

## INTRODUCTION

# Looking for Roots

*Lisa Watts*

My thirteen-year-old son gets it. We are driving on the outskirts of Greensboro, North Carolina, our new home, and he is puzzling over state character along with every other part of his identity. “People make fun of Ohio, like it’s so ‘country’ or something,” Tommy says. “But you could make fun of North Carolina, too.”

I know what he means. In the last few months, whenever we told someone we were leaving Ohio to move to North Carolina, they would tell us, “Oh, it’s so beautiful there,” or “You’re going to love the weather.” Yet here we are suffocating in the swelter of a mid-August North Carolina heat wave, and we remember beauty—the rolling hills of farm country dotted with hay bales outside our small Ohio town, or the way a sunset lit the entire downtown sky, leaving the city hall tower in silhouette.

And “country,” as in unsophisticated? We have heard southern accents in Greensboro so thick that we can’t make out the words. We have driven down some sad streets dotted with pawnshops and dollar stores.

In truth, it is pretty in our new home, and the heat will ease in September. We’re all just a little out of sorts. For both of my kids, Ohio has just become the place where they’re from, where they grew up. They lived there for almost ten years and had no reason to believe they would leave their comfortable small-town existence until they chose to, for college or work. Now their dad has found a new job and we’ve plopped them down in a southern city, promising them more things to do, less small-town nosiness, more opportunity. But I know what Tommy and his sister, Kate, are thinking. *We liked it in Ohio. They do have running water there, you know. Why do people make fun of it?*

I am the cheerleader, the one in our family who embraces change. Yet even I am grieving what we've lost, part of which is my kids' sense of roots.

ONE COMMON THREAD GATHERS the writers collected in *Good Roots*: they all grew up in Ohio. Their childhoods were as varied as their work, even as the state itself. Poets, novelists, reporters, essayists, they lived in the cities of Cleveland, Akron, and Cincinnati or in small towns. Others knew a rural Ohio of county townships. Yet what each tells us about roots, about growing up a Buckeye, resonates as a whole, building a shared sense of heritage.

Some people suggest that Ohio is too varied to claim a true sense of place. Clevelanders probably share more in common with someone in Erie, Pennsylvania, say, than with a southern Ohioan. Northern Ohio moves west from the lake-effect snowbelt to the flat plains and gridded streets of Toledo. Much of central Ohio remains agricultural, with rolling fields bounded by high ridges and new housing developments. Columbus and Cincinnati grow like trumpet vine, their suburbs creeping farther into the country. In southern Ohio, extended families travel back and forth across the Ohio River to Kentucky and West Virginia.

Yet Ohioans must share more than just the same license plate and tax address. Politicians eye us as a swing state, a piece of Middle America that makes up its political mind depending on the economy and other down-to-earth concerns. Some think of the state as the last holdout for innocence, a place where Norman Rockwell scenes can be found even on the streets of our most sophisticated cities.

*New Yorker* writer Ian Frazier suggests, in his introduction to *Best American Travel Writing 2003*, that Ohio is a place from which people leave. "When I was growing up there, Ohio seemed centrifugal. Some mystical force the place possessed flung people from it, often far." Leaving in itself can form a bond. Frazier marvels at the time when, halfway around the world and walking through a Moroccan market, he met a man from Cincinnati.

Leaving also unites the writers in this anthology. To a person, they have moved away from their home state. Many were drawn to New York City, even if they've since left that literary capital to raise families: Frazier and his *New Yorker* colleague Susan Orlean, Andrea Louie, P. J. O'Rourke,

Alix Kates Shulman. Others have settled on the coasts, from poet Mary Oliver on Cape Cod to nature writer Kathleen Dean Moore in Oregon. Some, like Elizabeth Dodd in Kansas and Scott Russell Sanders in Indiana, have learned to call other parts of the Midwest home, to trade hardwood forest for prairie grass, as Dodd says.

Clearly their Ohio roots haven't hurt these writers. Their collective résumé reads like a literary Who's Who, including four Pulitzer Prizes, a few National Book Awards, and many prestigious fellowships. They were among my favorite writers long before I knew of their birthplaces. Each addition to the list, another writer we could "claim," boosted our shared pride, as if we were alumni learning of another successful classmate.

Does it mean something that so many successful writers come from Ohio? Perhaps. These contemporary scribes follow in the footsteps of many Buckeyes before them—poet James Wright (1927–80), for one. After growing up in Martins Ferry, Wright traveled the world and earned an impressive collection of awards and fellowships, including a Pulitzer in 1978. Humorist James Thurber (1894–1961) is a favorite son of Columbus, where one of his childhood homes now serves as a literary center. The books of conservationist Louis Bromfield (1896–1956) made famous his Malabar Farm near Mansfield. Around the same time, Sherwood Anderson (1876–1941) drew on his childhood in Clyde, Ohio, for his book *Winesburg, Ohio*. Langston Hughes (1902–67) was named class poet at Cleveland's Central High.

It's a rich literary tradition, but it's a quiet one. Ohioans aren't much for blowing their own horns. We suffer a low-level inferiority complex, caught in the middle as we are—Ohio isn't quite east enough to be East Coast, north enough to fit in with Michigan, south enough to be genteel, or west enough to be the true heartland. We know that Ohio doesn't show up on many lists for top 10 vacation spots. We're well aware that most people living on either coast couldn't pick our state out from Iowa or Wisconsin. And we're all too familiar with gray clouds hanging over the northern half of our little piece of the Midwest from November until April.

A pervasive lack of pretension, so noticeable to anyone arriving from the coasts, probably strengthens creative souls here. This is a state, after all, where we call the weathered "Chew Mail Pouch Tobacco" ads that

adorn our barns art. Maybe by not taking ourselves too seriously, Ohioans open the door to producing serious work. Perhaps there really is a certain innocence here that allows our young people to dream big, not to grow up jaded and cynical. Many of the writers collected here read voraciously in their youth. Few expressed self-doubt about their writing careers; they simply pursued them.

TECHNICALLY I AM A native Ohioan. I was born at the Cleveland Clinic and brought home to join three sisters and a brother in Cleveland Heights. My earliest memory is a sensory one: I recall venturing out after a snowstorm, in my favorite red corduroy pants, with my mother to buy a red pack of Winstons. The snowbanks reached nearly to the top of my head.

But when I was three, our family moved to Atlanta, later to Baltimore, then Boston. I lived most of my life on the East Coast, in various suburban split-levels and colonials. What I know of place, of childhood roots, is the transience of new suburbs and reborn cities. I know the adventure of riding my bike through mazes of construction—around gravel piles, odd scraps of lumber, mud hills—as yet another field or stretch of woods morphed into the newest subdivision.

Not my older sisters, though. They recall a nearly idyllic Cleveland Heights childhood. They tell of Dad flooding the backyard for ice-skating. They remember the freedom of walking to the five-and-dime, the library, art lessons. It seemed the perfect semi-urban environment—the comfort of suburbia blended with the cultural opportunities of a city. They felt rooted in the church, the neighbors, and our grandparents nearby.

I envy that kind of childhood, that sense of home that so many of these writers remember in *Good Roots*. It is what I had hoped to give my own children in the small Ohio town of Wooster. There I found a grounding that I never encountered back east. People grow up in Wooster. Their parents and grandparents live an easy drive away. Some people are just passing through, because this is a college town. Others are leaving as the once vibrant manufacturing industry jumps off the sinking ship that is the Midwest economy. But by and large, you can live

in north-central Ohio and surround yourself with Ohioans, people born there and raising their children there.

*Good Roots* is a tribute to such people, and to Ohio—to its screened porches and gray skies, to its rural towns and gritty cities, to its lack of pretension yet its very real value. In remembering their childhoods, the writers honor another, earlier time, but they also honor a place. It's one that many of us cherish, even if we can't still call it home.