

Carol Bly was an award-winning author of essays, short stories, and two nonfiction works on writing. Tobias Wolff has said that her stories possess "a tremendous moral rigor . . . even a moral ferocity."

*In "Getting Tired," an essay in the book *A Letter from the Country*, the Minnesota author begins by describing a John Deere 6600 combine, which leads to reflections on the nature of modern farm work. In the following excerpt from that essay, Bly offers an extended definition of "monkeying" from a distinctly rural point of view.*



from "Getting Tired"* by Carol Bly (1930-2007)

The value of the 66 is that it can do anything, and to change it from a combine to a cornpicker takes one man about half an hour, whereas most machine conversions on farms take several men a half day. It frees its owner from a lot of monkeying.

Monkeying, in city life, is what little boys do to clocks so they never run again. In farming it has two quite different meanings. The first is small side projects. You monkey with poultry, unless you're a major egg handler. Or you monkey with ducks or geese. If you have a very small milk herd, and finally decide that prices plus state regulations don't make your few Holsteins worthwhile, you "quit monkeying with them." There is a hidden dignity in this word: it precludes mention of money. It lets the wife of a very marginal farmer have a conversation with a woman who may be helping her husband run fifteen hundred acres. "How you coming with those geese?" "Oh, we've been real disgusted. We're thinking of quitting monkeying with them." It saves her having to say, "We lost our shirts on those darn geese."

The other meaning of monkeying is wrestling with and maintaining machinery, such as changing heads from combining to cornpicking. Farmers who cornpick the old way, in which the corn isn't shelled automatically during picking in the field but must be elevated to the top of a pile by belt and then shelled, put up with some monkeying.

* Carol Bly's "Getting Tired" originally appeared in her monthly column, "A Letter from the Country," in the Minnesota Public Radio Magazine. It was later published in *Letters from the Country* (Harper & Row, 1981, reprinted by the University of Minnesota Press in 1999).

A highly regarded art critic, novelist, poet, essayist, and screenwriter, John Berger began his career as a painter in London. Among his best known works are Ways of Seeing (1972), a series of essays about the power of visual images, and G. (also 1972), an experimental novel which was awarded both the Booker Prize and the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for fiction.

In this passage from And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos (1984), Berger draws on the writings of Mircea Eliade, a Romanian-born historian of religion, to offer an extended definition of home.



The Meaning of Home* by John Berger

The term home (Old Norse Heimer, High German heim, Greek komi, meaning "village") has, since a long time, been taken over by two kinds of moralists, both dear to those who wield power. The notion of home became the keystone for a code of domestic morality, safeguarding the property (which included the women) of the family. Simultaneously the notion of homeland supplied a first article of faith for patriotism, persuading men to die in wars which often served no other interest except that of a minority of their ruling class. Both usages have hidden the original meaning.

Originally home meant the center of the world--not in a geographical, but in an ontological sense. Mircea Eliade has demonstrated how home was the place from which the world could be founded. A home was established, as he says, "at the heart of the real." In traditional societies, everything that made sense of the world was real; the surrounding chaos existed and was threatening, but it was threatening because it was unreal. Without a home at the center of the real, one was not only shelterless, but also lost in nonbeing, in unreality. Without a home everything was fragmentation.

Home was the center of the world because it was the place where a vertical line crossed with a horizontal one. The vertical line was a path leading upwards to the sky and downwards to the underworld. The horizontal line represented the traffic of the world, all the possible roads leading across the earth to other places. Thus, at home, one was nearest to the gods in the sky and to the dead of the underworld. This nearness promised access to both. And at the same time, one was at the starting point and, hopefully, the returning point of all terrestrial journeys.

* Originally published in *And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos*, by John Berger (Pantheon Books, 1984).

From the 1940s to the 1980s, Sydney J. Harris wrote a daily column, titled "Strictly Personal," that was syndicated in hundreds of newspapers throughout the United States. Described as "America's finest living aphorist" and "the most cosmic journalist we possess," Harris wrote thought-provoking personal essays on various aspects of contemporary life.

In this brief essay, first published in 1961, Harris offers an extended definition of a familiar character type.



A Jerk* by Sidney J. Harris

I don't know whether history repeats itself, but biography certainly does. The other day, Michael came in and asked me what a "jerk" was--the same question Carolyn put to me a dozen years ago.

At that time, I fluffed her off with some inane answer, such as, "A jerk isn't a very nice person," but both of us knew it was an unsatisfactory reply. When she went to bed, I began trying to work up a suitable definition.

It is a marvelously apt word, of course. Until it was coined, there was really no single word in English to describe the kind of person who is a jerk--"boob" and "simp" were too old hat, and besides they really didn't fit, for they could be lovable, and a jerk never is.

Thinking it over, I decided that a jerk is basically a person without insight. He is not necessarily a fool or a dope, because some extremely clever persons can be jerks. In fact, it has little to do with intelligence as we commonly think of it; it is, rather, a kind of subtle but persuasive aroma emanating from the inner part of the personality.

I know a college president who can be described only as a jerk. He is not an unintelligent man, nor unlearned, nor even unschooled in the social amenities. Yet he is a jerk cum laude, because of a fatal flaw in his nature--he is totally incapable of looking into the mirror of his soul and shuddering at what he sees there.

A jerk, then, is a man (or woman) who is utterly unable to see himself as he appears to others. He has no grace, he is tactless without meaning to be, he is a bore even to his best friends, he is an egotist without charm. All of us are egotists to some extent, but most of us--unlike the jerk--are perfectly and horribly aware of it when we make asses of ourselves. The jerk never knows.

* "A Jerk" by Sydney J. Harris was published in *Last Things First*, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1961.