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October 2012 - May 2013

Literature, Art, Music, and Poetry

Needful Things

One of the best parts about being a professor is the opportunity to write. I love writing, and I've been writing for pleasure and therapy for many years. But a book-length project can be a tough thing, and like the others, my third book, *Illegal Migrations and the Huckleberry Finn Problem*, became a grinding chore, a never-ending task that took up most of my writing life for the better part of seven years. Gowan asked in 2007, "When will it be done?" and I'd reply, "In 2008," and then in 2009, Gowan asked again, and I would swear, "Next year," and then the next year came and went, and then Gowan stopped asking, figuring it would never be done and that it was turning her husband into an habitual liar. It was becoming a sick joke: when the girls were bad, when they wanted to deflect criticism, when they were feeling naughty and wanted to see mom get into it with dad, they, too, asked, "Is your book done, dad?" Believe me, I wanted to be done, I wanted it to be over, if just to silence these little varmints, but sometimes a book takes a life of its own, it takes over your life, and it's not done until it wants to be done. I wanted to write an interesting and successful book, but that monster consumed my life and made me feel a failure, and an unfinished one at that. Huck himself complained at the end of *Huckleberry Finn* about the trouble of writing a book, and man, he wasn't kidding.

I think part of the reason it took me so long was because I wanted the book to be perfect—not just well-researched and a solid piece of academic work, but I wanted it to turn out aesthetically beautiful, to be a pleasure to read, and to be compelling no matter where a person might open it up. Isn't that the test of a great book? Open anywhere and you're captivated. For those who start from the beginning and stay with you until the end, the experience of reading the whole book should be satisfying on another level, like having a great meal or listening to a great album, walking through a well-laid art exhibit or witnessing an epic movie. Great books and

works of art should take us out of ourselves, such that when we are back in the real world, we won't see things in quite the same way. They make the familiar unfamiliar, they also help us relate things that we hadn't known were related, and they can tell us deep and meaningful things about ourselves. Now, I have no idea if or whether *Illegal Migrations* will do that for some readers, but having *that* goal in mind made the writing agonizing and more painful than usual. I wanted my book to be Great—it's not like I would get fired if it wasn't great, and there were no other serious repercussions if the book sucked, but if you have tenure at the University of California, if you're writing about compelling topics like structural inequality and law and people who are out of status, why not aim for a Great Work, something moving, striking, original, and persuasive?

Also, great writing is not useful like a can opener or a toothpick, but it can get into your head, make you think about who you are and how you should behave, and it can change the way you relate to yourself and to the world. I wanted my book to be Useful in a big way. If the attempt fails, better to fail spectacularly than fail with a whimper and then be forgotten. I wrote two books before this one, the first by myself and the second with my brother. Both were for academic audiences, and people in college are forced to read them, and our professor colleagues cite these books, too, but they're not exactly life-changing works. They're useful but not Useful. I wanted something that might help us think through one of the more vexing areas of public law in the United States, but I also wanted to write a book that might change the way people think about themselves, their identities, their common history, and their own moral positions. I wanted to speak to people who will struggle with these issues well after college and in day-to-day life.

Throughout my own education, I learned that the best writing is like a conversation—it's a neat trick, to arrange words on a page just so, and to do it so well that they can travel across time and space. The best writers are so *present*, and the best art and literature and music and poetry have the power to inspire long after their creators have perished from this earth. Being human beings, these artists and writers were imperfect, obviously, but what's amazing was that their art and literature and music and poetry were near perfect, almost perfect, and so close to the truth of their subject, whatever that subject might be. They speak to you. When writing a piece of work that might be Great and Useful, I thought, it'd be a good idea to surround myself with inspiring art, literature, music, and poetry. It happens that many of my own favorites made their way into my own book, and it's my pleasure to share some of the specifics here.

Jim

Most people reading *Huckleberry Finn* think that it's about Huck, that it's about his adventures on the frontier, his escape from civilization, that it's sort of about slavery, but not really. I think this is because it's hard to *see*. White supremacy in the United States makes all of us invisible, as Ralph Ellison might say, and so most white people see Huck and Tom and the King and the Duke, but they can't or won't see Jim as a full person, the most likeable person in the whole story, the man with a wife and kids, the man who can be sold and chained during that time and in the setting when the story takes place. Miss Watson can legally sell him. Jim is aware of how white people can't see him or the humanity of anyone like him, and so he runs away, and then he makes do, he must go along, he hides, and he manipulates Huck to turn the boy into an instrument toward his freedom. I myself had a hard time seeing it, too, but Jim is the center of the story.

Mark Twain knew, though, that a book entitled *Jim* would never sell to a white audience, and so sly fox that he was, he called it something else, and, I think, like a man projecting a more enlightened world after his death, he hoped perhaps that readers in the future might see the slavery so central to the story, maybe also feel guilt or sense the biting commentary about human cruelty that the book depicts as well. Twain's frontier is a lawless place, his book is like a conventional Western in this way, but in this Western, people could be sold and branded like cattle, grown men hunt and kill children within feuds that are as mindless and they are perpetual, and blatant, public murder is a source of amusement. At a time when his countrymen were pinning the end of the frontier, Twain refused to be romantic about it, as he showed the frontier in all of its brutality, and yet within a story written in a disarming narrative structure. Huck tells the story—this poor, orphaned, uncouth boy—a white person so far in the margins of American society that most respectable Americans might miss the horrors of what he had related.

I'm not sure it's such a good idea to teach *Huckleberry Finn* in American high schools, as most American high school kids may be too immature to pick up the underlying meaning of the story, so caught up as they are in the "nigger" this and the "nigger" that, as though they'd been given permission to speak freely the most unspeakable word in American English. Twain may have been hoping for a more enlightened America, but I remember a pack of white boys

pretending to talk like Jim, nigger this, nigger that, and hearing them in my own high school made me feel so hateful. I wanted to pummel their blonde heads into a pulp because they just didn't get the story and they thought instead that it was funny to talk like nigger this, nigger that. White people shouldn't read *Huck Finn* until they're older, until they have children of their own and can think concretely about how it might feel if someone else could sell them away from their families or maybe sell *their* kids for money, or rape the girls, or beat them all without cause, or chain them together and kill them. White people reading *Huckleberry Finn* might *still* think it's primarily about Huck Finn, and unless they're taught otherwise, they might miss the world from Jim's point of view. Assume, for a moment, Jim's point of view.

If Miss Watson had owned *me*, if she had sold *me* away from my wife and kids, it would take a miracle for me not to kill her, kill every white person that got in my way, and then run like hell with my whole family. Jim was more methodical and level-headed than I am (obviously), and so he ran away by himself, and then he plotted how he would, in time, steal his family away from slavery. Jim shed no blood, but notice how the white people pinned a murder on him anyway—Huck's murder—and how easy it was for them to accuse Jim even though he's innocent and they're all crazy. Huck was warped, too: he thinks it's a bad thing for Jim to run away and to want to get his family out of slavery, and this is because he was as limited and as stupid as the white boys that I saw in my high school. By telling the story from Huck's point of view, Twain uses his character's underdeveloped conscience to heighten the tension within the story—will Huck tell about Jim, and thus return Jim back into slavery?

Yet truly, if you were black, if you were a slave, if you had no rights that a white man was bound to respect, if you were Jim—why in the world would you obey American law? Imagine the virtue necessary to care about white people, to rescue someone as moronic as Tom Sawyer in the last section of *Huck Finn*. It's so obvious that Twain intended Jim to be the primary hero of his story, and for me, one of the more implausible episodes in the novel occurs when Tom Sawyer is dying and Jim helps him and thereby gives up his only chance at freedom. I would have taken off and let that brat die.

I've read *Huckleberry Finn* at least a dozen times from cover to cover, from the eleventh grade when I was murderous, through college, and then after grad school, when I was applying for academic jobs, and I got an interview at the University of Texas at Austin, and I did some research on my prospective colleagues in American Studies. "It's a good idea to get a good

sense of what faculty members are doing in the Department where they're thinking of hiring you, dumbass," said Ed, my older brother and my endless font for unsolicited (yet wise) advice. I was being hired in Asian American Studies and American Studies, but as there was no one yet full-time in Asian American Studies, there wasn't a whole lot to read there. My colleagues in American Studies were an interesting bunch: Steve Hoelscher and Janet Davis were from the Midwest; he studied ethnic white folks and their festivals, she was working on a book about traveling circuses in the United States. Jeff Meikle's first book was called *American Plastic*, and Mark Smith knew everything about American social scientists in the early 20th century. Steve, Janet, Jeff, and Mark were wonderful, engaging people, and they didn't frighten me at all.

I worried, though, about two senior professors—William Goetzmann and Shelley Fisher Fishkin. They outwrote everyone in the Department, but of the two, Goetzmann was uber senior, he had won the Pulitzer Prize and the Parkman Prize for *Exploration and Empire* (1967), a book that I'd read in college, and he was one of the most important figures in the establishment of American Studies as a separate field in the 1960s. He kept publishing—the man was a workhorse, producing excellent scholarly monographs at regular five-year intervals for over three decades.

Fishkin was younger, but she was a dynamo, too: she had already built an international reputation as a scholar of American writers, especially Twain, and her books read like honey, so thick and rich with insight. I didn't know of her work until March 2000, but even after the interviews were over, her written work was addictive, and it brought me back to Twain. I knew that Twain was a Great American Writer, but Fishkin persuaded me that he was a genius, that *Huckleberry Finn* was the most amazing novel ever, that it was much more philosophically interesting than I'd thought. I was too immature to appreciate these things when I first read it, and so I re-read it and saw things that were right there that I hadn't seen before.

I got the job at UT, but the first faculty meeting was horrifying for reasons that I will not dwell upon here. Suffice it to say that I had no idea that distinguished faculty members could be so...prickly. They both went to Yale (he in History, she in English) but they otherwise didn't seem to have anything else in common. Maybe it was that Steve, Janet, Jeff, and Mark liked me and wanted me to take the job, but no one warned me that faculty meetings in American Studies were going to be like Sundays with the Shepherds and Grangerfords. Faculty meetings in Asian American Studies were more pleasant because it was mostly me. Oh, there were quite a

few faculty members from other Departments that were committed to Asian American Studies, including Art Sakamoto from Sociology and Mia Carter from English, both of whom were excellent mentors, but I could tell that they were trying hard not to freak me out whenever we got together. On the other hand, my senior colleagues in American Studies were nice to me most of the time, just not always polite with one another. After several Sundays, though, I confess that I got to taking sides.

I don't think it's a good idea to glorify "American civilization," or even to talk of it as though it were not an oxymoron. I think *Huckleberry Finn* is one of the best American novels ever precisely because it is so critical of American civilization, and I think many of its central lessons apply as much now as they did back when the novel was first published. Professor Fishkin and I are not friends, we're not close and I haven't seen her in years, but when *Illegal Migrations and the Huckleberry Finn Problem* comes into the world, she's one of the first people who'll get a free copy. I'm not even sure she'll like the book nor approve of my own idiosyncratic reading of Twain, but her inspiration is undeniable, and so Professor Fishkin, if you're reading this now, thank you. I've read many other fine scholars of American culture and American literature while I was conducting research for the second chapter of *Illegal Migrations*, the one about *Huckleberry Finn*, and I remain convinced that Professor Fishkin is the most observant and finest Twain scholar of her generation or of any generation. She's made a convincing case that Twain is not just a great American novelist, but one of the most compelling theorists of American history and culture, as well as the first white American novelist to appreciate the African American vernacular in all of its variety.

Twain grew up in a society of nigger this and nigger that, he thought there was nothing wrong with slavery as a young boy and as a young man, and yet his moral vision evolved to a place where he saw the horror of white supremacy at the same moment that he saw African Americans as human beings. Jim is a fully-fleshed literary creation—he gets angry, exasperated, and frustrated. He is circumspect; he knows when it's safe to speak his mind and when he must hold his tongue. He must be smarter than all the white people around him, and he knows what to say, how to get revenge, and how to get out of a pinch. He is also a loving man—he expresses guilt and regret and longing, he misses his wife and daughter, and he treats Huckleberry Finn far better than Huck's own father. Jim is the only hero in *Huckleberry Finn*, the man whose actions have no moral ambiguity, even though his running away is illegal and it creates a moral crisis for

the title character. Some scholars have said that Twain didn't know what to do with Jim as a free man, as he was at the end of the story, and maybe this was true, but then again, Twain would not have been alone in that confusion. Majorities of white people *still* don't know what to make of free black people (or Chinese people or illegal immigrants). It's not clear that they can see now what Twain saw so clearly more than a century ago, and so I hope that many of my own readers will revisit Twain once again.

Treasure Map on My Hand



The cover image for *Illegal Migrations* is from a painting by my sister-in-law, Ajean Lee Ryan, an Assistant Professor of Art at the Colorado State University in Fort Collins. Ajean had artistic sensibilities ever since she was a girl and her parents tried to talk her out of them. She persisted, though, through UCLA, the San Francisco Art Institute (where she met her husband Trevor Ryan), and Cal, where she finished her MFA. In 2000, her MFA work was on display at the University Art Museum in Berkeley, and it seemed to me the most interesting work in that entire exhibit by far. In her sculptures and installations and in her paintings, Ajean has explored some of the darker aspects of the domestic sphere—little girls appear as spiders, trapped in

complex delicate webs, they wear clothes that are both beautiful and constricting, and they live in houses that are dark yet beautiful. In an installation, Ajean used pink bubble wrap to create an expansive landscape, she put dead bees inside a few of the bubbles, and thus captured the compartmentalized quality of urban life in San Francisco and New York. From a distance, the installation was quite pretty, but in the dead bees, in their separated, anomic arrangement, Ajean seemed to be saying that our own social orderings aren't so different from the lesser life forms. One of her most striking photographs is of a bunch of ripe grapes, glistening and full, but all cut in half, each orb of grape exposing its fleshiness in a way that'll make you wince. Her landscapes are overpowering and brooding, where bright colors are surrounded in sharp contrast against backgrounds of murky tones.

Maybe because she's my sister-in-law, but I think her most recent work is a response of sorts to motherhood, just as her earlier work might be a response to daughterhood. For heaven's sake, she and Trevor named their kid Musa. Musa-like girls wear bright costumes in muted background colors; they dream of tigers and water and birds and flying; they wear crowns that evoke specialness and chosen-ness, but the accoutrements are tacky ornate in Ajean's art, made of cheap materials, the way a democrat might ridicule royalty. One of her images reminded me of an exchange I had with one of my own girls, where Isabel expressed a desire to be a princess, and I replied that monarchy was a bad idea. Most sensible people have overthrown or killed their monarchs, I said, even the little princesses. Isabel looked at me as though I had crushed her dreams, and I suppose this was because I did. An inner sorrow awaits little girls, most of whom were not born princesses anyway, and so much of that sorrow is socially-embedded: the world is full of danger, evil men and women surround them, and as much as we might want to protect them from that world, we are ourselves of that world, we *are* the danger, the dark colors crowding in, the tigers, the water, the people who make our kids feel always on the cusp of busted. We are not all Pap Finn, but I think most parents are prone to Pap Finn moments. You are (not) special, you are (not) chosen, you may very likely become a victim of some creepy thing, and I won't be able to protect you because *I* may be the creepy thing. Home is a spider web that is supposed to be safe, but it's also a place of death and killing.

The way Ajean tells it, *Treasure Map on My Hand* is a painting inspired by a photograph she saw in a magazine, an image of a raft that had washed up in Florida during the early 1990s, when Haitians were fleeing their country in droves, when our government was intercepting them

at sea and shipping them back to their civil war or to the federal “detention facility” on Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. This raft made it to American shores, but none of the passengers did—the boat had no people, it just had this beautiful, patterned blanket that had once protected the living from wind and sun. No one knows how many people died in the water during those horrible months, in small rafts like this one that were no match for the Caribbean Sea or the Atlantic Ocean. The painting is a stunning piece—the blackness in the interior of the raft, the blackness in the left corner, the contrasting blues and greens, bubble-like whites suggesting...suggesting what? People? Their souls? Are they floating to heaven? Are they sinking to the bottom of the dark blue ocean and into the blackness of that left corner? Looking at the painting as an American citizen, knowing that Americans had supported military dictatorships in Haiti, aware of how many poorer Haitians suffered under these dictators and their amoral, money-grubbing, land-hungry allies, and remembering how our government and our society did not want refugees from that place, the painting condemns the American viewer. Americans saw and didn’t see the Haitians drowning all around them. Americans consider themselves very good people, but our own collective indifference made that raft a place of death and killing.

It throws you off, though: the image is all color and it’s beautiful, massive, even, as it hangs now inside my entryway in Santa Barbara. Most of our visitors do not see the dead people or the sorrow, nor do they feel guilt or sense the commentary about human cruelty that the painting depicts. I saw this painting originally in Denver when it was hanging in an art gallery, and right away, I knew. I knew. Ajean had to beat out several hundred people to get her job as a professor of art, and she has extraordinary skill and all of this is obvious, and I’m no art critic nor formally trained in art, but this is an amazing piece of art. It’s very haunting, one of her finest works, and it visits a darker place that most people—most Americans—would prefer not to see, if they ever, in fact, saw it in the first place. The painting is in my house because we are connected through Musa: Ajean was up for tenure, she needed time and space to work during this past summer, we agreed to watch Musa for about a month, and this painting was the only thing I wanted in return. *Treasure Map on My Hand* is a remarkable piece: the reference to domesticity and to regular simple objects is so distinctive of Ajean’s earlier work, but its emotional depth suggests an artist coming into the height of her powers. This work is haunting and evocative.

“Speak softly, don’t wake the baby...”

Gowan and I have three children. Zoe was born on May 11, 2000. The twins, Isabel and Sophia, were born on April 22, 2001. I liked the name, “Zoe,” because it means “life,” and because Zoe was born almost exactly one year after my mother had died. I was still bitter and grieving when I agreed “to let nature takes its course,” but sure enough, a week later, Gowan was preggers, and there was Zoe in a hospital room in Berkeley in May, the most beautiful creature I’d ever seen. We weren’t exactly planning for the twins either, and yet there she was again, pregnant in Austin, and with mono-amniotic twins. I didn’t know what they were either, but varieties of freakish twinning can occur after conception, and sometimes twins do not develop in separate amniotic sacs. My twins have been sharing a room for eleven years now, but they were sharing an amniotic sac before that, and in such a way that they could have easily killed one another.

Mono-amniotic twins are prone to “accidents.” Cords get wrapped around one another. There is constriction and oxygen deprivation. Death can come suddenly, and when one twin dies, it can poison the other, too. Their odds were not good. 50/50. For two months or so, Gowan was hooked to fetal monitors every day to see if anything bad had happened. The twins made it into the world in a bloody mess on the evening of April 22, when it was getting hot in Austin and when I wasn’t ready to be a father again. I didn’t get Gowan anything—no flowers, or candy, or fried chicken, which was what she’d wanted the morning after Zoe was born.

The twins were way too small: Isabel was under three pounds, Sophie was barely over three pounds. Sophie had a blood clot about two days after the delivery. They were in the neonatal intensive care unit within minutes of being “born,” and we would visit them there for three or four or five or six or seven hours every day, taking turns holding them, which was difficult because they were so wired to different machines, and it was hard to tell which ones were essential or which ones were just noisy. The NICU was a sad place. Several babies died while my twins were in the NICU. The twins were there for seven weeks, and even when they were sprung from the hospital, we had to take monitors with us, attached to each twin, and these were supposed to beep when a heart stopped. The twins were given caffeine to reduce the chances that that would happen.

Writing about it now, the whole thing was surreal and has the quality of a dream. Did it really happen that way? Was it so stressful? I can't remember well, and perhaps it's just as well. Looking at Isabel now, healthy as a pony and as tall as Zoe, you'd never guess that she was the smaller twin, the one who'd had heart trouble. Sophie, however, wasn't as unscathed. Sophie has cerebral palsy, caused by oxygen deprivation that had occurred sometime before or after the delivery. Sophie's had trouble walking and didn't stand on her own until she was almost four. She's worn braces since she was three, and she needs crutches and a walker, and she uses a wheelchair for longer distances, and she's already had three surgeries of various kinds on her legs and feet to correct for this, that, and the other thing. Intellectually, Sophie's been fine, and considering how things could have gone, this is an enormous blessing.

That she is alive and upright is a miracle of sorts, but children in general are miracles. Sophie, Isabel, and Zoe are marvelous girls. My daughters are stunning, beautiful, and talented young women now, and I do hope they each take after their mother. For many years, dinner has been my favorite time of day, as it's the special time where we sit and eat and talk and goof. Gowan's a better "cooker," and when we have these set meals, I'm reminded every day how lucky we are to have each other, how lucky I am to have this family. They've rooted me, and sometimes, I feel ambivalent about that rootedness—I catch myself thinking that I would write more often if I'd had fewer children, if I didn't have to do math with them (which puts me and them in a crabby mood not conducive to writing) or help them find the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World or take them to the library or go buy more school supplies or figure out whether she actually needs that next operation. I have colleagues who travel the world, and they send annoying emails "sent from Guangzhou" or from "fieldwork in Paris." I would have more time and money if not for these varmints. And yet surely I'd be a lot dumber if not for the children, if I didn't get to see and to experience the world through their eyes.

This is because Isabel just sees things in unique ways, Zoe is razor sharp, and Sophie exceeds all expectations. That kid has trouble walking but she can swim like a sunfish, something I didn't think was possible until her mother proved otherwise. Zoe can play the violin like the devil himself had taught her. Isabel is empathy and creativity incarnate, and to depths unusual for any man, woman, or child. These girls are incredible. Being a father to them has been a terrific experience, and I'm quite convinced that I've gotten more out of being a dad than I've put into fatherhood. I know how much they mean to me because when I'm planning for a

trip, I'm excited to get away, but when I'm away, even for a day or two, I get to missing them, and I want dinner again at my house, surrounded by these girls and their mother. Being apart for longer periods of time—I'm not sure how I would do it. I get into a funk when I'm away for longer than three or four days, and I rarely do such long trips anyway. Even when I'm writing nowadays, I think about the girls, about what I'd like them to learn and to read. I'm discovering that even my academic writing is directed toward them, or rather to the versions of the young women they will become right before my very eyes.

I'm writing about my family now because the epigraph for my book comes from a song by Los Lobos, "A Matter of Time," and the song itself is a conversation between two parents, and it takes place when the baby is sleeping and one of the parents is about to leave the family. The poetry of the song is spare and simple:

1 Speak softly, don't wake the baby.
Come and hold me once more
Before I have to leave,
'Cause there's a lot of work out there
Everything will be fine
And I'll send for you, baby,
Just a matter of time.

2 Our life, the only thing we know.
Come and tell me once more,
Before you have to go,
That there's a better world out there,
Though it don't feel right.
Will it be like I hope,
Just a matter of time?

3 And I hope it's all it seems.
Not another empty dream
There's a time for you and me
In a place living happily.

4 Walk quietly, don't make a sound,
Believe in what you're doing,
I know we can't be wrong.
Don't worry about us here,
It will be alright.
And we'll be there with you,
Just a matter of time.

5 And we'll all be together,
Just a matter of time.
A matter of time,
We'll be together
In a matter of time.
You and me, a matter of time,
It will be like I hoped,
A matter of time.

I love this song, I must have heard this a thousand times, and when this song first appeared in 1989, it still wasn't CDs but LPs, and this was one of the last LPs I'd bought. I played this song for my mother, and she much preferred it over other songs on the album, like "Don't Worry Baby" or "I Got Loaded." "A Matter of Time" is so versatile—it's not clear whether the husband is leaving or it's his wife who's leaving; it's not clear how long they plan to be apart; and it's not obvious whether the couple is even heterosexual.

One can also imagine a wide range of voices filling the song: an Irish peasant leaving for New York in 1830, his wife reassuring him that it won't be "another empty dream"; a Chinese man leaving his wife and child in the mid-19th century, headed for California, his wife telling him not to worry, "We'll be alright"; or a fugitive slave (Jim, maybe) running away because he's about to be sold, leaving his wife and child to find freedom first, then "to send for you, baby, just a matter of time." My father-in-law left from Korea for graduate school in the United States in 1972, when my wife was about two years-old and Ajean was a baby, and I'm certain that he and my mother-in-law spoke in tones similar to these phrases. We live in an age of migration—so many mothers and fathers have left their families to find work, and with hopes and aspirations that are universal and similar and always with that hope of reunion. "We'll be together." "It'll be like I hoped."

David Hidalgo and Louie Perez of Los Lobos have written some great songs together, but this one is special for me because of its subtle poetry and the understated musical arrangement. They wrote the song during a time when illegal immigration was an emergent public concern, when many Americans insisted that "illegal aliens" were a national threat, and that they should all be deported. "Walk quietly, don't make a sound." Is this what a wife might say to a husband

crossing illegally into the United States, as hostile as that place was becoming? Lay low, don't draw attention to yourself. "Believe in what you're doing, I know we can't be wrong." You may be illegal, you may be undocumented, but how is it wrong to want better for yourself and your loved ones? The pursuit of happiness underlying the song itself suggests the pull of a profound American dream, and the dream lies at the core of the desires expressed by these immigrants. And yet the separation is so painful: "there's a better world out there, though it don't feel right." How could it possibly feel right to leave your family, even if it's to support your family?

My own children have meant more to me than anything in the world, this life we have is full of love and caring. We've made a remarkable family for one another, and the thought of being apart is now unthinkable. Because we are affluent, because the wife and I have found a way to live together through all of the stress and hardship, we will never have to experience such a separation. But for many millions of immigrants nowadays, long separations are a fact of life: immigration rules in the United States and in other countries have developed in such a way as to discourage the migration of poorer families. Poorer people in general have a much harder time coming lawfully to affluent countries, including the United States.

Yet to survive, with few other options available, mothers and fathers have migrated alone, often illegally, to find work and to support their loved ones in the countries they've left behind. For these people, crossing international boundaries is dangerous and expensive, and so the separations from their families have grown longer and in many cases, much more painful. Remittances—money sent from migrants working abroad to their families back home—have grown tremendously in recent years, but as many sociologists and social scientists have insisted, money doesn't replace the constant, daily connections between parents and children, the loss of which can cause great suffering. Many immigrant women in the United States take care of other people's children to support their own children. As they play with and care for babies that are not their own, they are reminded every minute of what they're missing.

After having children of my own, this song meant something very different to me, and it resonates with a sorrow and a hope that captures the complex emotions that I feel now about my academic work and my professional life. As I was writing *Illegal Migrations*, I listened to this song many times, just as I listened to *Kiko* (1992) in its entirety many times. Music puts me in a mood to write, especially Los Lobos, and I've listened to so much of their music that it would

have been odd not to include some reference to the band in this book. Like many good things in my life, Los Lobos was an Ed thing, a group he picked up from his hippie days in Berkeley and passed on to me.

To acquire the rights to quote the first three lines of “A Matter of Time,” I got in touch with the attorney for Los Lobos. After a few emails back and forth, she said that “the writers” wanted to see copies of the manuscript, and so I sent two copies, along with a letter about why I wanted to use this song as an epigraph, and they agreed within a week to let me quote from the song. I promised to send them two copies of the book when it was published. I’ve been a fan of this band ever since high school, and so it’s with special pleasure that I’m quoting my favorite Los Lobos song right there in the epigraph. In interviews, Louis Perez has said that “A Matter of Time” was written during a moment when the band had to make some decisions—was it going to be a rock, punk, folk, Mexican American band that cranked out popular hits, or was it going to tackle more complicated personal, political, and socially conscious music that spoke to the unique experiences of the people and communities they knew best? In many ways, the band did both—“A Matter of Time” is not a political song per se, but it tells an enduring story of loss and longing, it humanizes this family, and this conversation between these two parents stays with you.

Something strange happened to me after becoming a father—I came to understand much better the sacrifices that many parents make for their own children, the intense love that can connect and bind a family together, often across vast distances, and the palpable sense of worry and hope that just becomes a part of one’s life as a parent. My in-laws tell me that it never goes away, that sense of worry. This song still speaks to me on all of those levels. You hope for that family in that song, that their dreams do come true, and that they’ll be together again. When I left for graduate school in the fall of 1991, I was so ready to get away, but when I was away, I missed my brother and my mother so much, and I came to appreciate how much I loved and needed them. We grew up without a father, but when I became a father, I also understood what my brother did for me, how much he did for me. My first book was dedicated to my late mother—she passed away in 1999, when death became the cruelest of distances. After mom, though, I’ve wanted to dedicate a book to my big brother. This one is for Edward. I like that dedication, as it honors the best big brother ever, and it still suggests that there will be more books to dedicate, too, for the wife, for the girls, maybe for each lovely one of them.

Mending Wall

Simple, direct speech, a conversational tone, the sound of a distinctive voice or a clear image rendered on a two-dimensional page—these are so hard to achieve as a writer, and yet for some, the right poetry and language seem effortless. I haven't tried to memorize Robert Frost, but his poetry has lived constantly in my memory. The sound of his poetry is so original, so plain, and yet so profound, that I've committed many of his poems to memory with no effort whatsoever. Pablo Neruda, Langston Hughes, William Shakespeare, and Kahlil Gibran have written poetry that is wonderfully sticky in the same way, and yet for me, Frost has been the stickiest of all. When I'm writing, his poetry often pops up in my prose, and it's amusing to see some of his passages there when I'm trying to summarize a long paragraph or a section. Frost has a way of saying what I'm thinking, and I've known the poems so long that it's more likely that they've shaped what I'm thinking and what I've been thinking for as long as I've been thinking. In *Illegal Migrations*, there are numerous passages from Frost, and I'm sure they're easy for some of you to pick out, too.

This year, my daughter Zoe is reading S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* (1967), and I also remembered my first Robert Frost poem in that book.

Nature's first green is gold,
Her hardest hue to hold.
Her early leaf's a flower;
But only so an hour.
Then leaf subsides to leaf.
So Eden sank to grief,
As Dawn turns into day.
Nothing gold can stay.

When I was thinking about the various meanings of the word "company," and thinking back to *Huckleberry Finn* and the moments when Huck and Jim were alone, floating on the raft, the image of them together reminded me of this poem again, and so you'll see a reference to that toward the beginning of Chapter 3. Johnny and Pony Boy discuss this poem in *The Outsiders*,

and for these boys, it's about losing your innocence and coming into an awareness of the bitterness of life; they, too, are alone and cut-off from the wider world when they consider the meaning of Frost's poem. After Johnny dies, the poem seems more funereal for Pony Boy, a meditation about mortality and the fall. As in *Huckleberry Finn*, it's the broader social world with its expectations and problems that intrude upon people who might otherwise be able to enjoy one another in a purer sense. The references to "nature" and "Eden" suggest, though, that as much as "nature" cannot hold on, people cannot remain true or innocent either. It's just not in us. Frost's short masterpiece is one of his saddest and darkest.

Consider another Frost:

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim
Because it was grassy and wanted wear,
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I marked the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I,
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

Volumes of scholarly commentary have been produced about this famous poem, and a great many readers say that this one is their favorite Frosts. It's not my favorite, but it seems to me the most ambiguous, the one where the speaker of the poem can't really tell whether the choices he's made have or haven't been the best. Being from an immigrant family, I've grown up with people who live in the midst of a similar confusion: should I have come to America, or would I have been better off in Korea?

These questions came in circles every time my mother's family got together, and now I hear them again when my in-laws get together, too. Korea was once very poor, completely authoritarian; I hear it's not so bad now. My father-in-law was quite sure that he was making the right choice by coming to America, and by sending for the rest of his family, but when he visits with his old classmates during reunions, he's not so sure anymore. Many of his friends did fine. Coming to America certainly "has made all the difference," though, but was it ultimately better for my father-in-law and his family? Hard to say.

Even when so many Koreans were leaving in the 1970s, his family's departure and my family's own departure were still unconventional paths, "the one less traveled by." I had a dinner one evening with a visiting scholar from Korea and his wife; he was a professor, she was a federal judge in Korea, and the conversation revolved around whether I would have been as "successful" in Korea as I'd been in the United States. Of course, said the professor, John is smart, he would have done fine, and there are lots of scholarships for poorer kids in Korea; no way, said the judge, he might be smart, but John's parents were divorced, scholarships were tough to get without the right connections, and life in Korea in the 1970s just wasn't the same as it is now. As interesting as this conversation was, it's not like any of us could go back and repeat the experiment: way leads on to way, and it wasn't my choice anyway. My mom chose for me, and so being a Korean American wasn't really an identity that I chose, was it? In this age of

mass migration, a lot of people have faced “two roads diverged in a yellow wood,” and as ambivalent as they may feel now or in “somewhere ages and ages hence,” their choices do “make all the difference.” You’ll catch the reference to that last phrase in Chapter 1. The poem’s genius lies in its meditation about human choice, and how it does and doesn’t ease that bothersome feeling that randomness governs our lives.

This sense of ambivalence comes up also in the context of boundaries erected against others, the kind that are built to make others feel unwelcome, and so “Mending Wall,” another Frost poem, is quite appropriate:

Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,
And spills the upper boulders in the sun,
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.
The work of hunters is another thing:
I have come after them and made repair
Where they have left not one stone on a stone,
But they would have the rabbit out of hiding,
To please the yelping dogs. The gaps I mean,
No one has seen them made or heard them made,
But at spring mending-time we find them there.
I let my neighbor know beyond the hill;
And on a day we meet to walk the line
And set the wall between us once again.
We keep the wall between us as we go.
To each the boulders that have fallen to each.
And some are loaves and some so nearly balls
We have to use a spell to make them balance:
“Stay where you are until our backs are turned!”
We wear our fingers rough with handling them.
Oh, just another kind of out-door game,
One on a side. It comes to little more:

There where it is we do not need the wall:
He is all pine and I am apple orchard.
My apple trees will never get across
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.
He only says, "Good fences make good neighbors."
Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder
If I could put a notion in his head:
"Why do they make good neighbors? Isn't it
Where there are cows?
But here there are no cows.
Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out,
And to whom I was like to give offence.
Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That wants it down." I could say "Elves" to him,
But it's not elves exactly, and I'd rather
He said it for himself. I see him there
Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top
In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.
He moves in darkness as it seems to me—
Not of woods only and the shade of trees.
He will not go behind his father's saying,
And he likes having thought of it so well
He says again, "Good fences make good neighbors."

As I'd mentioned in Chapter 9, Senator Jeff Sessions of Alabama did say, "Good fences make good neighbors," during a debate about expanding the border fence with Mexico in 2006. A few reporters thought that he was quoting Robert Frost, but others suggested that he was just repeating this truism that appears twice in Frost's poem. Sessions might have been as unthinking as the "old stone savage," repeating and redoing endlessly a phrase and a boundary that don't make much sense. There is, of course, in this poem, too, a sense of ambivalence—we do seem to

need boundaries, even though “something there is that doesn’t love a wall,” and yet the argument of the poem seems to be that these boundaries should perhaps be more thoughtful and thought out, rather than mechanical and rote. *Why* do we need this wall? Walls shouldn’t be something we do just because we’ve always done them.

Again, from my own skewed perspective as an academic, as someone who’s thought for a while about political boundaries between people, “Mending Wall” captures a divide between those of us who think that national boundaries are unfortunate, outmoded expressions of sovereignty, and those who can’t seem to build them fast enough. Most political boundaries are imaginary or pegged to shifting landmarks: the Yalu River, the Rio Grande, or the U.S.-Canadian border. Many borders are not what they once were: the line between France and Germany, for example, was once laced with bombs and fences and lethal obstacles; now, a traveler hardly notices moving from Germany to France or vice versa, along the multiple rail lines that now stitch these two countries together. And whether you’re on one side or the other, you’ll be using the same money anyway, a fact that would surely surprise the Germans and French of six decades ago. These places that once had lethal borders seem to have gotten over them. They seem to have disarmed fine, too, as there is now no thought of one declaring war against the other.

In contrast, places that still have hard boundaries nowadays are sad places: the U.S.-Mexico border; the DMZ between the Koreas; or the new walls between Israel and Gaza. They’re usually built to keep out “threats” to the nation, but these threats often present themselves in the form of desperate people. The border between the United States and Mexico is a one-sided thing, designed to keep out the most desperate Mexicans, because people who are not the least desperate in Mexico can usually ignore it. In an age of air travel, walls are most obviously built for people who can’t afford plane tickets.

Indeed, the trouble with political boundaries nowadays is that they are often designed with poorer and less fortunate people in mind, people who are perceived and coded as threats, burdens, and criminals. Even if they get beyond the walls and barriers designed to keep them out, there are still laws and policies that make them vulnerable and place them under a constant surveillance. They are “non-people”: without formal identification papers, they’re at the mercy of an ever widening system of federal and state cooperation that can “remove” them from the country more quickly and easily than ever before. Such people may have “rights,” but they

really don't—a right is something a person can claim without shame or fear, such that if I have a right to free speech, I can assert that right without having to ask permission, without being ashamed of it. According to the prevailing Supreme Court precedents, undocumented children should not be denied a public education, but it's tough to get any child or family to complain publicly when such a student has been denied access to the public schools. Because these parents and children can be removed from the United States by law, they're not in any position to assert their “rights” in the ways that legal residents can and do. Along the same lines, when companies refuse to pay undocumented workers or otherwise abuse them, they can seek remedies for such injustices, but they cannot do so in the same robust ways as American citizens or lawful workers. From a longer historical perspective, runaway slaves in the North and illegal Asian immigrants in the West had to face similar pitfalls: appealing for basic services and asserting basic rights could lead to removal, not the justice that they'd sought.

Of course, many American citizens have replied, then and now, that such persons should not put themselves in that kind of position. In 1850, Americans insisted that runaway slaves should not have run away, and in 1930, they said that Asians should not have come to the United States after the Chinese Exclusion Acts or the Gentlemen's Agreement or the Immigration Acts of 1917 and 1924. Fewer Americans in 2010 would agree with those Americans back then: most of us (not all of us) would evaluate negatively anyone who'd encourage runaway slaves to stay in slavery. Moreover, we're likely to believe that illegal Chinese and Asian immigrants in the early 20th century were victims of racism and nativism, and that the exclusion laws are not the best examples of American public law. They're pretty gross, actually, and they were premised in part on the idea that Asians could not become American citizens. Asians were “unassimilable,” according to this prevailing view. Now, this view did have the force of law, it caused endless misery to the lives of thousands of Asian immigrants in the United States, both legal and illegal, and so it has become for many of us a proper object of study and analysis. But I can't help myself from thinking that it's kind of funny. As I drive my children in our minivan to their violin lessons after shopping at Costco, where I've bought beer and chicken wings for the NFL playoffs, all the while speaking fluent English through my thoroughly American education, it's kind of funny to think that people like me were once regarded as “unassimilable.”

My family is so typical American, and like many American families, mine took a European holiday two summers ago to Crete and to Athens. We got passports for the kids (no

problem), we updated our own passports (no problem), bought the plane tickets (no problem) and off we went (without hiring a snakehead or a coyote). My other sister-in-law Sulggi is a physician, her husband Nick is a physician, Nick comes from a family of physicians, and Nick's father, the first physician in the family, grew up in Crete. For huge chunks of the trip, our gracious host and our equally gracious sister-in-law paid for meals, lodging, and entertainment. My dopey kids got up to the Parthenon, they saw the Mask of Agamemnon and the monumental bronze of Poseidon, and they all got diarrhea, just like many other American tourists.

We also saw things in Greece that were troubling and familiar: like the United States, Greece has enacted tough immigration rules to keep out black Africans, people from the Middle East, and people from Eastern Europe. These “undesirable” people were quite obvious, though, in both Athens and Crete. Anger at their presence has resulted in the formation of a new political party, the Golden Dawn, the Greek neo-Nazi fascist party, and members of this party now hold eighteen seats in the Hellenic Parliament. As self-proclaimed nationalists, they've promised an even purer Greek society through violent means if necessary. They're hostile to the European Union, they don't like Muslims, and they seem to have a special hostility to Africans and East Asians. They're all about walls and barriers, and keeping out “undesirable” people.

Did that include people like us? If Gowan and I fell in love with Crete and wanted to settle there for a while, would we become a problem for members of the Golden Dawn? Would they favor restrictions against our children in the public schools? Would a Golden Dawn Greece allow our kids to attend college at, say, the University of Athens? What about for their cousin Penelope—she has two Korean grandparents, one French American grandmother, and a Cretan grandfather. Would that be enough Greek ancestry, or would Penelope be a problem, too? Members of the Golden Dawn call for a pure Greek society for a pure Greek race, and their political and symbolic rhetoric are not subtle. It's amazing how the cradles of civilization can still produce old stone savage ways of thinking, sadder still that such positions can remain popular politically. In a country that was once under Nazi occupation, it's especially depressing.

Hybridity, globalization, cosmopolitanism, migration—these now are part of our reality, irrevocably so, and I believe that we should embrace these realities rather than clinging to some stone-age view of “pure” nations and peoples. No such things ever existed, they were always “imagined,” and so we should not mourn their passing. This doesn't mean we ought to forget history or past injustices, but it does mean that my niece and nephew—born of a Korean

American father and Japanese American mother—should be embraced and loved like any other children, and not treated as though they are some kind of “problem.” Although Korean and Japanese nationalists may be puzzled by their very existence, it’s that limited, parochial vision that blinds them to the simple fact that they’re a nice family. Indeed, we want a way out of walls and fences and borders and narrow-minded points of view, and really, someone should write a thoughtful book that proposes such a way. I should try that book, even though it’ll take a gazillion years to finish.

The Silken Tent

Writing a book takes a great deal of work, and it’s not just me doing the heavy lifting. Writing is a weird activity—I can’t do it in a mechanical way, I have to be in a mood, I agonize over sentences and paragraphs, and it takes me a while to find just the right word. I suppose I could calculate the amount of time it took me to finish *Illegal Migrations*, but that would be depressing, I think, given how little money the book might make. After writing one or two, all books look different to me: consider how in Albert Einstein’s mass-energy equivalency, $E = mc^2$, a very tiny mass can yield a great deal of energy; a book is like that in the reverse, as it’s portable, light, and a reader can enjoy it in a relatively short time, and yet it often took years and years and tons and tons of energy to create one measly, not-very-profitable book. Even a short bookshelf represents years of untold agony and grief for the poor writers set there, and a single monograph can strain a marriage, turn good people into liars, and cause pain and suffering and disappointment for their loved ones. Just ask my wife.

Ah, my wife. The last full paragraph of my book is a love letter to Gowan, and it references one of my favorite Frost poems, “The Silken Tent”:

She is as in a field a silken tent
At midday when the sunny summer breeze
Has dried the dew and all its ropes relent,
So that in guys it gently sways at ease,
And its supporting central cedar pole,

That is its pinnacle to heavenward
And signifies the sureness of the soul,
Seems to owe naught to any single cord,
But strictly held by none, is loosely bound
By countless silken ties of love and thought
To every thing on earth the compass round,
And only by one's going slightly taut
In the capriciousness of summer air
Is of the slightest bondage made aware.

I love this poem. Frost writes one long sentence through a complex rhythm and meter, and the resulting image is familiar, memorable, and captures completely the character of this woman he's describing. Although some have criticized Frost for comparing a woman to a spider or to a spider's web, I myself rather like the metaphor. It's something Ajean would appreciate—the spider as both a beautiful and a deadly creature—and I think it captures the edgy beauty of my wife, as well as her unusual ability to hold together the people she loves. That in itself is an art. Gowan Lee is a self-assured woman—a central cedar pole—even as she is delicate and often fragile, very much like the spider webs built in front of my house, containing the home and the family that was all her idea.