Introduction

Not long ago, I attended a panel discussion where someone from the audience asked why the literati seemed to overlook writers from the Midwest, not granting them the critical acclaim and recognition accorded writers from other regions, most notably the South. The answer from one of the panelists, who was, of course, a member of said literati, went something like this: When the Midwest can produce a Faulkner, then it can stake its claim to regional literary distinction.

I have to admit I bristled, albeit silently, when I heard this response. Inside my head, I was shouting, "Oh, yeah? How about Sherwood Anderson, Sinclair Lewis, William Maxwell, Toni Morrison, Mark Twain, for starters? Not to mention—all right, I will!—Saul Bellow, Willa Cather, Theodore Dreiser, F. Scott Fitzgerald, William Gass, Ernest Hemingway, Kurt Vonnegut." The list could go on and on, and I'm sure you'll be tempted to add your own names. I hope so, anyway, because it seems to me that the Midwest has always produced its share of outstanding writers—its own Faulkners—and it's time to crank up the publicity machine and shout not only those names, but also those of more recent additions to the club. The past ten years of Pulitzer Prize winners and finalists in fiction have included the following writers, all who were either born and raised in midwestern states or who live in and write about the region: Louise Erdrich, Jonathan Franzen, Ward Just, Richard Powers, and Marilynne Robinson. It's not my intent to argue literary merit or to propose where such writers should rank among the Faulkners et al., but merely to make a little noise (which I didn't do that day when the panelist threw down the literary gauntlet), in essence saying, "Show me what you got."

This new anthology, *New Stories from the Midwest*, does just that, gathering twenty representations of the finest fiction emerging from a twelve-state area. Some of the writers herein are natives, and others are transplants. The natives sometimes write about other locales, while some of the transplants write about their adopted Midwest. The common bond is the excellence of the writing itself.

We've heard so much in recent years about the decline of the short story as a marketable form. The message that the publishing world sends is that a collection of stories might be fine as long as the writer also has a novel in hand or the promise

of one to come. We hear again and again that people don't buy story collections, and I suppose that must be true in the game of dollars and cents that the publishers' bean counters play, but that doesn't mean that there aren't excellent stories still being written or that books of stories can't still capture critical approval and a large reading audience to boot. In the past ten years, two story collections have won the Pulitzer Prize: last year's winner, *Olive Kitteridge*, by Elizabeth Strout, and the 2000 winner, *Interpreter of Maladies*, by Jhumpa Lahiri. In addition to the New York trade houses, literary journals and small presses continue to meet the challenges of economic stress and reduced funding, finding ways to keep putting the best of the best from their submission piles onto their pages. Fifteen of these journals and presses first recognized the excellence of the twenty stories reprinted in this anthology.

Common to all these stories, whether set in the Midwest or elsewhere, is a deep embrace of the humanity behind all our missteps, fumbles, desires, disappointments, triumphs, and joys—in short, an honest look at what it means to be alive on this earth, at what Faulkner called "the old verities and truths of the heart." Here we have nineteen short story writers practicing their art in the service of dramatizing and exploring the complications and mysteries of characters in the midst of significant moments, the sort that show us to ourselves—those moments that offer glimpses into what happens when we rub up against one another and the surface of our living breaks away and something crucial rises through our skins to, at least for a moment, hover, defined and bold, in the light and air through which we move.

Some of the stories speak from a midwestern setting, portraying the cultures of small towns, suburbs, lake resort towns, and the "City of the Big Shoulders." Chicago provides the backdrop for Beth Mayer's "The Way to Mercy," a gritty and tender story of smelt fishing, violence, and the threat of loss to a family. Abby Geni's richly evocative Chicago story, "Captivity," dramatizes the tension between the urban setting and the natural world in a story of a missing son and brother and the far-reaching effect on the family. Suburban Chicago in the 1970s gives rise to the expertly rendered cultural conflicts in James Magruder's "Tenochtitlan." Bonnie Jo Campbell's hard-hitting "Bringing Belle Home" considers the possibility of redemption in the story of a man and his drug-addicted ex-wife in a small town in Michigan. Campbell's other story in the anthology, "Tell Yourself," is an equally memorable look at how much truth one woman is willing to admit and how much she's willing to hide. Chris Leslie-Hynan brings an exotic visitor to Wisconsin in "Pure Superior," and then with grace and verve develops his narrator in this setting where one's "dignity about coming from a Boring Place is very sensitive." Micah Riecker successfully juxtaposes the erosion of love with the beauty and tranquility of a Michigan lake community in summer.

Christie Hodgen's magical triptych, "Bedtime Stories for the Middle-Aged" (two sections feature Kansas), looks at the absence of love in the unfulfilled contemporary life. "You're in love with someone, and then you're not," one of the characters says, "and where does it go? That's all I want to know. Where does love go?"

It goes south in Janice Deal's achingly honest story of an attempt to remake family after the death of a husband—south to Florida, where the widow and her son travel from Minnesota to reconnect with the dead husband's parents. It goes to Philadelphia along with our narrator in Hubert Ahn's warm and witty "Korean Wedding," another story that puts pressure on a character by removing him from his native Midwest, where people "have to learn cornball ways to have fun, lacking metropolitan culture of a higher order."

Even when the characters aren't midwesterners, a number of stories capture the human desire for connection. Gregory Blake Smith's humorous "Being and Nothingness (Not a Real Title)" stands as a comment on role-playing and what's genuine. "Somebody, I have decided," the narrator says, "has to stick up for reality." David Allan Cates's "Rubber Boy" is one man's confrontation with the truth of his life, told with great candor and dignity. In similar fashion, the narrator of Clancy Martin's "The Guinea Pig" faces his own regrets with disarming honesty in a story of a blended family. Kim Brooks's "The Houseguest" is an elegant story of longing in 1938 Utica, New York. Benjamin Percy's lyrical fable, "The Tree," wisely resists moralizing and instead subtly captures the ironies of what we will sacrifice for the sake of love and connection. Rosellen Brown's delicate and finely made "The Threshold" is a story of love and compromise in a late-life marriage.

This desire for connection sometimes finds its expression in stories of families. Carol Howell's "Blood and Milk" puts fantasy to good use in a story of maternal love and the heartfelt longing for connection across generations. Bryan Furuness considers a mother's absence and her son's desire to predict and prevent harm in the very funny, but also very genuine, "Man of Steel." Judith Cooper's "Sister Light-of-Love Love Dove" extends familial longing into a redemptive tale of reunion in the afterlife. Longing comes in many forms, and Richard Burgin's "Do You Like This Room?" depicts desire as the underside of menace in this edgy and tightly constructed tale of loneliness and betrayal.

My own relationship with the Midwest is a complicated one. I'm enchanted with the often surprising beauty of the landscape, both rural and urban. I'm fiercely proud of the people and the values they maintain in their cities, on their farms, and in their small towns. These are not the best of times for many in our country, and the Midwest has its share of difficulties. In my own part of southeastern Illinois, too many people are

trading their lives for the sizzle of methamphetamine, too many are turning away from educational opportunities, too many are losing jobs and struggling to support their families. When I drive through my small hometown and see too many houses going to ruin—when I know there are too many people living lives of quiet desperation—my heart breaks, but it also breaks open with story. Frank O'Connor in his book about the short story form, *The Lonely Voice*, says that stories are about submerged populations, groups of people disenfranchised in some way or another: materially, spiritually, and so on. William Maxwell, in the last interview he ever gave, told the following story: "When I first came to New York, a writer I very much wanted to meet was Willa Cather; very few people had. And I spoke to a Wisconsin writer who had met her and asked him, 'What do you think made her a writer?' And he said, 'Well, deprivation I suppose.' And I think in some sense that's what makes all writers write."

I feel that sense of loss when I think of the Midwest these days, particularly now in the dead of winter when the landscape is stark and the snow and ice and cold can reach into my bones. I see the bare branches of trees against a gray sky, the dark falling early, the lights coming on in houses, or at shops, or in farm yards. I think of the coming and going here in the Midwest, people facing the circumstances of their lives and not caring a whit about whether the literati take notice. Perhaps we writers shouldn't care so much either. Perhaps there was a grain of truth in what that panelist said when he insinuated that we midwestern writers should stop complaining about a lack of attention and just get down to the business of writing well. The nineteen writers in this anthology have done just that. They've spoken for their distinct groups—their submerged populations—in stories that will delight you with their artistry, challenge you with their circumstances, entertain you with their charms, and, above all, give you a sense of how complicated, flawed, ugly, and exquisite we all can be. Stories of who we are and what we mean to one another, no matter where we live. Stories that are just plain good stories, no matter if they happen to be written about or from, to borrow from William Gass, the heart of the heart of the country.

Lee Martin