined their family name and decided they had better "fix me up." Then came the expulsion ... and my first books of criticism. Could I continue writing while cut off from my country, my roots?

I bore yet another burden, coming as I did from colonial times. Although a number of the lecturers at Makerere University College encouraged our writing, we were brought up by the colonial system to believe that we just were not good enough. Could I keep on writing, or was it over?

The first and subsequent sessions of the International Writing Program gave me the answer; a resounding "Yes." I used to think, with D. H. Lawrence, that literature was ultimately moral; therefore I felt that those who create it must be moral too. I was soon disabused of that notion, living as we did in the same apartment complex, the Mayflower, with over twenty writers. They behaved in as many different ways as any twenty individuals. And although I was awed by some of

the writers, I was convinced that I was as bright as the others. If such people could continue writing, so could I. None of them said they were afraid of not writing again; it was only a question of what they would write.

There was a positive influence too. Here we were, writers from all over the world. We did not have to explain why we were writers or why writing was important. We were living in a small city in which, say, one in ten people claimed to be a writer. So we could discuss technical or ideological problems having to do with writing. I discovered that writers from Western Europe get impatient with what they consider to be the excessively political approach of Third World writers: "We are supposed to discuss literature, not politics!" was their frequent cry. Writers from Eastern Europe tend to be political but in a different way.

I was political too. I was obsessed with the Amin regime, with the killings taking place in Uganda. Having worked for the Ministry of Finance, I knew that the expulsion was an economic disaster for Uganda, more so because Amin was killing the successful businessmen who could have taken over some of the businesses owned or run by Asians as well as killing those officials in the para-statal corporations who could take charge of the businesses. Fewer than 10 percent of the Asians were involved in business, industry, and transportation: most were teachers, doctors, civil servants, bank clerk, and lawyers, trained at the expense of the state and sent as gifts to countries such as Canada. Since Amin always blamed others when things went wrong, it was clear that the expulsion of Asians was going to lead to more killing of black Ugandans, not less. To my amazement, however, I discovered that Amin was considered a hero by Third World people outside Uganda, particularly in the States! They took Asians to be, stereotypically, a uniform people of outsiders exploiting Uganda. Therefore Amin was a nationalist: he could not be butchering black Ugandans! This was only Western propaganda. My wife, daughters, and I visited Dachau on our way to the U. S., and the photos there reminded us of Amin's Uganda, except that the Nazis had organized an administratively efficient killing machine. The only African writer who took a consistent -- and courageous -- stand against Amin was the later Nobel Prize laureate Wole Soyinka.

The night before leaving Iowa City, Jose Antonio Bravo, the Peruvian novelist, spoke to me in his halting English and told me that as a result of my obsessive stories he was having nightmares about Amin. He felt like writing a novel about Amin, "but he is your story," he said. He added that if I did not know how to write about Amin. I should go to the Iowa Book and Supply and buy ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF SOLITUDE by one Gabriel Garcia Marquez. I bought the novel and found it strange. I began to discuss it with Luis Dominguez, a Chilean novelist with whom I played tennis, and slowly began to understand the work, further assisted in my understanding by a paper Bravo had presented to the program writers (and which had been translated by Connie Dominguez) on the "marvelous reality" in Latin American fiction. I came to like ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF SOLITUDE, but instead of writing my novel, I felt like writing about Garcia Marquez and using him to say things obliquely about Amin -- directness was dangerous. Thus my second volume of criticism, published in East Africa as THE THIRD WORLD WRITER: HIS SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY (1978).

In the next session of the IWP, I met Cyprian Ekwensi for the first time and discovered that, far from being the careless writer of third-rate popular works some critics had taken him to be, he was a careful craftsman of oral novels. One day Ekwensi burst out, "My god, you have a novel about Amin in your head; just write it!" "That's just what Bravo said to me some months ago," I replied. "he writes novels in a strange way. He plans his novels on charts like an architect and when he is ready, he writes." "Good," said Ekwensi. "Let me show you how I write." He showed me he too planned his novels on charts like an architect! This was too much I thought. I went to the Iowa Book and Supply, bought some large sheets of paper, came back to my apartment, and started planning my novel they way Bravo and Ekwensi did. When I reached a certain point, the novel took off and I began typing. I typed for days, not remembering anything else that happened, like Margaret Cadmore Jr. painting in Bessie Head's *MARU* (1971). The novel swallowed up earlier pieces I had been writing but had abandoned in Entebbe, New Haven, and Iowa City, three pieces I had thought discrete. Some time later I phoned Ekwensi and said, "It is done!" "How long did it take you?" "Nine days," I replied, amazed because it seemed like years. "You see!" he said. "When I tell people I wrote *JAQUA NANA* in nine days, they think I am not serious." Then he asked, "How do you feel?" "Like I have recovered from a long illness!" Yes, indeed – getting the novel out had cured me.

That was not the end of the novel, of course. There was the question of revision. I retyped the manuscript, made copies, and passed them on to Ekwensi and U. R. Ananthamurthy, the novelist from India. I received good, practical criticism from both. Writers I met in the program took certain chapters, those about mass expulsion, and published them in their respective homelands in English or in translation into Polish and Japanese. Dilip Chitre, the Indian poet, published two chapters upon his return in *New Quest*, a journal he edited. Yitzhak Orpaz, the Israeli novelist, translated a chapter into Hebrew and published it in a paper in his country. *THE GENERAL IS UP* was published later (Calcutta, Writers Workshop, 1984). The first novel had used an epigraph from T. S. Eliot, the second used epigraphs from Christopher Okigbo, Garcia Marquez, Ishmael Reed, and Ezekiel Mphahlele.

I returned Ekwensi's favor by critiquing the manuscript of the novel he was writing while he was in the IWP. As he wrote to Paul Engle, he had planned the novel but wanted the time and opportunity to write it, which the program gave him. When I pointed out some flaws in his earlier writing, he said, "Don't tell me about work that is over and done with; tell me when I can make changes." And I did, as did students in the class taught by the Writers Workshop director Jack Leggett which Ekwensi attended by permission.

The International Writing Program was a dream, the dream of Paul Engle and Hualing Nieh. For me personally, the IWP was a lifeline. The Engles were very good to the four of us. We had arrived early because I had to teach, and we had the rare experience of meeting the Engles without other writers around. They took us out on Coralville Dam in a boat they owned at the time, and Paul went swimming in the river while we talked to Hualing. It was on the boat that the Engles asked me to give the

opening presentation of the 1973 program. The paper was later published in *WRITING FROM THE WORLD*, a volume containing selection by participants in IWP (University of Iowa Press, 1976).

We did not meet the Engles the day we arrived; we were met instead by John Bean, the program assistant. I knew about the legendary Paul Engle, so I asked Bean instead about Hualing Nieh Engle. The idea of a person like her appealed to me tremendously. I was very interested in the Chinese Revolution while in Uganda and had tried to read as much about it as I could find, which was not much since we were still suffering from the hangover of colonialism. At that time the Chinese revolution, with its stress on people, had a tremendous appeal. I wanted to find out what the people were like, what the problems were, how the people responded: in other words, what about the revolution after the revolution? Hualing, I learned, had left mainland China after her father had been killed by communists; she had lived in Taiwan, but she was not hostile to the revolution.

So I looked forward to meeting her and finding answers to my questions. And I did begin getting these answers. I attended a class she taught on modern Chinese literature in translation and came to know the works of Lu Hsun, Mao Dun, Lao She, Ding Ling, and others. (I discovered that one of my postgraduate friends at Leeds University had plagiarized Lu Hsun's *Diary of a Madman*, a decade ago and had won a British Council Prize for best fiction!) When the program ended Hualing invited me to join her team that was translating the literature of the Hundred Flowers movement and specifically to co-translate criticism and fiction since I was a novelist and a critic and, unlike most Americans, was interested in the ideology of the Chinese Revolution and did not believe that literature and politics were separate by definition. I jumped at the offer and for two years worked on the project, co-translating with John Hsu the work of Liu Binyan, Wang Meng, and others. The resulting two volumes of material were published in 1980 by Columbia University Press. Imagine my excitement when these very writers began to come to the IWP! Today, Wang Meng, who sang for the program guests while Leon Nolens of Belgium played the piano, is minister of culture in China, and Liu Binyan, one of the most urbane people I have ever met, a man who interviewed young Americans because he wanted to find out how they thought, is in trouble.

The Engles asked my wife and daughters to participate in the IWP's activities: to attend the presentations, for example, and to come along on trips such as the regular visit to the innovative John Deere administrative building in Moline and the modern American Public Insurance headquarters in Des Moines, both of which contain magnificent and thought-provoking collections of modern art, reminding me of Aldous Huxley's statement that in the twentieth century industry would be performing the functions of patrons of the arts. There were boat rides on the Mississippi, visits to the home of Senator John Culver in Macgregor, et cetera. Some radical writers felt that the excursion to John Deere was a propaganda exercise, but I pointed out that it was doubtful any writer had succeeded in persuading his or her government to buy a combine from John Deere. If it was propaganda, it was so only

in the sense that the writers were given a much broader picture of the United States than they had had before, and thus their response to the country became more complex. I recall a writer from Eastern Europe being startled when a farmer said he was against the Carter administration's decision to stop the sale of U. S. grain to the Soviet Union, saying this was disastrous for farmers like himself.

Dreams can take strange forms. Loneliness, cold, alienation, emotion, and stress can lead to all kinds of things. There are stories I could tell...but the people are alive, and this might ruin their names and give a false impression about their writings; never trust the teller, trust the tale, said D. H. Lawrence. Then again, these people might sue. I can, however, tell some stories about people who, tragically, have passed away.

One such person was Abbie Gubegna of Ethiopia. One day Kole Omotoso of Nigeria and I bumped into him at the bus stop. I was teaching two courses for the Afro-American Studies Program and had a lunch break between classes. Omotoso and I walked downtown to have lunch. Gubegna said he would like us to have a drink with him. I told him I didn't mind but my priority was lunch. So we walked into the Airliner, which served both drinks and meals. It was full. Omotoso and I walked around looking for a seat. Finally we noted Gubegna near the door, gesturing toward a table that had just been vacated. We sat down. I noticed Gubegna glaring at me maniacally. "What were you two doing?" he asked. "We were looking for a table," I replied. "This table was vacant," he said. "This table is always vacant when I walk in." Then he turned to Omotoso and said, "Amin was right." "What do you mean?" I asked. "Amin was right to throw you out." Turning to Omotoso again, he said that he had always been sincere with me but I had not reciprocated. I asked him what he meant. "Why did you lie to me?" he said. "You told me when I phoned you that you were sleepy after drinking the beer with me, yet I know you can drink much more beer!" I had indeed drunk beer with him the previous evening. I had been supposed to go swimming with him later in the Mayflower pool -- I was learning to swim -- but when he called, I was asleep. Yes, like most East Africans, he had a capacity for beer, whereas I was trying to cut down on beer drinking and was suffering from diminished capacity. We ended up quarreling, and Omotoso and I left. Then I realized that it was the time of year -- cold February -- when some people began to go a little crazy.

And go crazy Gubegna did. There were complaints from people. A student of mine said that he crept up to her door after midnight to listen to what was going on. A writer from Japan, we were told a year later by another Japanese author, wrote an article back home about the IWP in which she said that Gubegna tried to strangle her in the elevator. A writer from Yugoslavia visited Gubegna's room and found the latter lying in bed, shivering because he said, he had a fever. When the Yugoslav noticed that the windows were wide open and asked Gubegna about it. Gubegna accused him of opening the windows. Gubegna and the Indian writer Thyagarajan (who writes under the name Ashokamitran) used to be friends until they quarreled about whether Mayflower was one word or two; the Indian said one, the Ethiopian two. the Indian consulted a dictionary and said that it was one word, Gubegna called him a liar. Thyagarajan said, "On that note, I think I should leave." They did not speak

to each other again. Ironically, both were right: at the time the apartment complex spelled its name as May Flower, with a drawing of a flower between the two words. When the university bought the building in 1983 and converted it into a residence hall, it resolved the problem by spelling the name as one word.

Writers began to get scared of Gubegna, because he had indicated that he knew how to be violent. Once when I was in the Sauna with him in the brighter days, I saw a mark on his thigh. I asked him what it was. He told me that he always carried a gun in Ethiopia. One night two thugs jumped him. He went for his gun -- and shot himself through the thigh. Another time, at a party at the Engles' house high on the hill, I brought out my clarinet and played, accompanied by John Bean on the guitar. Omotoso turned to Gubegna and said, "Let's dance." Gubegna kicked him in the shins. The following morning Gubegna phoned Omotoso and said, "In Ethiopia we kill people for saying that." Apparently he thought Omotoso had made a homosexual pass at him. Ironically, earlier that evening, before the party, a young black American who had the ability to write and who had become friends with us came to see me, very disturbed and looking for Omotoso. I found out later that the young man was alarmed because, as he had been walking down the corridor, Gubegna had quietly stepped out of his room, put his arm around the American's waist, and said, "Come to my room and have a beer with me." The American thought Gubegna was making a homosexual pass at him.

This was Gubegna's first visit to the United States. He had arrived full of hostility for Americans, whom he saw as behind the Haile Selassie regime and thus behind the troubles of his country. He had been imprisoned by the Selassie regime and had been designated a prisoner of conscience by Amnesty International. Still, he was puzzled to find Americans in Iowa City so friendly. This was also the time when things were heating up over Watergate. He then began to grow alarmed at how Nixon was being treated. "This is not the way to treat your president!" he shouted. "Shoot him if you must, but don't humiliate him like this!" An assistant to the IWP patiently tried to explain to him that this was the American way of getting the president.

Gubegna did not really go crazy, however; he pulled out of it when the coup took place in Ethiopia. "This is what I have been waiting for all my life," he told me. Sadly things must not have turned out as he had expected, and he is dead. He had been a writer under tremendously difficult circumstances. Writing in Amharic, he was self-published. He faced severe problems from censors, as in the case of one work in which a baby refuses to be born into such a terrible world, or another in which he says that "Idi" is short for "idiot." He told me that he was not permitted to use phrases such as "old man," because to do so, according to the censors, would mean that he was saying Haile Selassie was an old man and was going to die. No wonder that, unlike Ekwensi, he was resistant to any practical criticism which Omotoso and I gave him about the translation of one of his novels into English.

The other story concerns Bessie Head. In those days writers gave individual presentations in the lounge of the Mayflower, whereas nowadays we have panels and mini-conference instead. One day there was a presentation by the Palestinian

poet Abdul-Latif Akel. His subject was “Palestinian Poetry of Resistance.” In the audience was Gideon Telpaz of Israel, a writer who had come to the IWP a little late, from Madison, Wisconsin, and who was therefore attending his first presentation. After the speaker had finished, it was question time. Of course everyone looked to Telpaz to speak first. “I am deeply offended by your presentation,” said Telpaz to Akel. A long, emotional exchange followed, the Middle Eastern drama enacted before our eyes. “But of all people, you, my dear enemy, should understand what we feel!” said Akel.

“But you don’t know how Jews have suffered!” protested Telpaz. At that point Bessie Head called out to Akel, “Aren’t you going to let the rest of us speak, Abdul-Latif?” “Yes, by all means, speak,” he said. “Why don’t you get together in Israel and elect someone who will solve all your problems,” asked Head. “Who has the power in Israel?” “Not me,” replied Akel, gesturing to Telpaz, “him.” Telpaz was sitting close to Head. She turned to him and growled, “In South Africa we are waiting for the day we can catch the white people on the streets, strip them, and eat them piece by piece!” After the presentation had hastily ended, Head could be seen walking round Telpaz saying ominous things like a Hollywood Indian circling the captive cowboy. Later I found an East European writer saying laughingly to Telpaz, “These women, when they eat you, do you know what part they eat first?”

Ah, Bessie Head, whose work I teach in my class, whose MARA my students and I love; Bessie Head, who tragically died of hepatitis in Botswana in April 1986. She could suddenly turn against people and attack them. She quarreled with me and we did not speak again. I believe that like the protagonist in her third novel, *A QUESTION OF POWER* (1973), when she was shut in her room -- rooms play a great part in her fiction -- her imagination conjured up people and she heard them say things which in real life they did not utter. In the novel the protagonist makes this mistake, but the *novelist* makes us see that she is confusing the imagined character with the real person. It seems, however, that unlike my experience with my second novel, Head was able to deal with is problem in fiction but not to exorcise it. She could not have eaten anybody, however, much less torn someone limb from limb. MARU is, as she intended, a magical story about an ugly subject: racism. While she was in the IWP, I believe, Head completed the writing of *SEROWE: VILLAGE OF THE RAIN-WIND* (1981) and did research for *A BEWITCHED CROSS-ROAD* (1984). After few months before her untimely death, she wrote a sad\cheerful letter to the Engles, and they sent her some money to keep her going (she used to support herself in Botswana by growing vegetables).

Yes, a great deal of literature has been created in the Mayflower, thanks to the International Writing Program. A few years ago I received a letter from a Hungarian member of the program who said that more literature was created about the Mayflower worldwide than about any other historical monument in the world. When I mention this to the residents of the building -- affectionately known these days as the “Boat” -- they look at me in disbelief. Still, there is a Mayflower movement in literature. Just read through issues of *World Literature Today* over the

past decade and look at reviews of works by such writers as Jose Agustin (Mexico), Agnes Gergely (Hungary), Bjorg Vik (Norway), and Helga Novak (Germany).

In 1977 Paul Engle retired as director of the IWP and assumed the position of consultant, with Hualing Nieh Engle becoming program director. They asked my wife and me to join the IWP as assistant and adviser respectively. Over the decade since, we have shared the joys and solved the problems -- some of them, at least -- of writers from all over the world. They carried the problems, if Bessie will forgive me, in their head. International conflicts came with the territory, and my wife knew which writers from which countries could not be made to share apartments. We dealt with suicidal calls at lunchtime or at two in the morning, with people who were split personalities and could not control the change from one facet to the other, with people who were immobilized at the sheer array of choices to be made at the supermarkets and who had to be dissuaded from buying everything right away, with ego-maniacs and introverts and musicians and alcoholics and people who required emergency dental treatment and those who wanted practical advice on their translations and writing and those who wanted to drink our best wine and eat some hot Asian food or listen to my rock "n" roll or jazz or blues records. There were loves and hates, but a bond always developed between the writers such that even those who started out wary of one another for political or historical reasons (Argentina and Spain, for example) became friends. During Telpaz's time the Egyptian writer Fouad Badawi and Telpaz talked idealistically about the day when there could be peach between their countries -- and then came the Sadat visit while they were still program members.

There are memories of presentations, of Geraldo Hurtado from Costa Rica, who insisted on reading his own presentation in English. The only phrase the audience understood out of his incomprehensible rhythm was, "It is dangerous to be a writer." At the end Hualing, the moderator, cracked a joke so that the audience could release its hysteria.

There was Sam Selvon, perhaps having had one drop of beer too many -- in those days we permitted drinking during presentations -- pacing the floor like a tiger, criticizing America, saying that when he wanted to find out about out about American. "I don't read the *New York Times*, I go to the real thing -- the *National Enquirer*." As he continued, fellow Trinidadian Earl Lovelace tried to bring him back on track by throwing down his ace: "Sam, you're beginning to sound like V.S.!"

And there was Pieter Dirk-Uys, the first white South African writer in the program, putting on an Afrikaner hat and doing a takeoff on Afrikaners: "The liberal housewife said her servant, 'You know, I've always treated you well, haven't I? You know me. When the revolution comes, you won't kill me. When the revolution comes, you won't kill me, will you?' 'No, madam, I won't. I'll cross the road and kill the madam there since I don't know her. Her servant will come over and kill you.' "

I was born in Uganda of Goan parents under British rule. In East Africa, Goans were not considered to be Indian. My mother, though Goan, was born in Malaysia.

So I was a Goan who had an Indian and a Malaysian and an African and a British and a Portuguese connection -- a Goan who had grown up on American country 'n' western music. The whole world was therefore in me. Some years ago I began a series of long interviews with Third World writers after I had got to know them well enough to make the interviews meaningful, writers who in some way were central their country or their people at a certain time. The completed, published interviews were with Hualing Nieh (she is a Chinese novelist, let us not forget), Edwin Thumboo (Singapore), Adil Jussawalla (India), Sam Selvon (Trinidad), Sahar Khalifeh (Palestine), Tom McCarthy (Ireland), Ishmael Reed (black American, a guest of the IWP). These interviews could not have been done anywhere else. I stayed in the heatland and the whole world came to me.

The Engles have supported my projects, which could not have been completed without such support. I was asked to edit a double issue of *Pacific Quarterly Moana* on African literature. The issue came out in 1981. Much of the material came from writers who had been in the IWP. To give the issue boost, the Engles purchased a hundred copies in advance. Even more important was the support they gave my Goan project, permitting the IWP staff to type the entire manuscript, letting me use the office copier and -- during the time I was not working for the program -- the IWP letterhead in sending out my appeals worldwide, and then purchasing a number of copies.

The International Writing Program now celebrates twenty years of existence and creativeness (1987). It has received vital support from many sources: the United States Information Agency, the University of Iowa, corporations, private individuals, and above all, the team of Paul and Hualing Nieh Engle. My wife and I are glad to be part of this flowering.

University of Iowa, 1987

THE TRIP TO EAST EUROPE (Autumn, 1988)

Paul Engle

Hualing and I stopped off in Paris, where the Maison de la Poesie, a part of the big arts complex on the right bank of the Seine in central Paris, had invited me to read. His poems were read in French translation by a professional actor (called a “comedien,” which means actor and not a standup comic). His poems sounded much better in French than in the original Midwest English. He was followed by Rita Dove, a fine black poet who had been in the University of Iowa Poetry Workshop and had married an IWP fiction writer from West Germany. The last to read was an American poet who, of course, was leaving shortly for Iowa. It was an All-American evening and an All-Iowa evening, typical of the astonishing outreach of the Writers Workshop and the International Writing Program. We also took our Paris alumni to dinner. We celebrated my eightieth birthday October 12 (you may have thought the flags were for Columbus Day on October 12, but they are really for Paul Engle’s birthday). Naturally, our guests were from Romania – Nicolae Breban and his beautiful wife. We ate in an old restaurant full of mirrors and black wood on the Boulevard St. Germain up from Notre Dame called “La Wagenende” because it had been endless years ago the place where wagons from north countries had ended their trips with goods to sell. Breban was chosen by the literary editors of the famous newspaper *Le Monde* as one of the best writers in any language of the last fifty years. Also among them was Fernando Del Paso, a fiction writer of Mexico, who participated in the International Writing Program, with his wife Socorro and three children 1969-71. Fernando worked for American corporations, for the British Broadcasting Corporation in London, and is the incumbent Cultural Attache of his country in France.

We drove with Breban from Paris to Avignon, where we found that at the medieval Palace of the Popes there were erotic graffiti sprayed on the wall and “The Last Temptation of Christ” was playing at a movie theatre within a few yards. Papal opinion? We then drove to Munich and stayed overnight, the next day crossing Austria to Ljubljana and Zagreb (overnight with dinner for Alumni). Next day to Belgrade for a weeklong International Meeting of writers from much of the world. Twelve former IWP members took part. The subject was EXILE AND LITERATURE, perfect for Hualing’s talk since she was three times exiled, first within China during the Civil War, then to Taiwan after Communist “Liberation” and then to the USA (which she cherishes and regards as home). After a morning of older almost male writers with stuffy business suits and stuffy voice, Hualing walked across the long stage, wearing a jade-green Chinese silk cloak with that great collar. The audience was so startled and so grateful to have some color and beauty to the program, it applauded before she spoke. She lectured in English; there was a Serbo-Croatian

translation. I spoke, using exiles such as T. S. Eliot, Henry James, Edith Wharton, Richard Wright, James Joyce, pointing out that, unlike writers from many countries today, they were all self-exiled. I also read my poems in English with an actor following with Serbo-Croatian versions. Again, they sounded more dramatic in Slavic language. Hualing also took part in an amazing event. From a television studio she was connected by satellite with the exiled Soviet novelist Vassily Aksyonov in Washington. We heard both writers as they spoke in turn with images on a screen. His exile was involuntary, hers was voluntary. He had protested literary censorship in the Soviet. Hualing had been literary editor of the most prominent magazine in Taiwan. It called democracy, was then banned, the publisher Lei Chen sentenced to ten years in prison; Hualing's house was torn up by secret police. The two writers had so much in common it had an excruciating aspect of the twentieth century. We gave a dinner for our IWP alumni and had a moving reunion. Serbia has good wine.

We were driven out to the mountains to a field where the Nazis executed several thousand people, many school children with their teachers. An annual memorial ceremony is held with singers and a bad using poems set to music. I wrote the attached poem on the very moving occasion. It has been published in Serbo-Croatian and is being set to much to be sung at the next ceremony

Hualing and I went by train to Budapest to see the landscape and were happy to see cornfields alternating with vineyards. We were met at the railroad station by Jorgy Somlyo, IWP alumnus (1981). As a young man he had been at that station in a crowd of Jews waiting transport to Auschwitz when the famous Swedish diplomat who saved thousands came through and gave him a Swedish passport, which saved his life. He said, I'm not Christian, but when I silently thank Jesus Christ. We gave dinner for fifteen IWP alumni at an old restaurant with new prices on the Danube. Some from the first years looked much older, but all were as pleased to see us as we were to see them. News of marriages, divorces, children, books, arrests, the usual talk of writers.

Train to Vienna and the Schoenbrunn Palace where Hualing was enchanted to find there were three Chinese-decorated rooms, so much color in that gray Hapsburg building. We also saw the little house in the Vienna Woods where Beethoven wrote much of his sixth symphony. Next to Mayerling deeper in the woods where the Archduke Ferdinand and his girl-friend committed either a double suicide or a murder-suicide. His father the Emperor was so outraged he had the building torn down. We also went down in a deep, huge old gypsum cave where the Nazis built their first jet planes, far out of sight. In Vienna we could not find the house on Kinderspitalgasse (Lane of Children's Hospital). I was there before the Nazis came; on the day the Austrian leader was shot the Heimwehr camped in the street under his window -- all night the stamping of boots, the stacking of rifles, the fat smell of soup in vats. Hualing's first trip to Vienna. She loved it.

Train to Prague, where Pavel Šrut (1987 IWP) met us at the station. Secret police all around. He had been exiled to a remote village for "independent views" and had only just been allowed to come back. A fine poet, a wonderful man, he was with us every day, indispensable. The atmosphere is oppressive, the government

still laments the loss of Stalin and waits for a Second Coming. We were to meet the distinguished playwright Václav Havel, who was to come to IWP in 1968 but the Russian tanks moved in to crush the “Prague Spring” and he was sentenced to prison, then to rolling barrels in a brewery. On the day the Russians came a student went to Wenceslaus Square, poured gasoline on his clothes and burned to death. On the Anniversary of the event writers and students led by Havel went to the Square to lay a single rose on the spot. They were attacked by police dogs, knocked down and clubbed, then arrested. Havel was sentenced to five years in prison, his second term. His plays are marvelously satirical of the bureaucracy which, as is true in all socialist systems, can't take a joke. So many IWP writers have been in prison and/or concentration camps. They are tough. They survive. One evening I read my poems, with Czech translations and a softbound book was published in both languages. Again, the poems sounded better in a Slavic language with its great richness of vowels. Havel's brother came to my reading to represent him while he was in prison.

Everywhere we found our alumni loyal, touched to see us from Iowa, yearning to come back. Such warm receptions. Such reminiscences of IWP and Iowa City. So many embraces. So many tears.
