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Entrance Essay

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Great Country, Troubled State

Being a Michigander means being born in a great country, but not scoring as well in terms of the state. Great country, troubled state. Out of fifty, Michigan does not rate well in some of the areas I care most about: valuing work of the mind, both intellectual and creative, accepting a progressive view of a world unquestionably ruled by diversity, and respecting the primary role of the physical in our transient lives. Reduced crudely: education, liberal values and “the balance of the universe.” (I drove my first boyfriend crazy with that phrase.) Nature rules, no question, so it drives me crazy to see remnants of cement walls failing to contain the Rouge River, as if the entire world could be and should be paved. How short sighted. Yet there are aspects of the Great Lake State that speak to my soul and make me feel whole: the water, the land, the native tradition, and our tradition of hard work. I left the state looking for what I wanted elsewhere and found these qualities, among other things, but I came back. I couldn’t make it elsewhere, apparently, so I now live here. Michigan is my home. Not perfect, but mine. Hey, we’ve definitely got the best geographical profile! But you can’t pick where you are born, so you make do, or leave, and then return when you are low hoping for salvation, which I found.

I left Michigan at age twenty in 1983. I knew I couldn’t stay and work in a factory or toil in cubicle as white collar for an automotive company. Staying put just wasn’t a good bet, especially for an artist. I wanted to create, to think, to build ideas, not engines. I moved to California, took advantage of the cheap system of higher education, dabbled in film, realized women didn’t make movies. I didn’t want to work the assembly line making movies either, though certainly labor on the set is more enjoyable than inside the factory. Barbra Streisand directed and starred in *Yentl* the year I left Michigan.

She was the first women to direct a major Hollywood film in decades. Over thirty years later, women still have little to do with movie making in major moviedom; percentages by job title, salary and screen time comparison, lead males versus lead females. No matter the view, the numbers are still heavily slanted male because the world still sees man as god, prefers a man as lead actor. I could not have written my first book, on women in Hollywood, had I stayed in Michigan. Not because Hollywood is elsewhere, in the Golden State, but because I needed to move to find families that communicated (however strangely), people who took my values seriously and to a new level: artists, filmmakers, educators.

I left California after earning my undergrad degree but did not return to Michigan. I moved instead to Massachusetts. The Commonwealth of Massachusetts does not actually call itself a “state,” though it is one. “Commonwealth” is a term used to describe of form of government that requires no representation; citizens can petition for the passage of new laws directly. In Michigan, by contrast, citizens must work with state legislators who in turn introduce bills on behalf of citizens, sort of a legislative middleperson. The word itself says a lot: common wealth. The Bay State was the first state to legalize same sex marriages, has already passed universal health care for its citizens and recently decriminalized marijuana possession. Meanwhile, Michigan leads in obesity and unemployment. Not incidentally, unemployment in the Commonwealth was recently 8.8 percent, under the national average of 9.4 percent (with education its leading industry), while the rate here at home has hit a new high: currently at 15.6 percent (thanks to the failing auto industry). Perhaps we can pick up a few tips from our neighbors. I needed Mass to teach me toughness in attitude, to build guts and develop brains. Even if people crossing through Harvard Yard don’t actually read, I swear, they keep that fact to themselves and otherwise do their best to act smart, real smart assey in some cases, but always sharp. You just can’t walk around MIT and Wellesley acting like a dumb ass, ya know? I once read an astrology book that said Virgos belong in Boston without comment on a preferred location for any other sign.

But I'm back in Michigan now, and I am happy, at least inside. Inside of me and inside our house, well, houses. I worry about the world, but now I worry more about my neighbors, too (particularly the ones with the mistreated pit bulls). In the Michigan I know, people equate work with the assembly line, with things done with hands not the mind. Problem is that way of life is no longer sustainable. On NPR this week, I heard world leaders casually discussing the United States slipping to third or fourth place in the world pecking order. Compared to Massachusetts, Michigan is not helping the union. Not long after I returned, an arts tax, which would have cost each Michigander the equivalent of about three cold, stale McDonald's french fries a year, did not pass, negatively affecting the existing arts organizations in the area as well as the economy and culture. "They haven't learned," I said to myself. I've long had a thought. Like Israelis must serve in the military, Michigan students should be forced to study abroad, across the great lakes, in another state. Be forced to leave this pleasant peninsula and look around the planet to note the diversity of life on Earth. Michiganders can always come back home across the big waters. Madonna hasn't because she makes more than the Big Three combined, and people here act like they're jealous.

The older I get, the crazier the world seems, the more I love nature. Michigan's natural self greatly outshines what humans have done to it. So I spend as much time as I can, which sometimes isn't enough, outside, up north, away from civilization. Thankfully, for me the wind can be enough. But please, when thirsty and buying bottled water, choose Evian from France, not the Nestle brand water packed in Evart, Michigan. I don't want our well to go dry. Again, another questionable Michigan decision. Assuming the water could never run out.