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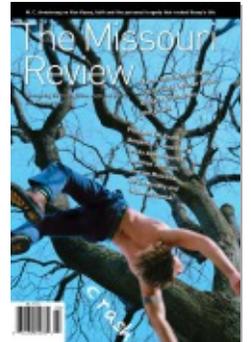
Home Is Where the Heart Aches

Levy, E. J. (Ellen J.)

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E.J. LEVY

Homeiswhere

do not know the woman who is taking me home tonight. We have only just met, two hours ago at Tracy's Bar, a two-room beer joint on Franklin Avenue in the Seward neighborhood of southeast Minneapolis. It's a poor, young, political part of town. Up the street, a few blocks west of here, are the Indian Cultural Center, the Minnesota Housing Union, small storefront offices with small staffs working for tenants' rights, legal services for the poor, AIDS counseling, shelters. This is the part of town where people off the rez, people on the dole, people who are brown or newly immigrated or just plain poor live. This, for those people, is home. I am just passing through.

theheartaches

Kristine, the woman who is driving, is a regular at the Tuesday-night gatherings at the bar, which I visited for the first time tonight. The gathering is called a *tertulia* and is modeled on literary gatherings in cafés of the 1920s and '30s in Spain and Latin America. It is intended to be a place where writers can meet and talk about books and ideas. When I arrived, however, the topic under discussion was how to fight with your girlfriend. Later on someone will tell me about medieval Japanese poetry and its progression from the sacred to the profane, but even when literature is under discussion I will feel a heaviness in my chest, a pressure behind my eyes. I will spend the evening sipping a glass of Woodpecker hard cider and nodding and smiling vaguely at the things people say. I will feel lonesome. The whole thing will seem sad to me. This effort to pretend we are somewhere, someone, else. This, I will want to say, is our time and our place.

The streets we are driving through are all but empty. A deep shadowy blue. We pass churches, basketball nets behind high chain-link fences, two-story houses with narrow aluminum siding. We pass the sleeping city, the blue icy streets, the slushy curbs, here and there a streetlamp like an emergency flare.

I am telling Kristine about the trip I am about to take. In two days, if the winter storm that is coming doesn't shut down the Minneapolis–St. Paul airport, I will take a noon flight to New Mexico and from there get a shuttle north to the small town of Taos, where I am going to spend six weeks writing on a grant. She tells me she used to live in New Mexico when she was married. When they divorced, her husband moved to Taos. "I could never live in Taos," she says, as if this were something she had long considered. "I like to visit, but I could never live there.

"I don't *belong* there," she says. "I realized that I'll never belong. It's beautiful country, but I have no right to it. I have no right to that sun, that water, that land. It is not meant for me. God," she says, "gave me this place. I was born in Minnesota. It's not the most exciting place. It's not exotic. But I have a right to

I WONDER WHAT MAKES A PERSON BELONG TO A PLACE. AND WHY IT SEEMS SOME PEOPLE NEVER DO, NO MATTER HOW LONG THEY STAY.

breathe this air, to drink this water, to swim in these lakes.” Like me, she was born in Minnesota, has lived in other places for years and recently returned. Unlike me, she has found a place, her place, here.

Home for her is where you came into the world, a geographic destiny separate from longing or affinity. My notion of home is the opposite: home for me is the place I recognize by its absence, a place I believe exists because I sense that I am far from it, I am not there.

People place themselves through the work they do, the car they drive, the home they own, the people they love or come from. But I seem to have come untethered. Or maybe it is that I am always trying to loosen those ties, undo those knots, nervous about belonging.

Home is a versatile word, and an ambivalent one. The word home is not just a noun; it is an adjective, an adverb, a verb. Which is to say, it is not just a place. According to the *Webster’s Dictionary* on the table beside me it can mean “n. 3. a congenial environment . . . 4. a place of origin . . . 6. the objective in various games; adj. 1.b. in harmony with one’s surroundings, 2. on familiar ground: knowledgeable; adv. 2. to a final, closed, or standard position . . . 4. to a vital sensitive core.”

What stands out for me is its etymological root—home derives from the Greek word *koiman*, to put to sleep—the same root as cemetery.

I am from a long line of migratory people. My paternal grandparents came from Lithuania and Russia in the early twentieth century to escape pogroms and conscription and in search of that American cliché—opportunity. My mother’s ancestors came from England in 1620 on that first and famous boat and have been drifting slowly westward ever since, making their way from Vermont to Minnesota, the farthest-flung finally settling down in Anchorage, Alaska. I was raised in the geographic heart of the country, in Minnesota, but I’ve never felt at home here.

I wonder what makes a person belong to a place. And why it seems some people never do, no matter how long they stay. My friend Mei, whose father immigrated to the U.S. in the 1950s and who paid a bride price to bring Mei’s mother from mainland China, is more rooted in this country than I can ever hope to be.

In her bedroom, Mei keeps a white cloth spread on the floor, on which is

set a framed photograph of her mother as a young bride, a bowl of fresh fruit and a vase of flowers: tribute to her ancestors who are living just across the Triborough Bridge. The five boroughs are home to her, and she knows that though she will travel, she will never leave.

When I arrive in the Albuquerque airport the following day, there is no one there to greet me. I take escalators down two floors to the baggage claim and retrieve my backpack from a luggage carousel. The shuttle that will take me to Taos, where I have rented a studio, is not scheduled to arrive until three o'clock, so I haul my bags outside and sit on a wooden bench by the curb where buses arrive and depart. Though it is early January, the air is warm—fifty-five or sixty degrees—and the sky is aqua; big, gaudy clouds scud by in a springtime wind. I open a notebook on my lap and begin making plans.

It is a pleasure to sit in the shade alone. I feel familiar to myself in unfamiliar surroundings. There is an existential pleasure in being the only one who knows my name. It reminds me of a comment a friend once made on the subject of anonymous sex: "At least," he said, "you know who *you* are."

A shuttle driver, an affable Hispanic guy with a stocky body, potbelly and black beard, who is looking for customers, chats me up. He wears a purple baseball cap and a matching T-shirt with the image of two hearts pierced by an arrow, the logo of his van service, Two Hearts.

He asks me if I am a scientist. When I tell him I'm a writer, he becomes confiding. He tells me you see them all over Taos these days, geneticists in for conferences: "Really geeky, with pocket protectors." I say he must have recognized me by my outfit. He laughs awkwardly, evidently afraid that he's hurt my feelings. But I'm not offended. One of the great pleasures of traveling is going unrecognized into the world; you could be anyone. Your history is not so much behind you as still ahead.

I imagine this is part of what brought my family to this country—the hope of transformation promised by a change of place.

But it comes at a cost.

When I was growing up in the '70s, my family, like a lot of American families, went camping. We'd rent a pop-up trailer and a Coleman stove and head out to the Black Hills of South Dakota or to Lake Superior or to the sand dunes along Lake Michigan and camp. These trips had an element of ritual: as soon as we arrived, my father would enlist my brother to help him put up the camper while my mother unpacked the cooler on the picnic table for lunch.

Logic would have dictated that I help my dad with the camper since though I was female I was the stronger kid, and my brother was skinny and nearsighted and physically clumsy. But my dad was trying to instill in my brother both a sense of his proper sex role and the outdoor competence my father had lacked himself as a boy growing up in New York City.

What I remember most from these trips, though, is my father's exclamation whenever we toured historic sights: "Kids," he would say with feeling, as we pulled into the parking lot of the Grand Canyon, "*this is America.*" He said this when we stood before Mount Rushmore, batting gnats from in front of our eyes; he said it as we stood in the valley at Yosemite; he even said it at the Dairy Queen on Highway 55, a few blocks from our house, where we sat among all the other aspiring young families, seated at identical round plastic tables, licking soft-serve ice cream from papery waffle cones. "*This,*" he'd tell me earnestly, "*is America.*"

When I recalled this phrase recently, at a time when I was restlessly shuttling across the country every few years, I thought I finally understood what my father meant. Son of immigrants who gave up everything they knew for a country they never got to know, my father has been looking all his life for home. He was trying to understand what they'd given up everything they loved for.

In Taos, I spend my mornings writing and my afternoons looking for a car.

My decision to buy the car, like my decision to come down here, was a sudden one. I had intended to rent a car, but because it is ski season, the rates are high and the Thrifty Car manager at the Albuquerque airport has told me that the best deal she can offer on a six-week rental is \$132 per week, not including tax or insurance. I told her I'd think about it. What I think is that for \$800 I might as well *buy* a car.

At night I lie in bed and stare at the ponderosa vigas illuminated in the firelight from the wood stove and think about where I will go when I have my car. Even here, with the stars outside my window, I am thinking about getting somewhere else. I think about driving to Arizona. About driving into the mountains to hike, of driving to the hot springs in Las Vegas, to the snake dances at Acoma. Even here I think about where to go next, about leaving.

I wonder sometimes why it is that I cannot stay in one place. What is this restlessness? What is this fear of staying put? Of living in this place and not

another? Of giving up the possibility of everywhere to say, at last, with finality, with certainty, I am here.

I first saw New Mexico with Wendy, a woman I fell in love with the spring after I graduated from college. We lived together for seven years—first in Minnesota, then in New Mexico, then in Manhattan. Wendy and I were deeply happy in New Mexico. Nevertheless, during the two years we lived there together, I frequently told people that I was planning to move to New York City. I said this the way waitresses and clerks in coffee shops will sometimes tell me—as if they were confiding—that they are *really* actors or playwrights or novelists or musicians; they are telling me that they are not what they appear to be.

I hoped that my geographical declarations would convey that I was more than I seemed in my jean jacket with its powdering of fine red earth, that I was part of the Big World. I said this because I wanted it to be clear that I was not defined by this place, that I had things to do. That I was going places.

The owner of the Toyota Camry I am scheduled to see this morning is a ridiculously handsome man.

Last night, when I called about his ad in the local paper, we agreed to meet this morning at a garage in town, Bob's Auto, where I would pay to have the car checked out, and when I first see him *that* is what I think: Ridiculously Handsome. He is tall, broad-shouldered, with pure white hair. When we meet, we shake hands and his hand closes over mine like a mitt. He wears a Greek wool fisherman's cap that makes him look like a sea captain. His eyes are a very pale blue, with navy lines radiating out from the pupils like spokes of a wheel. He has square white teeth. His face is tanned and glows with the aggressive good health and the boastful radiance one often sees in the faces of transplanted Anglos here; they look like they have swallowed light bulbs.

The mechanic at Bob's Auto says it will take an hour. So I offer to buy the Sea Captain a cup of coffee. We walk along the highway to Toby's, a lo-

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IN ONE PLACE. WHAT IS THIS RESTLESSNESS?

cal diner with Hispanic waitresses and a local clientele; they serve biscuits and gravy, breakfast burritos with green chili. In the restaurant we sit by the window. It is past lunch, and we are two of only six people in the place. Two of whom are waitresses. As we sip our coffee, he tells me about his work as a traveling medicine man. He spends half the year here, working construction, and half of the year on the road, selling smudge bundles, tonics, drums. He arrives in a town, rents a conference room and presents his wares. Sort of spiritual Amway.

"I make my own reality," he says. "I *created* this reality."

"In that case," I say, "could you maybe do something about the Republican Congress?"

"You won't forget me," he says without breaking a smile. "Just you wait and see." He says this like he has plans, and for a moment I feel out of my depth. Confused. Perhaps I have misjudged him. A train was mangled in Arizona a few months back, derailed by a loosened bolt, and it could easily have been a guy like this who did it.

"They control the weather, you know," he says, still on the subject of politicians. "They're trying to exhaust the people with all these storms, create confusion."

I turn to see if he is grinning, pulling my leg. But his handsome profile is serious, serene. His eyes are focused in the distance.

"What do you mean, 'they'?" I ask, resorting to a journalistic stance, trying to restore normalcy by interrogating the story, checking out the facts as if this were an ordinary sort of claim.

"Congress," he says, "politicians, the international bankers . . ."

"You mean, like, an international banking *conspiracy*? You mean, like, the *Jews*?"

"Of course," he says, "the Jews."

I ask him if the name Levy—*my* last name—means anything to him. I tell him I am a Jew and that the idea of an international banking conspiracy dates back to the protofascist forgery *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, circulated by (among others) Henry Ford but created earlier in the nineteenth century to galvanize anti-Semitic sentiment.

I tell him Jews have never controlled the wealth in the world or this country. That if they have been prominent in banking—the Venetian bankers who inspired Shakespeare's portrait of Shylock, say—it is because banking was, for a long time, one of the few professions in which Jews were allowed to work.

I am trying to sound authoritative. I am tossing out facts, making up facts,

talking as fast as I can, trying to come up with scraps of convincing information, I am lying, I am looking my fear in the face, and it is a handsome face. I say, finally, frankly, that in hard economic times such as our own, people often look for scapegoats and Jews have always been at the top of the list, so it is important that he understand that I am a Jew and that my grandfather was an ice man who lost his job in the Depression and that it is lies like his conspiracy theory that make it possible for people like him to do terrible things from ignorance and fear to people like me.

The ridiculously handsome man sort of shrugs with his face.

I am livid; I look away. I try to look at other people in the restaurant, but everything is blurring.

He places a heavy hand gently on my shoulder and says, "But you're a *nice Jew*."

I do not tell him what he is. Instead, I think nostalgically of the reasonable people in Minnesota, the informed intellectuals of Manhattan, places where there is no radio astrologer before the evening weather report. I think, *I am glad that I do not live here*; I do not have to claim this as my own.

As if, by not belonging, I might escape the consequences.

The car, it turns out, is a mess.

The mechanic asks to see me alone and leads me out to the car, opens the hood and begins to rattle off a list of very serious, very expensive problems. He begins by pointing out what I can see for myself now that the hood is up and it is broad daylight: the left headlight is held in place with a stick.

A stick.

The mechanic runs through a few thousand dollars' worth of repairs and tells me, "I wouldn't buy this car. I wouldn't let you *drive* this car on the road."

The Sea Captain offers to drive me home, but I decline. It's not just that I don't want to be in the vehicle when a part falls off. I do not want him to know where I live.

My aunt Marge, my father's sister, was sixteen the first time she saw a cross burning. It was in North Carolina, the summer of 1946, and she was at a summer camp for Young Judea; it was her first summer away from home. Her mother, my Grandma Levy, hadn't wanted

to let her go, but her father, Sol, insisted. Sol had come from Sod, Lithuania, to America at the age of fifteen, alone, without knowing a word of English, and now his daughter couldn't go to another state for a summer by herself? Nonsense, he said and put his foot down. She'd won a scholarship; how could they not let her go?

"Let the girl go, *cibola*," I imagine him saying as he chewed on his cigar in the dim sitting room of their East Side tenement flat. "Look at her, already she's almost a woman."

So my aunt Marge caught a train at Penn Station and rode to Union in Washington, DC. There she got off to change trains; she checked the postings to find the train to Carolina and hauled her luggage across the platform to the proper track and prepared to board when a conductor flashed a light in her face.

"Five cars up," he said.

"Is this the train to North Carolina?" she asked.

"It is, but you gotta go five cars up."

Her luggage was heavy and she didn't want to budge and she couldn't waste money on a porter. From where she stood on the steps, she could see into the cars on either side: lights were visible, bare bulbs from which metal cords dangled and a ceiling fan, the backs of wooden benches.

"Yankee girl, I *said*, 'Five cars up.'"

Marge relented and went down the steps, hauling her bags behind her. She was hungry, I imagine, though her mother would have packed her a lunch for the trip—boiled eggs, tea bags, maybe a liverwurst sandwich, bread pudding. She wasn't up for a fight, not one she could only lose.

When she got to the forward car reserved for whites, a man helped her stow her luggage overhead. She took a seat by the window in one of the leather reclining seats and fell asleep to the low hum of the air conditioning. When the train came to a halt in Chapel Hill, my aunt was startled out of sleep by the rattle and jerk of brakes. She gathered her things and dragged them onto the platform and made her way to the nearest exit, but an attendant stopped her when she tried to push through.

"You'll have to exit up ahead, miss," the porter said. "This one's for colored only."

Inside, through the doorway, she could see that the train lobby was the same one for everybody, but you had to enter by different doors and sit on opposite sides: one black, one white. When later my aunt got up to get a drink, she found that the water fountain on the white side of the lobby was bro-

ken, so—feeling righteous, I imagine, as the young often feel in the face of adult wrongs—she started over to get a drink at the fountain across the room.

The conductor stopped her.

“This here is for colored only,” he said. He looked her over. “You from New York?” Which my aunt says was what you asked in those days if you wanted to know if someone was a Jew.

“Yes,” she said.

“Figures.”

The camp was on a lake surrounded by hills. They burned a cross on one of those hills across from the camp, where everyone could see it when they raised their eyes to God.

Sometimes I think it was things like this that kept my grandmother—my father’s mother—from getting to know her adoptive country. The stories her children could tell were not things she wanted to know.

Grandma Levy was thirteen when she left her homeland. She bled for the first time when she crossed the Russian border. In an ox cart, hidden in hay, having bribed the driver, she was driven from home. She came from Chernobyl to Manhattan via Ellis Island in 1912, but she never got to know the America she had crossed an ocean and half a continent to see.

Except for brief visits to Minnesota to see our family, she remained on the margin of the continent speaking Yiddish in the six-story apartment building on East 95th Street in Manhattan, every Friday morning taking a trolley to buy a live chicken, which she plucked and cooked for the Sabbath.

And until her death in 1969, she continued to eat raw onions as if they

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were apples, her food of choice, by which habit she earned her nickname, *ci-bola* (onion).

For years I imagined it was integrity that stopped my grandmother from mastering American ways: a refusal to divide her loyalties. She had come to this country for the sake of her brothers, but no more. She would not become a part of it.

My aunt Marge, keeper of the family stories, tells me that I am wrong about my grandmother. It wasn't integrity that stopped her from learning American ways; she was simply a daughter among sons. Who thought to educate a daughter in those days? Who had the money to throw away on a girl? It wasn't until my grandfather, her husband, died that Grandma Levy learned to write her own name.

My grandmother never found her way back home; she never got the hang of her adoptive country. For years she thought Italian was the language spoken in this country because it was the language of her first employers, owners of a dress factory where she sewed.

My family has been wandering ever since, cut adrift from history. Nostalgic for a home we never knew. It was to recover this sense of location, of home, that my father left New York City and moved into the heartland of the country—the Midwest—the geographic center of the continent, where he married my mother, whose own ancestors had been preachers and planters and homesteaders—America itself. (He jokes that he came to Minnesota in search of Western culture. When he's feeling more wistful, he says he ended up here because he took a wrong turn in the Holland Tunnel.) But as is often the case, my parents did not find in each other the home they sought and passed on to their children homesickness.

When I moved to New Mexico after college, I came both for love of a woman and to regain a sense of place, in a place where shopping malls and fast-food restaurants had not yet rendered every town a bland replica of a hundred others. One of the least populous states in the nation, it was also the site of the longest continually inhabited pueblo in the country. If ever I would be free of the pressure to assimilate, I thought, it would be here.

My first week in the little northern New Mexico town where I settled

with Wendy, we went for a long walk in the twilight along the unpaved roads that wound through the neighborhoods east of the town plaza. We walked under cottonwoods and past prairie dog towns, past a new one-story brick high school and the spindly frames of housing developments. Eventually, we came on an old cemetery bordered by a low white picket fence, where the headstones were engraved with six-petaled flowers.

These, I would later learn, were the graves of the Sephardic Jews who were forced by the Spanish Inquisition to convert in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Many fled to the Americas to save their faith, but they remained in hiding even here, lighting Sabbath candles in the basement, keeping kosher in secret, covering the mirrors with lace mantillas after a death but gradually forgetting why they did these things. Even in death they maintained their silence, marking their tombs with six-petaled flowers in cryptic reference to the Star of David.

Months later, when the local paper asked me to write a piece about Hanukkah in Taos, I interviewed the local rabbi-in-training, an ex-hippie with short, flame-red hair who conducted services for local Jews in the Episcopal church in town. She told me about the Hebrew school she was organizing and how, when she first ran an ad in the local paper offering Hebrew lessons, she received calls and visits from many Catholic acquaintances who reported the odd habits of their grandparents—the candles, the separate plates for milk and meat.

One man, as a child, had asked his grandmother why she lit candles in the basement on Friday nights and was told it was because they were Jews.

“But you must never tell anyone,” she warned, “because we are the last ones.”

In the window of the studio I'm renting is a red reflective tag with white numbers identifying the house address; there is no street name. I could not tell anyone where I live. Street addresses are a local joke in Taos. Nobody has one. Like the Episcopal church a friend of mine describes, which lists services but doesn't give their times, “as if,” she said, “if you don't already know, perhaps you really shouldn't come.”

When I moved to Taos years ago, it took me months to figure out street addresses. Even now, when the town has become a small city—there are computer stores, a golf course, a spa, a university campus, even a temp service, which seems to me the hallmark of modern, urban life—even now many

streets remain unpaved and unmarked. Over dinner a friend describes a new restaurant in town. The owner imported all the staff from other places—mostly from New Orleans. When my friend wrote a check for the meal, the cashier asked for his phone number and to see ID, which is unusual in Taos. Then he asked for a street address. Brian just laughed. “I don’t even know my address,” he said. “The guy next door to me has the same house number facing the same nameless alley. But,” he says, smiling, “I know where I am.”

Most places don’t have this inwardness anymore; it is the inwardness of small towns. At its worst it manifests as xenophobia, at its best as an acute awareness of an inside in contrast to the outside. It is an inwardness that is rapidly disappearing, even in remote places, under the pressure of corporate commerce. McDonald’s and 7-Elevens, the familiar chains that serve up familiar goods, have no inwardness; they are designed to be outward, to reveal themselves equally to all. To show you everything, indiscriminately.

The bright colorful displays and signs advertising specials of the week are the same displays and signs you will find in McDonald’s across the country that week. There is nothing *particular* about this and there is not supposed to be; it is meant to make you feel at home, or rather to ensure that you do not feel excluded. But there is no way to feel included either. The loss of exclusivity is attended by a loss of belonging. There is nothing to discover in these places, no search or struggle to make your place. There is no knowledge, no privilege or benefit gained by staying. The thing about malls and mall culture (if that’s not an oxymoron) is that everyone belongs because no one does. Unlike a town or city that grows up organically over time, a mall has no history. There can be no privileged claim made on the basis of ancestry, no feuds over this or anxiety of access. The uniformity of franchises and chains is a rebuke of history—so that we needn’t feel the burden of our own.

Home, for me, is where the heart aches, the place I feel must be out there because I long for it. But maybe it is with me wherever I am, and I am simply failing to recognize it, overlooking it. Maybe home is nothing more or less than the place we *call* home, less a location than a locution. Maybe home, as my friend Sawnie says of fate, is a built thing. A story we tell ourselves. A story we become part of. I wonder if stories are

what bind us to a place, if we make our home in words.

I don't have many family stories, but here is one:

A few years ago, my Uncle Sy, Marge's husband, took his mother to Washington, DC, to attend the wedding of her granddaughter. It was the first time his mother had flown, and she was terrified. She wouldn't go, she said, without him, and probably she couldn't have. Born a peasant in Poland, she had never learned to read or write. Passing through security she set off alarms and was pulled aside. They removed her overcoat so the change in her pockets wouldn't trigger the metal detectors and passed her through again. They asked if she had a pacemaker.

"That'll do it sometimes, y'know," the blue-suited attendant suggested.

"My heart's fine," she said. "Tell them *hurry*, we have a plane to catch. *Tell* them," she urged her son.

"Ma, they know. They're going as fast as they can."

Eventually they had to escort her to a curtained-off cubicle, where an attendant patted her down, then asked her to disrobe so they could check for weapons. What they found was a corset with three dozen metal buttonhooks up the back. They ushered her out past security and apologized for the delay.

As my Uncle Sy and his mother started up the corridor to their gate, his mother leaned over and asked him if they could do that again, that patting thing, it was fun.

The wedding wasn't until the next day, so that afternoon they went for a tour of the city. Sy took her to the Lincoln memorial.

"Who's he?" she asked, looking up at the seated statue.

"Ma, that's President Lincoln. He freed the slaves after the Civil War."

"I *know* who Lincoln is," she said. "I'm no ignoramus. 'Four score and seven years ago, our fathers . . .'" And standing there in the massive, all-but-empty sanctuary, the small old woman from Vilna, Poland, recited the Gettysburg Address by heart.

Eventually, I fall in love with a truck.

While I am test-driving a Toyota hatchback, I drive past a used-car dealership where a VW diesel truck is parked. It is small and green, the color of pine forests, with a two-seater cab and a broad bed, and I imagine myself driving to Portland, hiking the Appalachian Trail, driving through Brooklyn. It has the winsome air of a capricious purchase. At the same time, it looks

solid, an object to be reckoned with. It is something I can pack my life into and move with. It will take me places. A getaway truck. I know people who drive trucks like this, and they are not people like me. I want to *be* them, and I think if I have this truck I will be mistaken for them, that I may mistake myself for one of them.

The Toyota I am test-driving is a city car, a responsible and practical car. A suburban liberal car. With good gas mileage and a hunched, apologetic shape. If I buy it, I feel I will be choosing and confirming this life with its petty calculations, its suburban angst, its immobilizing caution.

It is ridiculous, I know, to imbue an object with this kind of significance. Or perhaps it is not so much ridiculous as unmodern of me. There is something primitive in this approach to consumer goods that is distasteful. It is also commonplace. "When you are searching for something, everything becomes symbolical," writes Eudora Welty, and so into the vacuum of my ambivalent longings rushes a totemic truck.

I return that afternoon to the truck dealers with \$200 in my pocket, the deposit necessary for a test drive. I peer in the window and read the odometer: 151,000. I ask the dealer if the mileage is correct. He tells me that he can't be sure: the odometer is broken, he says; it *broke* at 151,000. No one knows how many miles this truck actually has on it.

Disappointed but practical, I decide to keep looking, hoping to find the thing I need.

The next day, when I get a call about yet another car, I start to walk the three miles into town to check it out; the afternoon is cold and dark and threatening snow when I realize that this is bullshit. I do not need to keep searching for the perfect vehicle in order to get where I want to be. I do not need to find—will never find—the Platonic Form of car. I am overlooking what is right in front of me: the decent Toyota hatchback I test-drove the other day. That unromantic, serviceable, inexpensive car. Certain things, I realize, are merely instrumental. The trick is in knowing which is which. In not mistaking one for the other.

On Saturday, I take the Two Hearts shuttle down to Santa Fe to pick up the Toyota.

On the way to Santa Fe, we pass through the gorge road that winds alongside the Río Grande. The artist Christo wants to wrap this river in cloth; it is

one of six proposed sites for an American river wrapping. My friend Sawnie says that if Christo does this, it will be one of the defining events of her life—there will be the *before* and *after*.

When she first said this, I was pained and saddened or maybe a little angry. She repeated herself several times, said, “This will be one of the defining events of my life,” as if she were trying on the opinion, or perhaps she sensed my annoyance and was attempting to flush me out, prodding a sore spot to determine what hurt. I said in a bland, uninterested tone that these big public events are not the ones that affect me deeply, but the small, intimate ones, the private moments to which memory attaches great significance.

But in truth what wounded me about her statement is this: that she is not afraid to look at her life and see its course laid out, confined like a river between these two banks, that she is unafraid of saying that this is where she is, this is how she lived. She is unafraid to claim this terrain, unafraid to acknowledge its borders. And maybe this is the secret of belonging.

There was a time, in those years I lived in New Mexico with Wendy, when I used to drive between Santa Fe and Taos a lot. The ride is about sixty-five miles, the last twenty of which take you through some of the prettiest canyon there is. Coming over the ridge, out of the Río Grande gorge, the world that is Taos Valley opens out before you and you can see where the earth is split open by the Río Grande, the big river, which over hundreds of thousands of years has worn its place into the rock and become a part of it. In the west you can see a hundred miles across the citron plain, once covered in prairie grasses, now pale phosphorescent green with sagebrush and snakeweed, to the north where the lavender-blue mountains glint under snow, and—tracing a line between the two—glimpse the red jagged rim of the gorge. From the ridge above the valley, that tear in the earth looks like lips parting, not a break but an opening, a space made through patience, by staying.

Driving back in my newly purchased Toyota, I come over that ridge and look out across the mesa to the blue outline of the mountains, and as it is evening I see the faint stammer of lights in the valley and feel a great openness that is almost like sorrow spread over me, the weight of knowing that if I stayed here I might belong to this place but not to every place, and weighted down with that knowledge I descend into the valley to make my way among

the twisting, unmarked roads toward what—for tonight, at least—I will call home.

E.J. Levy's essays have been published in *Salmagundi*, *Fourth Genre*, *Orion* and Best American Essays 2005. She earned an MFA from Ohio State University in 2002 and holds a BA in History from Yale. An Assistant Professor in the MFA Program at American University in Washington, DC, she is completing an ecological memoir set in the Brazilian rainforest, as well as a novel. This is her second appearance in the *Missouri Review*.



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