

The Denizen

for Hal

Denizen: an alien admitted by favor to all or a part of the rights of citizenship;...one that remains in a place temporarily or for a period of time.

--Webster's Third International Dictionary

Some years ago, I wrote an essay called "On Not Being a Citizen". This was when I was still a widower, and living on Long Island - before I met my second wife, Julie, and moved to Seattle. When I went for walks in my Long Island neighborhood, I would see my neighbors out and about on their property, performing various property-related tasks: mowing the lawn, raking leaves, planting and weeding and pruning, putting down new tar on the driveway and, in the winter, snowblowing and shoveling. All this activity made me acutely aware that although I too was a homeowner, I did none of these things. I was a delinquent - not (in my own locution) a "citizen"; at least not in the way my neighbors apparently were. I was irresponsible in the matter of keeping up my property. I would rather be reading, writing, drinking tea, and going on walks, watching other people tend to their homes and do the physical things I had no interest in doing, and saw little value in. The things I saw value in were of the mind, and the heart - the lonely heart; and home, for me, was not where the heart was. My heart was with the dead; and I needed tea, and walks, and books, and writing, in order to

be able to contemplate about this state of affairs. (I know the verb should be just "contemplate", not "contemplate about", but once again, I prefer my own locution, because it suggests something more... well, abstractified; and abstractification seemed of the essence at that time in my life, when I wondered if I would always be a widower, and live the rest of my life alone.) My son Zack had gone off to college, then to Italy on a Fulbright, then on to law school, and so I had pretty much adapted to life alone. Indeed, there was something about my loneliness that, as La Rochefoucauld says, "did not displease me". I could contemplate about things to my lonely heart's content; and one of the things I liked to contemplate about was my aloneness, and how it led me to see the world around me - my little world - differently. Clouds, and trees, and horizons, and the night sky, with its small planes and their blinking lights wending their way across the wide, dark expanse - these all took on a particular importance to the solitary eye, and what Wordsworth calls "the philosophic mind":

Though nothing can bring back the hour
 Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower;
 We will grieve not, rather find
 Strength in what remains behind;
 In the primal sympathy
 Which having been must ever be;
 In the soothing thoughts that spring
 Out of human suffering;
 In the faith that looks through death,
 In years that bring the philosophic mind.

It was a time when things were reduced to their essence, and the basic elements of nature became companionable to me, who had lost his life's companion.

I suppose there was a certain amount of self-pity in all of this; but that "did not displease me", either. (It probably should have, but it didn't.) I became an object of compassion to myself, which did not seem the worst thing in the world. A moderate self-pity that you were conscious of, that you could contemplate about, was surely better than the unexamined version, was it not? Woody Allen once defined masturbation as "making love with someone I love very, very much". Along the same lines, it seemed to me that an examined self-pity was like having compassion for someone who was in need of it -- very, very much in need of it. To believe otherwise - that we should somehow be above feeling this kind of sympathy for ourselves, perhaps out of a sense of decorum, or some kind of stoicism -- appeared almost a form of arrogance. (Not that I was above arrogance. On these walks I was aware of a certain feeling of superiority over my neighbors. They may have been improving their properties, but I was improving my mind, and there was no question about which was more important.)

Actually, that's not quite true. There was some question. In neglecting my property I knew I was being impractical, and somewhat irrational, and irresponsible -- even, as I mentioned

before, delinquent. Though I saw it as a venial delinquency, committed for the sake of a greater good. My neighbors might not see it that way - but so what? What knew they of the Nietzschean "Free Spirit"? They were tethered to material things, tied to the earth; for better and for worse, I was a creature of air. A luftmensch. Floating a few inches above the ground, head in the clouds, contemplating about - what, exactly? Whatever it is one contemplates about when looking at clouds. Hope, for one thing. Hope was something I set a lot of store by in those days; I didn't have much else.

But that's not quite true either. I had a son. I had a job I liked, teaching at a four-year private college on Long Island (since gone bankrupt; but that's another story). I had a house - a rather handsome, two-story, pre-war Tudor house (neglected though it was). I had good friends. I still had my mind, for what it was worth. And I had - not the least of things - my writing. My writing was my best companion, now that Diane was no longer with me; in fact, it was because Diane was no longer with me that I had my writing. I was writing a book about life without her.

The book was titled The Widower: An Afterlife, and "On Not Being a Citizen" became a chapter in that book. I was describing -- or trying to describe -- my sense of what being a "citizen" entailed (which was pretty much what I wasn't): an upstanding

member of the homeowners community, practical and conscientious regarding their realty, who responsibly discharged all the tasks and duties pertaining thereunto. As I saw it, my neighbors' membership in this community necessarily entailed my exclusion from it. And I took a certain pride in that exclusion. I lived in the neighborhood, but I was not of it. Some of my neighbors recognized me by sight, and we would exchange pleasantries; but I couldn't help feeling that if they really knew my habits - if they knew what a truly inadequate property-owner I was - they would see that I could not be admitted into their company. I didn't have the requisite skills. Nor did I want them. I had other fish to fry. My kettle was a "contemplational" one.

Another neologism, I know; but "contemplative" would not quite get at exactly what I mean, which is more along the lines of process than product. "Relating to contemplation" or "conducive to contemplation" would be more like it. Thus I like to indulge myself in "contemplational geography" (the state of mind you enter into when perusing a map or atlas from the comfort of your easy-chair); "contemplational astronomy" (doing the same with a guide to the heavens, or a book of photographs from the Hubble); "contemplational oceanography", etc. "Contemplational Studies", I call them. This field of study is not the province of scientists, but of poets -- or freewheeling essayists. (Let us not forget the root meaning of "essay", which

is "attempt". The attempt doesn't even have to be entirely successful; it's the effort that counts.)

About once a month I would take a break from my regular walks through the neighborhood and go walking in the city. One of the things I liked best about living on Long Island - besides the trees, and the clouds, and the big sky, and the beaches, and the small planes flying at night -- was its proximity to New York City. The proximity, and the distance. I had the city whenever I wanted it, but it wasn't in my face. I didn't have to deal with it day in, day out, as I had in my early and mid 20s, when I lived there for four years, and when dealing with it was an adventure, not a burden. The only disadvantage of the setup now was that I couldn't consider myself a true New Yorker (despite having been born there). I was a Long Islander, a suburbanite. But that was also an advantage, because I wasn't, in Tama Janowitz's wonderfully apt phrase, a "slave of New York", either. The city didn't command my tastes or sensibility or consciousness, as is the case with so many proud New Yorkers. (And as it had been with me, when I lived there.) I don't deny that New Yorkers have every reason to be proud; New York is still -- notwithstanding the plague, and the temporary exodus it has produced -- the greatest city in the world. And as with Los Angeles (where I grew up), I will always defend it against its detractors. But I don't really feel of either city. Indeed, I

don't feel of anyplace. I am a citizen of nowhere. Maybe that's one of the things it means to be a denizen.

So I had New York when I wanted it. I would go in on the train - usually direct from Huntington to Penn Station, though sometimes there was a change at Jamaica, or Hicksville. Arriving at Penn Station meant a change of worlds. An immediate step up in pace and energy. The press of humanity by the tracks, and then in the concourse, and then again - even more - as I came up the stairs onto 34th Street or Seventh Avenue. The sense of greater urgency and purpose in your walk (and I almost always walked), no matter where you were going. I was usually going to see friends on the Upper West or East Side; but sometimes, on Friday or Saturday evenings, when it was open til nine, I would go to the Met. I liked the museum best at that time, when I felt my loneliness most acutely; and this too was a feeling that "did not displease me". For the museum at night was supremely a place for contemplation - or rather, "contemplationalizing". I was alone, I knew I was alone, and I felt my aloneness as a kind of "surround". This "surround of loneliness", which was most palpable in the museum at night (and was not the least of my pleasures), formed an important part of my life as a widower. And if I did not exactly embrace that life, I at least allowed myself to experience it in all of its - what, exactly? Starkness? Bareness? Its stripped-downness to a more essential

state of being? At the museum, I was an observer not only of the artworks themselves, but also of myself observing the artworks (and feeling a little sorry for myself in my aloneness), and then feeding that feeling of loneliness with more loneliness - the more "elevated" loneliness that came from an underlying consciousness of loneliness.

I admit that during this time I was kind of milking the feeling of being alone, though exactly for what purpose, other than the dubious pleasures of self-pity, wasn't completely clear. Except that not long after Diane's death, in June of 2004, I had read an interview in Sun Magazine with the Buddhist nun Pema Chödrön (love the double umlauts!) - formerly Deirdre Blomfield-Brown, of the Upper West Side - in which she said she counseled people to "turn towards the pain". This idea deeply appealed to me - and not just for masochistic reasons. It seemed honest and truthful and real. And there was that in me that craved those things, and always had. Growing up privileged in Southern California in the 50s and 60s - a place where honesty and truthfulness and reality were so often passed over in pursuit of images of happiness - I was aware, from a rather early age, of a lack of substance in my coddled life and surroundings. A "surround of emptiness", you might say. I felt in need of reality - that is, of a different kind of reality than what was all around me; the kind of reality that I

associated (wrongly or not, though perhaps understandably) with suffering.

But if I felt myself in this (the feelings of emptiness, unease and lack of substance) to be a denizen rather than a citizen, in another sense I was - and still am -- a rather bogus denizen. In a Zoom panel on "Denizen Futurities" at the virtual convention of the Modern Language Association this past January, I learned about the experiences of genuine denizens - historical denizens: Jews in Nazi-occupied Europe; Syrian war refugees living in camps in Turkey; refugees from the various wars in East Africa; the homeless of New Delhi, living in abandoned zoo cages. I can see how my own "cultural appropriation" of that term - if that is what it is, or some version of it -- might be thought a travesty. To be a denizen in the sense in which the members of that MLA panel understand it is to live in a state of constant precarity - violence, homelessness, hunger, fear and uncertainty. What know I, really, of any of these forms of suffering? But maybe that's just the point. My feeling of bogusness, of inauthenticity, is part of my own experience of "denizenry": the floating man, the hollow man, the luftmensch, the alien among the "citizenry" of the neighborhood. Not to mention the fact that I am, after all -- in the traditional sense -- a citizen of the United States, and as such among the blessed of the earth.

"Blessed denizens", in fact, was a term I once used to describe another highly privileged group - Harvard undergraduates, among whom I once had hopes of counting myself. But that didn't happen. I didn't get in to Harvard - twice - and for a long time afterwards would get the willies whenever I even heard or saw the word. It became an emblem of my failure to cut the mustard, and a painful reminder of the vain hopes I had once entertained. It wasn't until I got my first full-time teaching job - at Holy Cross, in Worcester, MA - and Diane and I, sometimes with Zack in tow, would go into Cambridge for the evening, that I finally began to get some perspective on my Harvard-related feelings. One winter evening at dusk, we were walking through Harvard Yard (the inner sanctum!). The lights were on in the brick-clad dorms, creating a pretty effect against the evening sky. "Ah, the rooms of the Blessed Denizens", I remarked to Diane, who well knew my feelings in that regard. I called them "denizens" then, but I now see they were more like citizens - students enrolled in Harvard College (perhaps the most exclusive academic club in the world, except for maybe Oxbridge, and the École Normale Supérieure), and enjoying all the rights and privileges pertaining thereunto. I was the denizen. But no, not even that. I was the alien, an interloper on the sacred precincts. And yet there was also a certain curious pride in the recognition of my outsider status.

(Not unlike the pride I was to take, years later, in my sense of exclusion from the "citizenship" of the homeowners in my Long Island neighborhood.) I saw that this status had become a defining part of me, in a good way. Maybe I wasn't such a failure after all. I was now teaching at a good college nearby; I had, in my way, made good. Maybe Harvard, and my sense of failure regarding it, wasn't the be-all and end-all of my self-regard, as I had thought for so many years.

But the idea of denizenry, as I now understand it - not only a state of temporary or extended residence in a place or country, but also a condition of alienation from it, a feeling of being present only through the sufferance of the authorities - goes back before my particular experiences with Harvard, to the place where I got the idea of even applying to Harvard: Exeter. (Yes, reader, I'm afraid it's privilege all the way down.) I first saw the buildings of Exeter when I was 15, arriving fresh from LA for the beginning of tenth grade (called "Lower Year", in Exeter parlance); though during my three years at the school, neither the term "denizenry" nor any of the ideas behind it had yet occurred to me. But I think my experience there paved the way for many of these ideas. The Federalist architecture of the place, so much in the style of Harvard, with its brick cladding, and its gray roofing tiles, and its dormer windows, their frames painted white, was the material foundation

of what much later became my idea of denizenry; and my being an outsider to the social and cultural world of Exeter, and New England in general, was the existential foundation. There were terrible moments of homesickness that first year - especially my first night back in the dorm after Christmas vacation, lying in bed in my little room on the "flight deck" (top floor) of Wheelwright Hall, with the steam heat banging in the radiator, and the freezing wind whipping around my single dormer window. I was flunking math, and was sure I'd be expelled, or at least advised not to return, at the end of the academic year (if not before). Maybe I'd even have to leave at the end of my first semester. Soon after that night, I came down with the flu, and spent a few days in the infirmary. I remember waking up just before dawn one morning, and looking with achy, feverish eyes out the window at a corner of the Academy Building, dim in the weird bluish light, with snow on the ground, and feeling, with the suspended disorientation of fever, that I was on another planet. Planet Exeter. What a strange place to be. How had I gotten here? And how could I possibly be allowed to stay? The whole concatenation of events was hard to understand. I think that was my first brush with the feeling of denizenry - privileged version, of course, though I didn't know that either at the time. All I knew was that I felt like an alien, out of place in this strange new land of brick, blue light, and snow.

And strange, also, how I look back on it now with feelings so different - fond and even nostalgic feelings for the place, and all it came to mean to me; though I can still feel also what I felt at the time. (Again, that contemplational overlay of consciousness.)

Some years later, after college (I ended up going to Berkeley - probably the best thing that could have happened to me, in terms of my larger education in the world: huge public university, democratic and anti-elitist, one of the great proud foils to the Ivy League), I became a denizen of New York for four years. As I mentioned earlier, though I was born there, I never felt I could rightly call myself a native New Yorker. (If I did refer to myself that way a few times - wanting to be part of the gang -- the designation always felt spurious.) New York was too new and exciting for me ever to take it for granted, in the way I imagined true natives must do. I was never, for one moment of my time there in my mid-20s, not aware that I was "in New York" - that this was a new experience for me, and that it must somehow be having a definitive effect. What I was feeling, I think, was a self-conscious appreciation of the "New York Surround", which was very strong in those years.

That all changed, though, when almost 20 years later I became a denizen of Long Island. I had begun to teach at a college there. At first, we would go into the city often,

because Diane's mother and brother both lived there - Mimi at 77th Street, right across from Lenox Hill Hospital, and Robbie in Brooklyn Heights. I remember once saying, when we were visiting Mimi and she had a friend over, something like "Well, now that we live in New York..." and her friend correcting me. "No you don't," she said, with a smile that had a little edge to it; "you live on Long Island." I felt chastened, but took her point: the city was its own world, and never to be confused with the suburbs; and I was now a suburbanite.

Mimi died the following year, and six years later, Diane herself was dead of breast cancer, at 54, and the city lost most of its charm for me. But Zack and I would sometimes go in to see Robbie. At the time, Zack was still very taken with his uncle, who was a close link to his mother. Robbie was also a character - though one not so much to my taste. (He was an addict - pain-killers and cocaine -- and ended up dying of a heart attack in his sleep, at 66.) So I usually preferred to go in by myself - to see friends, or go to the Met, and sometimes to the Natural History Museum. I loved the dioramas there, and liked to imagine myself somehow inhabiting their evocative environments, not unlike the 3D worlds of the stereoscopic Viewfinder I used to wonder at as a child. It was around this time that the city began to seem truly spooky and haunted - full of memories of Diane, and reminders of my aloneness without her. That was when

the "surround of loneliness" really kicked in. I remember one Sunday in particular, when I went in to see Christo's "Gates" installation in Central Park. This must have been in the early spring of 2005. The trees were all still bare, and it was a cold, gray day. By total coincidence, I ran into my friend Hal, from Boston; he was down to see the Gates, with his wife Carol and a friend of hers. I was aware of the friend subtly assessing me, and wondered if I should be assessing her as well. Friend of Carol's, apparently single, possibly interested... But I didn't have it in me to even talk to her. Hal wanted to take a picture, so I posed by a lone Gate, remarking that it was sort of like me. The ride home on the train that night felt especially lonely and strange.

But the "surround of loneliness", à la Rochefoucauld, was not always displeasing, and sometimes almost comforting, as sad and contemplational things can be. One evening, after visiting friends on the Upper East Side, I decided to walk all the way back to Penn Station - about an hour's walk from E. 95th St. (I'd had more than a little to drink, and felt no pressure to catch the train.) Besides, it was snowing lightly, and I love the snow, which has never ceased to be a novelty for me. I felt it would be an aid to my contemplationalizations that evening. I was bundled in warm clothes - a good vantage point, I felt, from which to be in "observer mode". The lit-up windows of the city

buildings shone through the falling snow, and seemed to me the muniments of a great culture - a culture that knew winter (unlike where I came from), and could offer it up as a buttress for the serious mind. There could be no serious mind without a serious winter - or so it seemed to me at the time (and still does - one of the legacies of Exeter, I guess). Wallace Stevens is definitive here:

To discover winter and know it well, to find,
Not to impose, not to have reasoned at all,
Out of nothing to have come on major weather,

It is possible, possible, possible. It must
Be possible...

Such thoughts in the snow cheered me as I wended my solitary way across the great city to Penn Station. I imagined the "blessed denizens" of those New York buildings dwelling snug in their cozy, lit-up abodes, and it pleased me to think of them so.

There is a difference between being in "observer mode" from a position of fellow-feeling - or at least of a more well-disposed, contemplational reflectiveness - and one of exclusion and envy. My pre-dawn vision of Exeter from the infirmary window, and even the tableau of the lit-up dorm windows in Harvard Yard, seen against the backdrop of the evening sky, were experienced from a vantage-point of (relative) exclusion - of feeling like an alien in that Exeter moment, or of remembering, walking across Harvard Yard, my earlier feelings of exclusion

from the "blessed precincts" of Harvard College, and envying the denizens, many years after the fact of my own rejection from their company, for their rights and privileges thereunto. But that long, snowy and somewhat drunken nighttime walk across New York City had a different cast of mind. I felt I was being fed by the scene, rather than burdened, or subject to a background - a "surround" - of anxiety and dismay. The denizens of New York on this winter evening were pictured as my contemplational companions. The snowy scene enfolded us all. No, I was not a citizen of New York - just as I was not a citizen of my neighborhood back on Long Island. But this was not a problem for me. And not only was it not a problem, but my lack of citizenship, so to speak, even seemed to confer upon me a favored status. Walking through my Long Island neighborhood, I had felt a sense of superiority deriving from my non-citizenship, though I also knew this feeling was a hollow one - just the face that I put on my sense of "homeowner's delinquency". But this vision of New York City was different. It was not compensatory. It was not in bad faith. It was inclusive. (Or so it felt to me at the time; but my vision was only partial.) I was "regarding" and "beholding" the blessed denizens of New York safe and secure in their apartments in somewhat the same way that Stevens employs those terms in his poem "The Snow Man":

One must have a mind of winter
 To regard the frost and the boughs
 Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;

And have been cold a long time
 To behold the junipers shagged with ice,
 The spruces rough in the distant glitter

Of the January sun...

The speaker of the poem is at one with the scene he beholds and regards. He accepts the frozen world before him through the gift of a "mind of winter", which allows him not to remove himself from the harshness of the world he is a part of, and also keeps him from sentimentalizing it:

...and not to think
 Of any misery in the sound of the wind,
 In the sound of a few leaves..

The speaker's stance is one of a highly-qualified and diffident empathy - "regard" - for the scene he observes. But perhaps "empathy" is not quite the right word, since it implies too much emotional content for the more muted register that is being conveyed here. The scene is practically stripped of all emotion; yet the speaker's attitude is not quite stoical, either. He is not steeling himself against the onslaught of winter; rather, he is giving in to it. One thinks of Pema Chödrön again - but with the difference that there is no pain here to turn towards. Both the scene and the listener have been cleansed of pain - and indeed of any familiar emotion. There is a kind of ascetic

emptying out of emotion - but in a receptive rather than resistant way. And this emptying out of emotion has made room for the possibility of a kind of habitation - the listener's, and the reader's - within the poem, not unlike my feelings regarding the more fortunate denizens of New York, or my wish to dwell inside the scenes of the dioramas at the Natural History Museum, or the 3-D scenes inside my Viewfinder. This kind of viewing has somewhat the same appeal as travel, but without any of its hassles and dislocations. And when I do travel, I always like to imagine myself as a denizen of the places I visit - certainly not a tourist, but not a citizen, either. A resident alien. Yes, a denizen.

When you write, you create a certain locale to inhabit. My friend Hal - he of "Gates" fame -- calls these structures "huts", though by this term he means something a little different from what I am thinking of here. For Hal, "huts" are preliminary bits of writing that form the germ and basis and beginnings of writing ideas, which you can then go on to develop more fully. For me, huts are the writing itself - the place of refuge "of a cold winter's night" (to employ the antique literary diction that seems called for here). I feel at home in my writing in the same way I imagine a citizen feels at home on their property. It is the only place I really do feel at home - in my writing, and in memories of the past that my writing comes

from, and evokes. It makes me feel sad, and also a little delinquent, to admit this, but also a little proud, too - in the same way I was proud to be in merely "observer mode" during my walks past the citizens in the neighborhood. It is the pride of denizenship, of not quite belonging. The pride of a more elusive, contemplational fellowship.