promises to itself continue to command the faith of people like me, who are not its citizens.

Ivan Klíma
Czech Republic

I belong to that dwindling number of people who still remember the Second World War. I regard it as a quirk of fate that the very day we were carted off to concentration camp (I was ten at the time), Nazi Germany went to war with the United States. It was paradoxical: in the middle of their despair at what had happened to them, the people around me embraced each other. They believed that with America's entry into the conflict, the decisive moment had arrived and the war would soon be over—Hitler had no hope of victory.

The fighting didn't come to an end as quickly as we imagined, but I well remember during the last year of the war squadrons of Flying Fortresses flying over the town where I was interned. I stood in the barracks yard and watched them with a sense of exalted terror and joy, because their clearly undisturbed flight heralded the German defeat that was now just round the corner.

Unlike my compatriots in West Bohemia, I didn't encounter the Americans as liberators. Terezín camp was liberated by the Red Army, like Prague, to which I then returned.

I loved American war films, although I was less enamoured of the sickly film musicals of the day—they seemed to me to belong to a different world to the one I knew. I later realized that musicals and war films symbolized the two extremes of the Americans' attitude to life.

Soon after the war, all American films disappeared from Czechoslovakia, the war films and the sickly musicals alike—it was the beginning of the communist era. Along with them went books by all modern American authors with the exception of the communist Howard Fast. Nevertheless, in a lane not far from the Botanical Gardens in Prague I came across a sort of stationer's-cum-bookbinder's shop that had remained in private ownership. I used to chat to the owner about literature and one day he declared mysteriously that he had something to show me. From the depths of his shop he brought out two novels: one by Steinbeck, the other

by Hemingway. In those days such books were something like contraband. I paid for the two treasures and took them away with me. I was hooked. Later, when censorship was relaxed, I got to read Dos Passos, Faulkner, Wilder, Heller, Mailer, Roth and others. They had a lifelong influence on me. I know that for many people American culture means Hollywood films and endless TV serials. For me American culture means above all its literature, which in the last century was undoubtedly among the most remarkable in the world.

I first visited the US in 1968, to attend the premiere of my play *The Castle*. I recall being overwhelmed by New York, which seemed to me like a city from another planet, from another culture. (That is precisely why I subsequently came to dislike it: it seemed to me that in that enormous agglomeration of concrete and asphalt, people, and particularly children, must either go crazy or suffer deprivation.) A year later I was invited to take up a visiting fellowship at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. By then, the Soviet army of occupation was well ensconced in Czechoslovakia. The purges began, rigid censorship was reintroduced and culture was driven underground. I left the day before the frontiers were closed. At that moment I perceived the US chiefly as a land of freedom. (On the bridge I had to cross each day on my way to the faculty, someone had painted an enormous red hammer and sickle—a paradox for someone who had managed to escape the land of communist symbols for a short while.) Something else I'll never forget is how, straight after a TV programme in which President Nixon eloquently defended the Vietnam War, a commentator came on the screen and started to take the president to task in a manner that seemed unbelievable to me. It was all part of the democracy and freedom that I still admire about America.

I have been told many times how superficial Americans' relationships are—shallow because they are simply social convention. In my view this is not true. The Americans mostly live at peace, but the moment an accident or even a disaster occurs, they act. It needn't be a terrorist attack. I once drove off the road into the ditch in a blizzard and got stuck in a snowdrift. It was about twenty degrees below zero and there was such a gale blowing that anyone out in the open would have started to freeze. Nevertheless, within moments a lorry pulled up and the driver ran over to make sure no one in the

car was injured and to ask if we needed help. He gave one of my companions a lift to go and arrange for the car to be towed out. The next driver to pass by, a few seconds later, tried to pull us out with a chain. I don't think drivers in our country would behave with such concern and self-sacrifice.

We returned from America six months later when the neo-Stalinist era in Czechoslovakia was at its height. America became the embodiment of freedom for all of us: we received uncensored news from there, and its journalists came and took an interest in our circumstances, and their interest and their reporting about the state of affairs in our country helped inhibit the inclinations of the communist regime to stamp on anyone who resisted them. And from time to time we actually visited the free territory of the American Ambassador's residence. It was a great encouragement to me to know that there existed an entire continent where one could live freely, where they didn't jail people because of their attitude to the regime, where they didn't confiscate books or ban authors and where they didn't expel professors from universities for rejecting a totalitarian (or any other) ideology.

For more than a century now there has existed a sort of American dream. For some it means boundless affluence, for others freedom. I am not a devotee of hypermarkets or of grandiose mansions containing dozens of rooms for just two or three people and a few pedigree dogs and cats. I've never yearned for more than one car or a private plane, jet-engined or otherwise. I have an aversion to profligacy, but I don't share the view that there is an indirect relationship between America's affluence and Third World poverty. Without idealizing the policies of the big monopolies (either American or European), I am convinced that America's wealth, which derives from the work of many generations, is chiefly the result of the creative activity of free citizens. The Americans are not to blame for Third World poverty, which is mostly due to the circumstances in the Third World and the demoralizing lack of freedom that most of the people there endure.

On my visits to the United States over the past ten years, I have discovered that freedom continues to prevail there as it did years ago and there is even greater affluence. That affluence is certainly provocative with the world in the state it is. It would be better if the

Americans—and we Europeans—exercised rather more restraint.

Freedom also tends to be viewed in different ways. For some it represents freedom of spirit and independence from authority, for others it signifies vice and spiritual and moral depravity. Freedom can indeed have paradoxical consequences. One of them is the unbridled cult of entertainment, which increasingly nowadays seems to be the supreme social value: witness the astronomical sums paid to hockey and basketball players, pop singers, and film and TV stars. And the tide of violence, horror and perversion, catering for the basest instincts, which streams every day from the gutter press and from film and television screens seems to me not so much an expression of freedom as a manifestation of moral decline that is ultimately a threat to the freedom of the citizen. In this respect I do not agree with the message of Forman's celebrated film about Larry Flint.

Nevertheless I regard attacks by fanatics on American citizens in New York or anywhere else in the world as being, above all, an attack on the civic freedoms that America embodies and thus an attack on my own freedom too. To view them in any other way ultimately means siding with the reactionary and totalitarian forces which spurn democracy, civil rights, racial and sexual equality and the freedom to live according to one's own convictions and to profess—or not—any belief.

Translated from the Czech by Gerald Turner

Doris Lessing
Britain

Busily promoting my book *African Laughter* I flitted about (as authors do) on the East Coast, doing phone-ins and interviews, and had to conclude that Americans see Africa as something like Long Island, with a single government, situated vaguely south ('The Indian Ocean? What's that?'). In New York I had the heaviest, most ignorant audience of my life, very discouraging, but the day after in Washington 300 of the brightest best-informed people I can remember. To talk about 'America' as if it were a homogenous unity isn't useful, but I hazard the following generalizations.

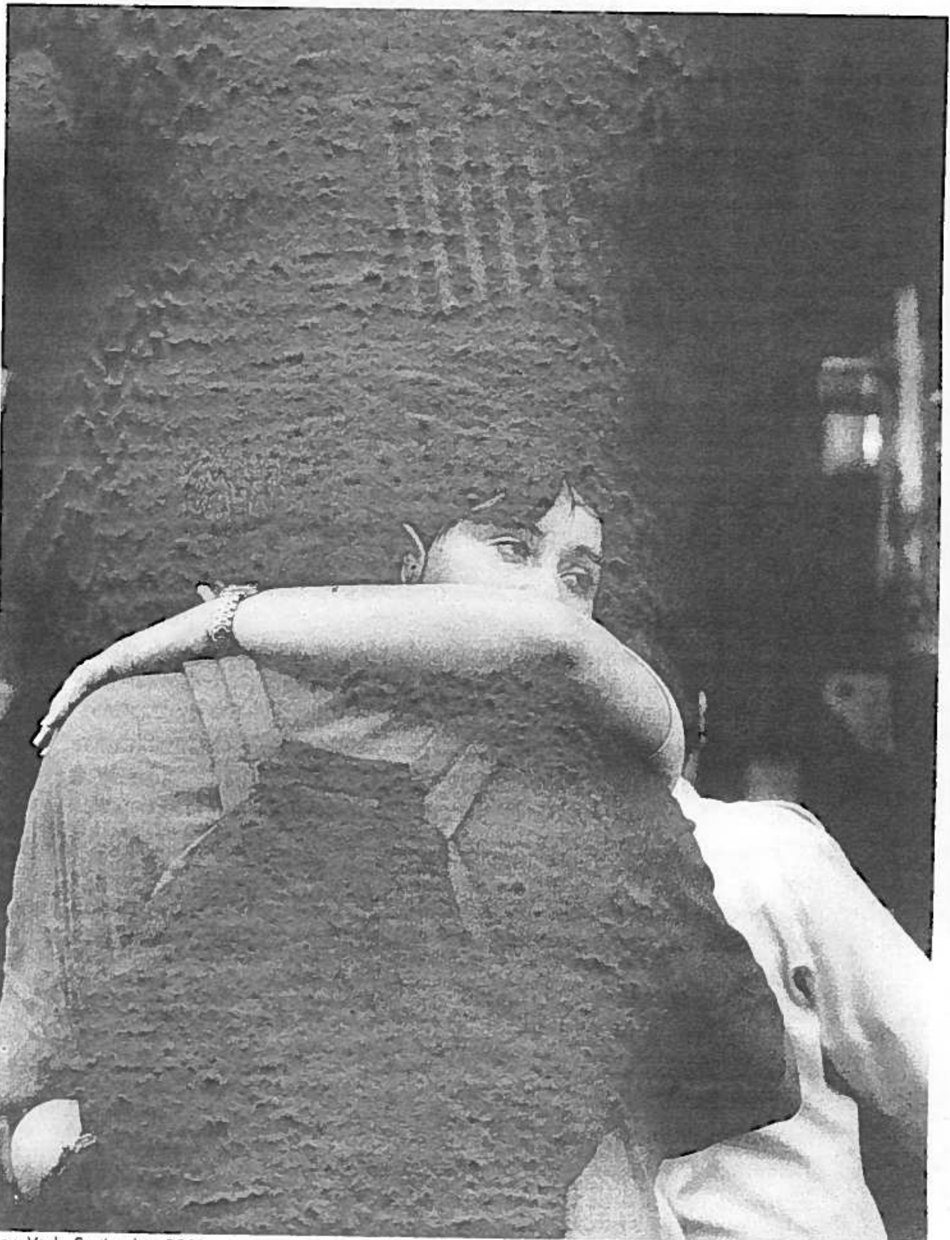
America, it seems to me, has as little resistance to an idea or a mass emotion as isolated communities have to measles and whooping

cough. From outside, it is as if you are watching one violent storm after another sweep across a landscape of extremes. Their Cold War was colder than anywhere else in the West, with the intemperate execution of the Rosenbergs, and grotesqueries of the McCarthy trials. In the Seventies, Black Power, militant feminism, the Weathermen—all flourished. On one of my visits, people could talk of nothing else. Two years later they probably still flourished, but no one mentioned them. 'You know us,' said a friend. 'We have short memories'.

Everything is taken to extremes. We all know this, but the fact is seldom taken into account when we try to understand what is going on. The famous Political Correctness, which began as a sensible examination of language for hidden bias, became hysterical and soon afflicted whole areas of education. Universities have been ruined by it. I was visiting a university town not far from New York when two male academics took me out into the garden, for fear of being overheard, and said they hated what they had to teach, but they had families, and would not get tenure if they didn't toe the line. A few years earlier, in Los Angeles, I found that my novel *The Good Terrorist* was being 'taught'. The teaching consisted of the students scrutinizing it for political incorrectness. This was thought to be a good approach to literature. Unfortunately, strong and inflexible ideas attract the stupid...what am I saying! Britain shows milder symptoms of the same disease, so it is instructive to see where such hysteria may lead if not checked.

The reaction to the events of 11 September—terrible as they were—seems excessive to outsiders, and we have to say this to our American friends, although they have become so touchy, and ready to break off relations with accusations of hard-heartedness. The United States is in the grip of a patriotic fever which reminds me of the Second World War. They seem to themselves as unique, alone, misunderstood, beleaguered, and they see any criticism as treachery.

The judgement 'they had it coming', so angrily resented, is perhaps misunderstood. What people felt was that Americans had at last learned that they are like everyone else, vulnerable to the snakes of Envy and Revenge, to bombs exploding on a street corner (as in Belfast), or in a hotel housing a government (as in Brighton). They say themselves that they have been expelled from their Eden. How strange they should ever have thought they had a right to one.



TIM HETHERINGTON/NETWORK PHOTOGRAPHERS

New York, September 2001

Yang Lian
China

'The full moon's fuller in America.' In China before 1949, this was a way of referring to the much-coveted lifestyle in the 'gilded imperium' on the other shore of the Pacific. After '49, of course, it became a way of satirizing the absurdities of capitalist 'running dogs'. Whatever. It was a powerful image: silvered, shining. And don't forget, in modern Chinese the round 'fullness' of the moon is a perfect pun for the round fullness of a dollar.

In the early 1980s this illusion was shattered for me by an evening meal at a Beijing restaurant. A visiting university professor from America had invited me, then a novice poet, to eat out. As usual the conversation never strayed from the cruelty of the contemporary political situation in China and the hardships of practising 'underground literature'. After we'd finished eating, there were considerable leftovers on the table. 'Do you want to take them home?' asked the professor. 'Sorry? Why would I want to do that?' In China there is no sense that the remains of a meal has any 'surplus value', and no one uses the phrase 'doggie bag'.

'If this were the States, a poet would have no qualms about taking one back home. It's not to feed the dog, you know; it's to feed yourself'.

American poets surely can't be poorer than their Chinese counterparts? That would just be too far beneath the 'American moon'!

After the mid-autumn festival of 1992 I made my first visit to New York as an exile. Standing at the end of a street in Chinatown, I was just getting a sense of the incomprehensibility of fate when the sound of a greeting made me jump. 'Yang Lian!' It turned out to be another Chinese poet, one who had migrated somewhat earlier. In the middle of the usual pleasantries, he said, 'You must stay in New York.'

'Why New York?' I asked.

'Because if you've made it in New York, you've made it in the world.' He looked utterly serious. In the emptiness above the bright lights of the city, the great wheel of the moon, perhaps a little overstuffed, was rising. So this was the 'American moon'. I didn't know whether to be envious or amused.

In this same New York: 'My God. By the end of next month, my bank account will be completely cleared out!' This wasn't the first or last time I'd heard such a cry of despair while talking on the phone with my American poet friend L.S. But here he was describing his circumstances while writing poetry from a flat in Greenwich Village. What was to be done?

'Why don't you come and have dinner here with me? At least you'd save the money for a meal.' I had begun to appreciate the importance of the 'doggie bag'. In America, after all, my novelist wife was obliged to work as a maid to earn a little money, and I was running myself ragged at universities, giving readings here, there and everywhere, no matter how far away, for a couple of hundred dollars a performance. 'Capitalism' was not only a slogan, it was a steely logical network, which held everything in its mesh. We had, in the past, been the happy beneficiaries of the 'socialist rice bowl' while talking up the high principles of 'individuality' and 'identity'. Now we faced up to the concrete realities: putting bread on the table, paying the rent, buying medicine, a glass of beer...the tyranny of money: terrifying and sweet. The oppression of survival made the seductions of 'success' loom ever larger. I forced my translator to create a new form for a word, so that the poems I had written in America could, as a series, be called *Darknesses*, as a sequel to the old saying about the moon, a 'realization' concerning American poets, that they were in dire straits compared with us: here, no one was going to put up money for the love of art, let alone to raise a halo over the head of political opposition. So you want to write poetry? Be prepared to regret it. A dog that could write poetry would dream of 'doggie bags', and in the dream it would see the American moon, but as full and round as a filling meat pie. My father had warned me, 'You know, poets always die in poverty.' I guess the fathers of American poets will be even more intimate with such worries.

Of course American culture means Hollywood, McDonald's, all manner of credit cards, crowds of ravenous consumers, and so on. But for me it means 'doggie-bag art'. And as for those, like me, who cannot even begin to have faith in the doggie bag—who keep on writing, reciting—I suppose they continue to do so for an audience of one: that unchanging moon, hanging at the edge of the sky.

Translated from the Chinese by John Cayley

we sometimes feel the tectonic plates shifting beneath us and wonder where we are, it is simply because America is now the ground on which we now stand.

Orhan Pamuk

Turkey

My first encounters with Americans took place in an atmosphere of childhood simplicity yet bore traces of complex desires and envy that later developed in me.

In 1961 my father's job took us to Ankara, where we lived in an expensive apartment, across from the nicest park in the city, which had a man-made pond in whose waters swam two weary swans. Sometimes we heard our upstairs neighbours moving about. They were Americans—their blue Chevrolet was parked in the garage. We were curious about them.

We weren't curious about American culture. We didn't know or care whether the films we saw at the Ankara cinema, packed with children each week for the Sunday discount matinee, were American or French. It was enough that the films, speaking through subtitles, came to us from the West.

What we were curious about was the Americans themselves. At that time, in this new and relatively affluent part of Ankara, there were a lot of Americans and we found them interesting for what they carried, and what they threw away. The most interesting American thing that we collected, pulled out of rubbish bins, or smashed flat with an angry stomp, were empty Coca-Cola cans. We called all such tins 'kukas', although sometimes they'd be empty beer tins or cans left over from different soft drinks. Even though we played games with the cans—most often what was called 'kuka hide-and-seek'—even though we cut them up and made metal signs out of them, even though we used their tabs as play money, I had never tasted Coke or any other canned drink.

We often hunted for 'kukas' in a large dustbin belonging to one of the new apartment buildings. In this building there lived a young American woman whose beauty was renowned. One day, in a gesture we had seen only in films, her husband pulled out of their garage, interrupting our football match as he slowly drove by, and kissed the tips of his fingers, sending a kiss to the beautiful woman

wearing a nightgown and waving her hand on the balcony. We were overcome with silence. No matter how much love the adults we knew shared, they never revealed their happiness and privacy in front of others with such ease.

The things that the Americans owned, which often passed to those who befriended them, were purchased from a large shop I'd never seen—it was forbidden to Turks—'P/X', which we referred to as 'Piyeks.' Things like blue jeans, Chicklets, Converse All-Stars, the latest American albums, nauseating sweet and salty candies, coloured hairslides, baby food, toys. Many of these items were 'smuggled' out of Piyeks and sold under the counter in certain Ankara shops at exorbitant prices. My older brother and I were mad about marbles, and we would save up and buy American marbles from one of these shops. They were made of white porcelain and we treated them like jewels beside our own Turkish mica and glass ones.

We discovered that the son of our upstairs neighbour, who went to school each day in a big orange school bus, like the ones I would later see in American films, had a stock of these porcelain marbles. He was a lonely boy, with no friends. He was about our age, with his hair cut in the American style, short and standing up straight on top. He must have seen us playing marbles with our friends in the yard; at any rate, he'd bought himself many, many marbles from Piyeks. It seemed like he had thousands. He'd empty them all out of a bag at once and the dizzying sound of hundreds of marbles hitting the floor above us drove my brother and me crazy.

Soon, news of this abundance spread to our friends. Two or three of them took to standing in our backyard and calling up to the window of the American, 'Hey, boy!' After a long period of calling and waiting, he'd suddenly appear on his balcony and angrily toss a handful of marbles down to those waiting below. He'd watch them grab and scuffle for the marbles, then disappear again. He was a cross and lonely king tossing gold pieces to the masses! Sometimes he didn't come out for an entire day; then the news that the king's bus had brought him back from school or that his parents had gone out and left him alone would quickly spread. Once a crowd had assembled, he would begin dropping marbles, not by the handful, but one by one, and my friends would run about the backyard and push each other as they picked them up.

One afternoon, the king began to toss marbles down to our balcony. They fell like hard rain, some of them bouncing off our balcony and on to the ground below. My brother and I couldn't stop ourselves. We rushed out to our balcony and started picking them up. When the downpour intensified, our scramble got rougher.

'What's going on here?' said my mother, coming to the balcony door. 'Get inside—now!'

We shut the balcony door and from inside watched the continuing rain of marbles with embarrassment and sorrow. Then the rain slackened and stopped. The king had understood that we couldn't go out on the balcony. He started pouring marbles on to the floor of his room instead. The sound excited us again. As soon as no one was around, we guiltily collected the marbles from the balcony and sombrely divided them between us.

The following day, heeding our mother's instructions, we called up to the king when he appeared on his balcony: 'Hey, boy, do you want to exchange?' We held up our own glass and mica marbles. Five minutes later he rang our doorbell. We gave him five or ten Turkish marbles and he extended a handful of his expensive American ones. We traded in silence. He told us his name and we told him ours.

More than the profitable trade, we were struck by the fact that his name was Bobby, that his squinty eyes were blue and that his knees, like ours, were dirty from playing. Then he ran back up the stairs to his own apartment.

Harold Pinter
Britain

On September 10, 2001 I received an honorary degree at the University of Florence. I made a speech in which I referred to the term 'humanitarian intervention'—the term used by NATO to justify its bombing of Serbia in 1999.

I said the following: On May 7, 1999 NATO aircraft bombed the marketplace of the southern city of Nis, killing thirty-three civilians and injuring many more. It was, according to NATO, a 'mistake'.

The bombing of Nis was no 'mistake'. General Wesley K. Clark declared, as the NATO bombing began: 'We are going to systematically and progressively attack, disrupt, degrade, devastate and ultimately—unless President Milosovic complies with the

demands of the international community—destroy these forces and their facilities and support.' Milosovic's 'forces', as we know, included television stations, schools, hospitals, theatres, old people's homes—and the marketplace in Nis. It was in fact a fundamental feature of NATO policy to terrorize the civilian population.

The bombing of Nis, far from being a 'mistake', was in fact an act of murder. It stemmed from a 'war' which was in itself illegal, a bandit act, waged outside all recognized parameters of International Law, in defiance of the United Nations, even contravening NATO's own charter. But the actions taken, we are told, were taken in pursuance of a policy of 'humanitarian intervention' and the civilian deaths were described as 'collateral damage'.

'Humanitarian intervention' is a comparatively new concept. But President George W. Bush is also following in the great American presidential tradition by referring to 'freedom-loving people' (I must say I would be fascinated to meet a 'freedom-hating people'). President Bush possesses quite a few 'freedom-loving' people himself—not only in his own Texas prisons but throughout the whole of the United States, in what can accurately be described as a vast gulag—two million prisoners in fact—a remarkable proportion of them black. Rape of young prisoners, both male and female, is commonplace. So is the use of weapons of torture as defined by Amnesty International—stun guns, stun belts, restraint chairs. Prison is a great industry in the United States—just behind pornography when it comes to profits.

There have been and remain considerable sections of mankind for whom the mere articulation of the word 'freedom' has resulted in torture and death. I'm referring to the hundreds upon hundreds of thousands of people throughout Guatemala, El Salvador, Turkey, Israel, Haiti, Brazil, Greece, Uruguay, East Timor, Nicaragua, South Korea, Argentina, Chile, the Philippines and Indonesia, for example, killed in all cases by forces inspired and subsidized by the United States. Why did they die? They died because to one degree or another they dared to question the status quo, the endless plateau of poverty, disease, degradation and oppression which is their birthright. On behalf of the dead, we must regard the breathtaking discrepancy between US government language and US government action with the absolute contempt it merits.

The United States has in fact—since the end of the Second World

War—pursued a brilliant, even witty, strategy. It has exercised a sustained, systematic, remorseless and quite clinical manipulation of power worldwide, while masquerading as a force for universal good. But at least now—it can be said—the US has come out of its closet. The smile is still there of course (all US presidents have always had wonderful smiles) but the posture is infinitely more naked and more blatant than it has ever been. The Bush administration, as we all know, has rejected the Kyoto agreement, has refused to sign an agreement which would regulate the trade of small arms, has distanced itself from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty and the Biological Weapons Convention. In relation to the latter the US made it quite clear that it would agree to the banning of biological weapons as long as there was no inspection of any biological weapons factory on American soil. The US has also refused to ratify the proposed International Criminal Court of Justice. It is bringing into operation the American Service Members Protection Act which will permit the authorization of military force to free any American soldier taken into International Criminal Court custody. In other words they really will 'Send in the Marines'.

Arrogant, indifferent, contemptuous of International Law, both dismissive and manipulative of the United Nations: this is now the most dangerous power the world has ever known—the authentic 'rogue state', but a 'rogue state' of colossal military and economic might. And Europe—especially the United Kingdom—is both compliant and complicit, or as Cassius in Julius Caesar put it: we 'peep about to find ourselves dishonourable graves'.

There is, however, as we have seen, a profound revulsion and disgust with the manifestations of US power and global capitalism which is growing throughout the world and becoming a formidable force in its own right. I believe a central inspiration for this force has been the actions and indeed the philosophical stance of the Zapatistas in Mexico. The Zapatistas say (as I understand it): 'Do not try to define us. We define ourselves. We will not be what you want us to be. We will not accept the destiny you have chosen for us. We will not accept your terms. We will not abide by your rules. The only way you can eliminate us is to destroy us and you cannot destroy us. We are free.'

These remarks seem to me even more valid now than when I made them on September 10. The 'rogue state' has—without

thought, without pause for reflection, without a moment of doubt, let alone shame—confirmed that it is a fully-fledged, award-winning, gold-plated monster. It has effectively declared war on the world. It knows only one language—bombs and death. 'And still they smiled and still the horror grew.'

Karim Raslan
Malaysia

When I was six years old television—*Lassie*, *Hi Chaparral* and *The Monkees*—was launched in Malaysia. It happened on the same day that a wooden crate containing the twenty-three volumes of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* was deposited outside our house in Kuala Lumpur. Or maybe I'm mistaken? No one in the family can remember now. But whatever the case, TV shows like *Bewitched* with Elizabeth Montgomery wrinkling her nose in order to cast her spells and the fat burgundy-coloured volumes were America for me: light, frivolous and deliciously silly on the one hand, sublime and serious on the other.

Thirty-two years after the encyclopedia's unexpected arrival and sitting in here in an airless New York room, I have begun to realize how those unprepossessing books helped to shape the way I see the world, think and write. They started it. They made me question. They gave me a deep commitment to the power of rational thought, and an equally profound scepticism of the revelatory and of established authority (both secular and divine).

As the forces of Islamic conservatism gather strength and move to silence the singers, the poets and the writers there are times when I wish I'd never opened the wretched books and never known words like inquiry, doubt and enlightenment. But it is too late to relive the past—too late to change what we have done. What we have learned we cannot now unlearn.

At night, back then, the entire household, including the servants, would gather around the small flickering black-and-white television in my father's library. With the lights dimmed and bowls of crispy deep-fried salted anchovies smeared in chilli paste and stacks of prawn crackers to sustain us, we'd watch the evening's transmission. *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.*, *Daktari*, reruns of *I Love Lucy*—anything at all—we weren't discriminating. The adults laughed at Barbara Eden's

harem pants in *I Dream of Jeannie* and sighed whenever the film detective Charlie Chan said, 'This is Number One Son.'

While everyone was concentrating on the television I would move towards the bookshelves. I had developed a special game that only I could play. Quietly, with my eyes closed, I would take down one of the volumes of the encyclopedia. Opening the leather covers, I'd try and guess what I'd find: would it be Napoleon, Alliterative, Zug, Maharashtra or Ethiopia? Having found the subject, whatever it was, I'd read the entry, quickly, before my absence was noted.

What was it or who was it? Madach, Imre: Hungarian poet (1823–64). What did he do? He wrote *The Tragedy of Man*. Then I'd search for photographs—hoping to find ones I'd never seen before. I loved gazing at the images of other countries: Balinese dancers, homes in California, steel mills in Siberia, Thai temples and the Great Wall of China. Having satisfied my curiosity I'd return the volume to the shelves and start again, repeating the game.

The arrival of the crate containing the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* coincided with extraordinary and unsettling events. Neil Armstrong landed on the moon. In Malaysia, there were race riots between the Muslim Malays and the Chinese, following a hotly contested general election. Nineteen sixty-nine was an evil year for the country.

Unsurprisingly, though not disappointingly for my brothers and me, the schools were closed. We were confined to the house, where we grew extremely bored. Because we lived on the outskirts of the city in a hilly, wooded enclave, we had little real sense of what was taking place elsewhere in the country except when visitors turned up with stories of brutal killings and revenge attacks—stories that our parents tried their best to keep from us. The new encyclopedia was a welcome distraction from all the hushed and anxious conversations and I buried myself in its pages.

I found the name perplexing—Britannica but not British? No, my mother explained, definitely not British (although it had been once). Later I wondered how I could ever have made such a mistake. There was no way that something as vast and comprehensive and all-encompassing as the encyclopedia could have come from England, my mother's home. England was just too tired. It was small, quaint and tradition-bound. Houses were two-up, two-down: pinched and narrow. As far as I could tell from my father's library, the British

had particular preoccupations: antiques, stately homes and Winston Churchill. America was different.

With so much time on my hands and no school, I spent the days poring over the pictures, maps and diagrams. The encyclopedia was interesting about anything and everything: temples in Thailand, dams in Egypt, coffee in Brazil, reproductive systems, nuclear fusion, steel production in Sverdlovsk as well as Sartre, Camus, and Jackson Pollock's squiggly paintings. I was amazed by their ambition and magnificence.

But I would be lying if I said that all the images were uniformly positive. There was one photograph from the encyclopedia that always left me with a sense of foreboding. It was a picture that showed a young mixed-race family sitting on the veranda of their 'spacious' Congolese bungalow in Leopoldville. The angular lines of the house and blinding whiteness of the sunlight reminded me of our home and Malaysia.

The father was African and a professional. From the way he held his head, erect and confident, I suspected that he might be a banker like my father. There was a small chocolate-coloured boy sitting by the European woman. They looked to all intents and purposes no different from us. They were modern, they were educated and they were prepared for the future. However, I knew the image was false. Malaysian troops had served in the UN peacekeeping mission and everyone had an uncle or cousin who'd been in Central Africa, who'd returned with stories. Congolese society had collapsed. Their lives had not fulfilled the promise held out by the encyclopedia. Something dark and evil had reclaimed their world.

Raja Shehadeh
Palestine

Ever since I was a child I have been losing friends and relatives to America. I remember one summer afternoon sitting on a green wicker chair, which had first to be cleared of dry pine needles, in the garden of the Ramallah Grand Hotel. Trees rustled in the breeze. I was just ten years old. My friend, Issa Mitri and I had been allowed to join a group of older guys who were saying farewell to Issa's brother. He was leaving the next day for the US, the first member of his family to emigrate.

I had not heard that word before. Did it mean he would never come back? Issa solemnly confirmed that this was so. He was more proud than sad. I looked at his brother Elias, a tall, slightly stooped young man with a shy face. He didn't look particularly happy. I could not understand why. Travelling to America was to me then like going to heaven. I could not understand why he was not utterly blissful.

A few years later Issa left Ramallah to finish high school in America. This was soon after the 1967 war and Israel's occupation of the West Bank, and the Mitri family had decided he would be safer there. His mother went with him to keep house. His father, who reported for *Newsweek*, remained alone for a few months and then decided to pack his bags. I remember seeing him before he left and asking him if he was happy to be leaving. There was rancour in his voice as he told me: 'I have long been dreaming of the time when I would no longer have to follow your father around to get his comments on the situation.' My father was a political maverick. A few days after the war he had called for a peaceful resolution of the conflict based on the partition of the land into two states, Israel and Palestine, the Palestinian state to be created in the areas occupied by Israel in 1967. That was then a novel proposal, and it earned him few friends among Palestinians or Israelis.

There are tens of thousands of Ramallah people, like the Mitris, who have settled permanently in America. The few who come back for brief summer visits parade up and down Main Street in their Bermudas and baseball hats, stopping at the ice cream parlour to reminisce with its proprietor in an old accent that you hardly ever hear in Ramallah today. The migration has been going on since the end of the nineteenth century; today there are more Ramallah people in the US than in Ramallah. Before 1967 that was how most Palestinians related to America—via the good things about the country that they heard from their migrant friends and relations. After 1967, America entered our life in a different way.

After Israel occupied the Palestinian territories, it began almost immediately to claim large areas of land surrounding our towns and villages for the building of Jewish settlements. This was an expensive enterprise. Without American largesse, both official and private, this massive assault on our countryside would not have been possible.

When the British ruled Palestine during the Mandate period, they

didn't expropriate Arab land to build Jewish settlements. They fulfilled the terms of the mandate that called for the creation of a national home for the Jews in Palestine in other less provocative and costly ways. The roads they built were cheap. They followed the contours of the hills. And they were still used well after the Mandate ended in May 1948. In the early Eighties, when I accompanied my father, whose driving was as perilous as his politics, to the court in Nablus I would hear him curse the British as he took the turns so abruptly that my stomach jumped. 'Instead of cutting through in a straight line they had to go around every damn hill,' he would complain. He had just returned from his first trip to the US and was captivated by the American spirit. He believed the Middle East should follow the American example and open up its borders for immigration. The influx of new blood would rid us of our interminable squabbles. How he proposed to convince Israel to abandon its dream of Jewish purity I never knew. In any case, I had no time to ask; it was only a passing fancy.

My father began his legal practice in Jaffa in 1935 when Palestine was still undivided. By the time I began to practise law, the West Bank was under Israeli occupation. On my way to courts in different parts of the country, I could see heavy Israeli machinery flattening the tops of hills. Many of the settlers were enthusiastic American Jews who dreamed of being pioneers. They used the tactics of colonizers everywhere: surveying, mapping, developing spurious legal arguments to justify their plunder, and terrorizing local Palestinians who stood in their way. 'Transfer' was the euphemism used by the Israeli parties which advocated ethnic cleansing. To many Palestinians it appeared that American money funded this settlement project just as America's pioneering history vindicated it.

Within a few years Israeli settlements came to dominate the Palestinian landscape. Next came the need for new roads to connect them to Israel; not the old British-style meandering roads but American-style straight four-lane highways that cut through the hills that stood in the way. Palestine is tiny and its countryside precious, yet by 1984 Israeli planners had developed a fully fledged road plan which superimposed on the old north–south road grid a scheme of east–west highways that would cut in half the commuting time between the West Bank's new dormitory settlements and the centre

of Israel. The plan needed billions of America dollars to implement. Funding was again no problem.

In the context of the Middle East conflict, roads may seem a small thing, but they have done a kind of spiritual damage. Gone is that attractive stretch of serpentine road that meandered downhill into the lower wadi that led into Nablus, an ancient city cupped between the mountains of Ebal and Gerizim. Gone are the gorgeous, dramatic views. Now the expensive new highway cuts through the hill and all you can see as you drive is a cutting.

But American assistance did not stop at the funding of ideologically motivated programmes. Last July my cousin was at a wedding reception in a hotel on the southern outskirts of Ramallah when an F16 fighter jet dropped a hundred-pound bomb on a nearby building. Everything had been quiet. There had not been any warning of an imminent air attack. The young couple were exchanging rings. The wedding cake was about to be served. When the missile zoomed over the hotel, the aluminium frames of the large French windows were torn asunder, all the glass shattered, the powerful security doors burst out of their frames. The wedding cake became encrusted with glass and the guests along with the waiters all hit the floor. The target, an old house next to the hotel where the reception was being held, was obliterated. You could not tell that a house had ever stood on that land. Something happened to my cousin that evening. He felt he had been through the worst. He felt he had died and was surprised afterwards to find he was still alive. He was also emboldened. Fear had been wrested out of him. He did not hate America. He studied there. On his last trip to New York he had visited the Twin Towers in New York. He fully appreciated the immensity of the tragedy. When the bombing took place he was worried about his brother who often takes the Boston–Los Angeles flight in the course of his work. Yet when I asked him what he thought of the country he indicated that he dismissed it as a lackey of Israel, giving it unlimited military assistance and never censoring its use of US weaponry against innocent civilians.

Most Americans may never know why my cousin turned his back on their country. But in America the parts are larger than the whole. It is still possible that the optimism, energy and opposition of Americans in their diversity may yet turn the tide and make America listen.

Tara Bray Smith

Hawaii

In the early evening of September 10, just before sunset, I boarded a red-eye bound from Honolulu, my childhood home, to New York City, the place where I live today. I say 'place where I live today' because I've always had a problem calling anywhere besides Hawaii my home. Hawaii is where I was born; it's where my family lives, where my ancestors are buried, five generations back. Though I've now lived here almost as long as I once lived there (I'm thirty-one, I left when I was seventeen), I still carry a Hawaii driver's licence. It's white; a rainbow stretches across it. The computer-generated photo floating above the spectrum makes me look too tan, as if I'd just come up from the beach. The whole thing is so aggressively cheery it actually makes ticket agents laugh.

HNL–NYC: a trip members of my family have made many times before. Fleeing the plantation, they steamed to New York, not London or Paris. New York was our centre, our empire. Bright, independent women—always with a vaguely sapphic air about them—came to New York to make something of themselves.

They were great-aunts and great-great-aunts. Each floated about in her earnest, unmarried way, never leaving a family behind, never rooting herself in the city. Still, New York, and more specifically, Manhattan, probably seemed—as it seems to me now—like a kind of home. There are superficial similarities, of course: both are islands (New York's peaks and valleys a concrete version of Hawaii's eroded volcanic silhouettes); both breathtaking (the length of the city as seen from the FDR, glittering at night); both solipsistic, in the way only islands can be. But there's something more. New York reminded us of how we felt as *haole*—foreigners, white people—in Hawaii. Not so much in that we belonged, but in knowing that we never would. No one does. Belonging is a fiction easier to maintain, somehow, in the bulwark of the continental United States. In Hawaii, as in New York, everyone is an outsider, except maybe the Hawaiians themselves, and even they came from Tahiti.

It's what makes New York familiar, even lovable. On September 10 I was looking forward to returning. My flight, nearly direct, was set to arrive into LaGuardia at 10.49 the next morning. We landed, instead, in Detroit.