

American Triptych

Marta Tarnawsky

The land was ours before we were the land's.
Robert Frost, "The Gift Outright"

THE FIRST DISCOVERY OF AMERICA

1. *Navigare necesse est*

Sailing is just another adventure.
When you're eighteen years old,
the proverb that "sailing is required,"
seems like a lifelong motto,
and though the sailors in the port sang
a German song about the death of a dream —
Bremerhaven remained indifferent.
The U.S.S. Mercy no longer carried soldiers
to strengthen the European front—
she was returning home with cargo,
her last sailing across the ocean,
she carried an unusual cargo to her native harbor.
A hospitable gesture to those shortchanged by war.
And the gates to the future opened...
I too am on deck with my closest kin.
The war is now a distant memory—
a childhood peeled off like a shell,
and I am all aflame with the excitement of the day
I am all expectation. Youth has passed already,
and so too Salzburg's beauty, love's sanctuary.
But what comes next? What is my future?
Uncertainty, anxiety—that's what's ahead,
and that small slice of wisdom already won:
to catch in handfuls every drop of joy
immerse yourself in the moment's rapture
and live—right now, today, and every moment.

There's land on the horizon for a while now,
but suddenly, out from the mist,
rise ghostly figures hanging in the air—
skyscrapers, which I've never seen before.

A sudden wakening, a blow
as if a turn into the actual and real,
this is in fact a different continent.
The sea has been a Rubicon for me,
the bridges burnt, no longer can there be
return to that place where I've left
my childhood, youth, and Europe.

2. First lesson in democracy

A cold wind blows off the ocean
but he's without a coat; this grey haired
fellow, with his straggly, wind-blown mane,
his jacket casually open, and his tie
fluttering in the wind like a flag.
Who is he, this stranger? A Bostonian?
An agent of the immigration bureau?
Or someone's sponsor? Or maybe just
a passerby, then wandering along the quay
as our ship was arriving at the harbor
and lanky passengers emerged into the sun
from cabins where they'd huddled on their voyage
onto the deck, to see, with wondering eyes
the dock, the port, the place where they would land.
The band stuck up a cheerful sound:
"Oh say," we heard, triumphantly, "can you see?"
An anthem played to greet us, as if in a parade.
And yet the unknown fellow stands
At ease, unburdened, lost in thought
and looking out into the ocean,
while I remember anthems played not long ago
with rows of boys and girls arrayed in lines
observing goose-step marching soldiers,
coordinated moves by monolithic crowds
accompanied by military tunes.
In all that discipline, there was no room
for a disdainful, independent stance,
for pacifists, ignoring martial customs
to stand aside, bemused and inattentive
with hands in trouser pockets, far from a salute.
There were the songs of patriotic ardor,
the fatherland above all else
and everything you have, and what you'll be
you owe to it, and to it pledge your life,

not in one moment, but forever more.
 They taught that we were cogs in a machine,
 Alone we're nothing, the collective is all.
 There is no noble feeling greater
 than pride in watching our flags flutter
 than shouting "heil" or "glory" in a crowd
 than raising hands in a salute with other.
 Such was my childhood, this was not strange to me
 a youngster in tight rows with fellow scouts
 I loved to march and watch the wind-blown flags.
 But now, from the ship's deck I watch
 as this undisciplined civilian man
 listens unmoved as his own anthem sounds,
 and I am moved.

I understand at last:

This is a citizen of a free country
 He's not a victim, slave, or pawn,
 He's not the dung of empires and leaders.
 And in my thoughts, I stretch my arms
 into the future—into tomorrow. I hope
 I too will someday raise my head
 and proudly know the most important value—
 that simple human dignity the world forgot.

3. *E pluribus unum*

The anthem's over. A row of speakers
 to the microphone stands patiently in line,
 the first of them begins his greeting.
 I don't know who he is or what he said.
 No doubt about how welcome we should feel
 how readily we'll be accepted and what awaits us:
 prosperity and peace and fruitful labor,
 more valued here than elsewhere in the world.
 This country was, from its inception
 built by hard working hands of immigrants
 and we, like they, are its prospective citizens.
 We'd heard so many speeches in the past
 in praise of peace but promising a war,
 that promised paradise but delivered hell
 we weren't about to fall for empty words.
 Besides, the effort is in vain. Who listens
 to words they cannot understand?
 These words are in a foreign language

the speaker is twofold removed from us:
 mistrust and by the barrier of language.
 But here, the second speaker takes the stage
 He's from the sponsors, UUARC
 "Brothers and sisters, dearest countrymen..."
 He opens, in the language that's our own.
 Ukrainian words, like a warm breeze from home
 like a spring thaw amidst a stormy season
 a sign that winter's over, summer's coming,
 and in this place, we are indeed at home.

THE SECOND DISCOVERY OF AMERICA

1. Lackawanna Manufacturing Company

I am so fresh from European schooling
 that Latin phrases still ring in my ears.
 The neon sign with "Manufacturing"
 that glows as I approach in morning twilight
 speaks of the work of hands,
 and not just any human's hands
 but my own.
 I'm now a member of the proletariat
 I joined with youthful zeal and zest.
 I'll try to show to one and all
 and mostly to myself
 that I'm a healthy and young plant
 transplanted into different soil
 with all the energy I need to live
 and grow in this new climate.
 I've read Franko and Kotsiubynsky
 I understand the working class
 I'm almost something of a socialist—
 ready to test the principles of theory
 against the living practice of a job.

I can't yet master the machine:
 It pulls much faster than I can hold.
 "Be steady, not so nervous," says the foreman.
 And intercedes for me with the bosses: "Give her another week!"

Slowly, I get the hang of it.
 The boys in the shop
 pester me with smutty jokes

while the married ladies
pass pornographic toys
from hand to hand, with secret smiles.
I'm married now, but still not skilled
at fending off assailants with a joke or laugh.
I hide, embarrassed, behind the shield
of simplicity, idealism, and pretending
not to understand the foreign language.
I try to bury my own small world
deep within the confines of my heart.
But I already understand
that bridges across chasms are not alike
some are made of steel and stand quite firm
but others can be made of rope
they sway and wobble in the wind
and yet they carry Himalayan mountaineers
safely across gorges and roaring streams.
The jokes, no matter how lewd,
the smiles, warm and sincere,
a hand outstretched in friendship,
the tears of my emotions—
these are the ropes of mountain bridges
that span the chasms of class and nation
over the turbulent rivers of language
spanning the gap from humanity to the human.

I am friends with the workers.
But here, in jeans and checkered shirt
working from dawn to dusk beside us,
covered in sweat and grime,
is the manufacturer, the owner.
He lunches with us, coke and sandwich,
smashing the old stereotype
of an imagined capitalist.
He knows us all by name
and he's the last to leave at night.
He doesn't mind the workers' jokes
And even listens to their complaints.
But everyone calls him Mister Rosen,
he's not just Peter to anyone
and his skin is tanned like no one else's.
He spent January down south
vacationing in the Bahamas.

2. Pursuit of happiness

The neighbor's lilacs are full bloom
 This girl, who never asked for favors
 from no one, nowhere—obstinate and proud—
 now meekly asks the miser to relent:
 Sell me a handful of that heady scent!
 And now, supremely proud, she carries
 Lilacs for her beloved, and she, like they,
 all blooming, young, and full of joy.

A lilac grows in our own garden
 Cared for by the wife's own hands
 that it may prosper, grow, and blossom
 even in rocky, sunless soil.
 Year after year on the kitchen table
 May comes with blooms and heady scent,
 A scent that still lingers in the room
 Even after the flowers have wilted in their vase,
 a scent that fills both home and soul
 like music playing in the great outdoors.

The lilac blooms. Now it's the children's hands
 instructed by their mother's love
 that bring the heady scent into the home,
 bouquets of purple fantasy in flowers.
 That scent, like oxygen for the soul,
 fills me with strength like a fresh transfusion.
 The lilac blooms, its May forever in my heart.

3. Plain living and high thinking

On the way to work each day I see
 Students loaded down with books.
 I secretly read the titles.
 There's Freud and Darwin, Shakespeare too—
 a wealth of unfamiliar subjects brings
 a longing that will not be stopped.
 These subway-riding students can't imagine
 the burning passion that engulfs
 the young mother with an infant on her lap
 her eyes aglow with sorrow and envy.

But here, her father's hands hold out
 the keys, like magic, that will unlock

the padlocks on the gates of education.
The universe of possibilities expands,
the heart fills up with limitless expanse
as for a climber in the mountains
where every higher peak gives
a new perspective in the thinner air
and the resigned thrill of new discovery.

I swap the mundane joys of daily life
for the freedom to fly above the clouds
I now abandon lazy sweet surrender
for the rigid discipline of intellect.
The time that girlfriends from my youth
devote to preparations, thinking in detail
about their gowns, their shoes, and hairdos—
they're planning for the ball they'll all attend—
I'm running with a satchel full of books
in a plain skirt and inexpensive blouse
to catch the uninviting subway in the dark
to make my evening classes in good time.

But there are sacrifices I won't make,
Some things are worthier than life itself
than all the wealth of thought contained in books.
I have a well from which I always draw
the healing waters of emotions, passions:
from this great stream of human warmth and joy
I draw the strength to live life and to grow.

I'm busy raising my own sons
and this is not just motherhood's great joy,
it is a laboratory of real life
a second university—right at home.
Observantly, I watch the child grow,
expanding his horizons day by day—
an infant yesterday in diapers
now holds his head, stands on two feet
and forms the sounds of his first words
and now he's asking his first questions
of cosmic implications. He does not yet know
that answers to these queries don't exist.
With silent pride I watch and hear
the small philosopher, all knees and shorts:
this little person, through the ages
trying to catch eternity in his hands
is only man, who carries God within.

THE THIRD DISCOVERY OF AMERICA

1. A Ballad about a Silver Key

In a ditch, barely visible to the eye,
 as if grown over by the land itself,
 blackened by time, maybe even rusted
 there lay a magic key, untouched.
 They passed it with disinterest:
 some had much better keys themselves,
 the others wondered: what could it unlock?
 If only it had a diamond to help it shine
 or if in gold it could reflect the sun!

So I picked up this old black key
 and now at home I sit at night
 and brush it down, I clean it up
 slowly and patiently, with loving care.
 Beneath my brush, after another wiping,
 the shine of silver slowly comes to light
 an unexpected joy—a silver key.

Excited, nervously I take this key
 and with a slow, uncertain gesture
 I put it in the opening of the padlock
 of a gigantic trunk, in which
 are treasures that were heretofore forbidden:
 Chaucer and Milton, Wordsworth and Byron.

And then in a greedy trance
 like an agitated rich miser
 I run to the next trunk.
 The world's pirates have deposited
 here in an eternal present
 the world's timeless treasures:
 Plutarch, Confucius, and Voltaire
 stand side by side in the basement
 like barrels of wine in a cellar—
 I'm drunk, I'm drunk, I'm drunk ...

I'm not used to drinking so much
 I must come up for air and sunlight.

But the silver key hangs on my neck
 my newfound magic talisman.

It's a memento: in my cellar
stand rows of cognac, Armagnac
Burgundian wine, champagne, and port
and pinot-chardonnay, sauterne, cab-franc.
This will need a careful taster's regimen,
not the mindless indulgence of a drunk.

Each time I descend to the cellar
fate holds out a surprise for me.
I go down and get frightened: what's this?
Has a thief broken in to the trunk?
With his own key he turns the lock
and he's just as drunk as I am.
A co-owner, a friend, and a drunkard!
There's a whole company of us now,
each with a key to these treasures
that cannot be stolen or sold.
We all descend to the cellar
each of us to drink alone
then drunk we gather together
and sing ecstatic drinking songs.

2. Moratorium

Today the stadium is repurposed
for an unfamiliar event:
they've called a public demonstration
a moratorium against the war.
Here they come, the student-activists,
the working staff and the professors—
the whole university community.
Here they come, publicly to meet
in an unstructured open forum
to talk about the problems of the day
the open wounds, social despair.
Here they come, unexpectedly stirred
to make their views well known to others
to stand up and be counted
among the ranks of dissidents.

Here there's no waiting for directives
from those on high, no following the masses—
there's only consciousness of being at the core
within a liberal nation's public conscience.
In this healthy, fertilized womb

in pregnant contemplation
after a nine-month gestation
and only after painful labor
perhaps an idea will be born.
Like a ball of wet snow
that rolls down a hill to the valley
and grows larger and larger
and stronger and faster,
this daring initiative, this idea
articulated at the right time,
can give the required push
to an avalanche of public action.

Tomorrow, perhaps, the papers will condemn
this action of ours, this seeming heresy,
a month later there will be a flood
of resolutions flowing across the country
and within a year this heresy of ours
will be a plank in party platforms.

The path of democratic change
is hard, complex and slow;
it's not a sudden burst of exaltation
nor heroism on a single day;
it's not the stuff of patriotic speeches
or public proclamation of one's faith.
What's needed here is civic courage
to swim against the public's favored tide;
despite the trials of gray, fruitless workdays
to stand up for the dignity of yourself and others
and for the right to have a difference of ideas—
not just your own, but those against you, too.

The tree of liberty they say
must yet be watered with blood.
But these romantics fail to add
that freedom's tree will not survive
without the daily watering it gets
in bitter sweat from stubborn activists.

It's a different sport in the stadium today
and yesterday's passive observer
silently takes in this strange spectacle.
I've come down from the stands
today I'm on the pitch, in the arena
taking part in this unusual sport.

3. Synthesis

Librarian, professor of law
and director of the largest law library in the world,
today my friend Morris
is at the pinnacle of his career.

Sipping wine in the faculty club
Morris says: "You know,
I just got a letter yesterday,
a temptation: to establish
a library research center
at a new university
on the outskirts of Jerusalem..."

"For this you would consider
leaving your security, your well-being, your career?
The books you're planning.
The monographs already on the way?"

"For my position here," says Morris,
"there is an endless line of candidates...
But over there volunteers are scarce
and I have no competitors..."
He smiles: "They said I would build there
an arsenal of liberal thought
to hold the equilibrium
between our totalitarian factions...
There is need and funds are available,
but the plan cannot be realized
unless real live people come forward,
men with heart and soul
who would be willing to bring in as a sacrifice
the experience they have gained in the wide world..."

Says Morris: "I've observed at first hand
how difficult it is to build a new society
on foundations that are thousands of years old.
Healthy hands and healthy thought are needed,
the knowledge and intellect of the best specialists available..."

"You will go? You've decided already?
But your roots are right here, in New York.
Is this not, after all, your own country?"

"I am a New Yorker all the way back to my grandfather
and I'm sure to come back here eventually
to live out my old age here in Brooklyn.
But remember, I am a descendant
of that ageless, that ancient culture,
that united us all in diaspora,
that fed infants together with mother's milk
the dream about the promised land of Canaan.
I have a debt to history on my shoulders
and I have to pay it back with honor."

Sipping wine in the faculty club
we sat long into the hours of night
and I saw through the windows
in the city's darkness
a mirage born along the Dnipro—
the ageless gold-covered cupolas
of my own far-away Jerusalem.

Translated by Maxim Tarnawsky and Marta Tarnawsky

Original publication: Marta Tarnavs'ka, "Amerykans'kyi tryptykh," *Novi dni*, May 1981, pp. 1–2.