

Recognized by John Updike as the best essayist of his generation, Edward Hoagland is especially well known for his nature and travel writing. This passage, however, is drawn from an essay on boxing--a "waning sport," says Hoagland, and one of the most "poignant ways to earn a living." Here he describes the old Gramercy Gym on East 14th Street in Manhattan.



The Gramercy Gym from "Heart's Desire," by Edward Hoagland*

The Gramercy Gym is two flights up some littered, lightless stairs that look like a mugger's paradise, though undoubtedly they are the safest stairs in New York. Inside, two dozen bodies are chopping up and down, self-clocked, each fellow cottoned in his dreams. Some are skipping rope, turbaned in towels, wrapped in robes in order to sweat. These are white-looking figures, whereas the men who are about to spar have on dark headguards that close grimly around the face like an executioner's hood. There are floor-length mirrors and mattresses for exercising and rubdowns, and two speedbags banging like drums, and three heavy bags swinging even between the rounds with the momentum of more than a decade of punches. The bell is loud, the fighters jerk like eating and walking birds, hissing through their teeth as they punch, their feet sneaking the floor with shuffly sounds. They wear red shoelaces in white shoes, and peanut-colored gloves, or if they're Irish they're in green. They are learning to move their feet to the left and right, to move in and out, punching over, then under an opponent's guard, and other repetitive skills without which a man in the ring becomes a man of straw. The speedbags teach head-punching, the heavy bags teach body work, and one bag pinned to the wall has both a head and a torso diagrammed, complete with numbers, so that the trainer can shout out what punches his fighter should throw. "Bounce, bounce!" the trainers yell.

The memoir Farewell to Manzanar (1973) recounts the experiences of the Wakatsuki family at an American internment camp for Japanese-Americans during World War II. In this excerpt, Jeanne Wakatsuki, just seven years old at the time of her imprisonment, provides a clear-eyed description of the "shack" in which the family was forced to live for almost three years.



From Farewell to Manzanar* by Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston and James D. Houston

After dinner we were taken to Block 16, a cluster of fifteen barracks that had just been finished a day or so earlier--although finished was hardly the word for it. The shacks were built of one thickness of pine planking covered with tarpaper. They sat on concrete footings, with about two feet of open space between the floorboards and the ground. Gaps showed between the planks, and as the weeks passed and the green wood dried out, the gaps widened. Knotholes gaped in the uncovered floor.

Each barracks was divided into six units, sixteen by twenty feet, about the size of a living room, with one bare bulb hanging from the ceiling and an oil stove for heat. We were assigned two of these for the twelve people in our family group; and our official family "number" was enlarged by three digits--16 plus the number of this barracks. We were issued steel army cots, two brown army blankets each, and some mattress covers, which my brothers stuffed with straw.

The first task was to divide up what space we had for sleeping. Bill and Woody contributed a blanket each and partitioned off the first room: one side for Bill and Tomi, one side for Woody and Chizu and their baby girl. Woody also got the stove, for heating formulas.

The people who had it hardest during the first few months were young couples, many of whom had married just before the evacuation began, in order not to be separated and sent to different camps. Our two rooms were crowded, but at least it was all in the family. My oldest sister and her husband were shoved into one of those sixteen-by-twenty-foot compartments with six people they had never seen before--two other couples, one recently married like themselves, the other with two teenage boys. Partitioning off a room like that wasn't easy. It was bitter cold when we arrived, and the wind did not abate. All they had to use for room dividers were those army blankets, two of which were barely enough to keep one person warm. They argued over whose blanket should be sacrificed and later argued about noise at night--the parents wanted their boys asleep by 9:00 p.m.--and they continued arguing over matters like that for six months, until my sister and her husband left to harvest sugar beets in Idaho. It was grueling work up there, and wages were pitiful, but when the call came through camp for workers to alleviate the wartime labor shortage, it sounded better than their life at Manzanar. They knew they'd have, if nothing else, a room, perhaps a cabin of their own.

*The memoir Farewell to Manzanar by Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston and James D. Houston was originally published by Houghton Mifflin in 1973. It is currently available in a paperback edition published by Bantam Books.

Biographer and theater critic John Lahr, the son of comic actor Bert Lahr, has been composing profiles for The New Yorker magazine since 1992. The following paragraph is drawn from the conclusion of his 10,000-word profile of David Mamet. Notice how the description of the cabin where the playwright works, the references to the books on his table, and the brief quotations from Mamet's sister and from Mamet himself all serve to reveal aspects of character.

from "Fortress Mamet"* by John Lahr



Mamet types with his back to the window on a blue Olympia manual typewriter, above which a kerosene lamp is suspended by a chain from a beam smudged with black smoke. The special calm of the place is in part the peace of having no electricity; it is also the peace of the activity that goes on there. Writing has always been Mamet's way of containing terror, or what he calls "mental vomit." "David's brain is a very busy place. It's very cluttered," Lynn Mamet says. "Writing's the only thing that stops the thinking, you know," Mamet says. "It stops all that terrible noise that's in there." In "The Edge," where the billionaire bookworm thinks himself out of the backwoods, Mamet quite literally shows the triumph of thought over terror. It's something that he clearly works hard at in his own life. Across the room, on a table in front of the sofa, his serious reading is laid out: D.W. Winnicott's "Thinking About Children"; a special Hebrew prayer about "the good wife," whose twenty-two verses are traditionally read by the husband to his wife on holy days; and Seneca's "Letters from a Stoic." Mamet has underlined only one passage in Seneca: "Each day . . . acquire something which will help you to face poverty, or death, and other ills as well."

* David Mamet's profile of David Mamet appeared in the November 17, 1997 issue of The New Yorker magazine and was reprinted in Show and Tell: New Yorker Profiles (The Overlook Press, 2000).

*A poet, novelist, and playwright, Langston Hughes was one of the major figures of the Harlem Renaissance. In the following passage from his autobiography, *The Big Sea*, Hughes describes how Harlem became a tourist destination for white New Yorkers during the 1920s.*

Notice how his predominately paratactic style (along with his reliance on series in paragraphs four and five) gives the writing a casual, conversational flavor. (For another perspective on Harlem in the 1920s, see "The Making of Harlem," by James Weldon Johnson.)



When the Negro Was in Vogue from *The Big Sea** by Langston Hughes

White people began to come to Harlem in droves. For several years they packed the expensive Cotton Club on Lenox Avenue. But I was never there, because the Cotton Club was a Jim Crow club for gangsters and monied whites. They were not cordial to Negro patronage, unless you were a celebrity like Bojangles. So Harlem Negroes did not like the Cotton Club and never appreciated its Jim Crow policy in the very heart of their dark community. Nor did ordinary Negroes like the growing influx of whites toward Harlem after sundown, flooding the little cabarets and bars where formerly only colored people laughed and sang, and where now the strangers were given the best ringside tables to sit and stare at the Negro customers--like amusing animals in a zoo.

The Negroes said: "We can't go downtown and sit and stare at you in your clubs. You won't even let us in your clubs." But they didn't say it out loud--for Negroes are practically never rude to white people. So thousands of whites came to Harlem night after night, thinking the Negroes loved to have them there, and firmly believing that all Harlemites left their houses at sundown to sing and dance in cabarets, because most of the whites saw nothing but the cabarets, not the houses.

Some of the owners of Harlem clubs, delighted at the flood of white patronage, made the grievous error of barring their own race, after the manner of the famous Cotton Club. But most of these quickly lost business and folded up, because they failed to realize that a large part of the Harlem attraction for downtown New Yorkers lay in simply watching the colored customers amuse themselves. And the smaller clubs, of course, had no big floor shows or a name band like the Cotton Club, where Duke Ellington usually held forth, so, without black patronage, they were not amusing at all.

Some of the small clubs, however, had people like Gladys Bentley, who was something worth discovering in those days, before she got famous, acquired an accompanist, specially written material, and conscious vulgarity. But for two or three amazing years, Miss Bentley sat, and played a big piano all night long, literally all night, without stopping--singing songs like "St. James Infirmary," from ten in the evening until dawn, with scarcely a break between the notes, sliding from one song to another, with a powerful and continuous under beat of jungle rhythm. Miss Bentley was an amazing exhibition of musical energy--a large, dark, masculine lady, whose feet pounded the floor while her fingers pounded the keyboard--a perfect piece of African sculpture, animated by her own rhythm...

But when the place where she played became too well known, she began to sing with an accompanist, became a star, moved to a larger place, then downtown, and is now in Hollywood. The old magic of the woman and the piano and the night and the rhythm being one is gone. But everything goes, one way or the other. The '20s are gone and lots of fine things in Harlem night life have disappeared like snow in the sun--since it became utterly commercial, planned for the downtown tourist trade, and therefore dull.

* *The Big Sea*, by Langston Hughes, was originally published by Knopf in 1940 and reprinted by Hill and Wang in 1993.

Born in St. Louis and then reared by her grandmother in the segregated community of Stamps, Arkansas, Maya Angelou overcame great adversities in her "roller-coaster life" to become a successful writer, dancer, singer, and African-American activist. The passages here have been drawn from Chapter 22 of the first volume of her autobiography, I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings (1970).

In these paragraphs, Angelou recalls the first funeral that she attended as a child, that of Mrs. Florida Taylor, a neighbor who had left young Maya a "yellow brooch." The ritual that Angelou describes also marked the girl's first recognition of her own mortality.



from *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1970) by Maya Angelou

The mourners on the front benches sat in a blue-serge, black-crepe-dress gloom. A funeral hymn made its way around the church tediously but successfully. It eased into the heart of every gay thought, into the care of each happy memory. Shattering the light and hopeful: "On the other side of Jordan, there is a peace for the weary, there is a peace for me." The inevitable destination of all living things seemed but a short step away. I had never considered before that dying, death, dead, passed away, were words and phrases that might be even faintly connected with me.

But on that onerous day, oppressed beyond relief, my own mortality was borne in upon me on sluggish tides of doom.

No sooner had the mournful song run its course than the minister took to the altar and delivered a sermon that in my state gave little comfort. Its subject was, "Thou art my good and faithful servant with whom I am well pleased." His voice enweaved itself through the somber vapors left by the dirge. In a monotonous tone he warned the listeners that "this day might be your last," and the best insurance against dying a sinner was to "make yourself right with God" so that on the fateful day He would say, "Thou art my good and faithful servant with whom I am well pleased." . . .

Mr. Taylor and the high church officials were the first to file around the bier to wave farewell to the departed and get a glimpse of what lay in store for all men. Then on heavy feet, made more ponderous by the guilt of the living viewing the dead, the adult church marched up to the coffin and back to their seats. Their faces, which showed apprehension before reaching the coffin, revealed, on the way down the opposite aisle, a final confrontation of their fears. Watching them was a little like peeping through a window when the shade is not drawn flush. Although I didn't try, it was impossible not to record their roles in the drama.

And then a black-dressed usher stuck her hand out woodenly toward the children's rows. There was the shifty rustling of unreadiness but finally a boy of fourteen led us off and I dared not hang back, as much as I hated the idea of seeing Mrs. Taylor. Up the aisle, the moans and screams merged with the sickening smell of woolen black clothes worn in summer weather and green leaves wilting over yellow flowers. I couldn't distinguish whether I was smelling the clutching sound of misery or hearing the cloying odor of death.

It would have been easier to see her through the gauze, but instead I looked down on the stark face that seemed suddenly so empty and evil. It knew secrets that I never wanted to share.

The author of several essay collections and a regular contributor to the Chicago Public Radio program This American Life, David Sedaris has been described as "the most brilliantly witty New Yorker since Dorothy Parker." In this excerpt from his essay "Naked," an account of a week-long visit to a nudist colony, Sedaris describes his living quarters and the surrounding neighborhood.



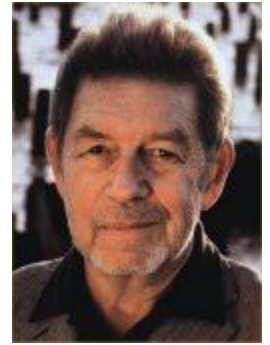
A Nudist Trailer Park from "Naked," by David Sedaris*

My trailer's main room is paneled with artificial walnut planks, and the low, fiberglass tiled ceiling is stained with water marks. A linoleum floor separates the kitchen area from the carpeted living room, which is furnished with a worn gold velvet sofa and two matching easy chairs that face a low table bearing the scuff marks of a now absent television set. Two of the walls are lined with windows, and the other supports a large, ornamental carpet picturing a family of polar bears occupying an ice flow. My bedroom, like that of my potential roommate's, is cell-like in both its size and simplicity, furnished with only a bed and a small chest of drawers that easily accommodates the little I brought with me.

By the time I'd unpacked and put away my groceries, it was early evening and the rain had stopped. After staring at the spot where the television used to be, I took a walk past the clubhouse and up into the park's more established neighborhoods. These were mobile homes that had been soundly grounded upon carefully manicured lots, many with built-on decks made of pine and redwood. Some of the trailers had been sided to resemble log cabins, and others were fronted by shingled, A-framed entrance halls. The homeowners' names were displayed on wooden plaques along with slogans such as "Bare with us" or "Smile if you talk naked!" Flowerbeds were marked with wooden cutouts of bare-bottomed pint-size children and silhouettes of shapely, naked women were painted onto the doors of tool sheds and nailed like FOR SALE signs onto the trees. Most everyone seemed to have a golf cart parked in the driveway, and these, too, were personalized with bumper stickers and hand-painted slogans. I passed a sign reading SHEEP CROSSING 20 FEET and came across a trailer whose lawn played host to a flock of artificial sheep tended to by an oversized, bonneted doll equipped with a crooked staff. Time had not been kind to the shepherdess, nor to her charges, whose waterlogged wool was stained with the evidence of a long and unforgiving winter. Farther along the road these homes gave way to tents and campers equipped with pop-up roofs and jury-rigged awnings made of plastic and fronted by mosquito netting. The lack of space had forced both the kitchens and bathrooms outdoors, and the yards were home to outhouses and picnic tables surrounded by coolers and grills that sat positioned beneath festive paper lanterns. A trailer door opened and a young woman stepped out, leading a child who beat upon her legs with a wooden spoon. The woman was topless, and her breasts hung like two kneesocks, each stuffed with a single orange. I knew when I signed up that I would encounter exposed breasts, but this being my first pair, I reacted with alarm. She wore her hair in a neglected shag and scolded the child for a moment or two before gathering him up in her arms and burying her sharp-featured face in his stomach. Topless. She was topless, walking the streets of what amounted to her neighborhood. The boy howled with pleasure and then rapped her over the head with his spoon.

Although he has published ten popular novels and two collections of short stories, Pete Hamill is probably best known as a (many would say the) great New York City newspaperman. He has served as editor-in-chief of both the New York Post and the Daily News, and has written columns for almost every major newspaper and magazine in the city.

In his memoir A Drinking Life (1994), Hamill re-creates everyday life in Brooklyn and Manhattan during the 1940s and '50s. This passage, set in the days immediately following the end of World War II, describes the rules and rituals of a once popular New York City street game.



Stickball in New York from A Drinking Life, by Pete Hamill*

In the streets, we still played the now forgotten games of the New York summers. Stickball was the supreme game, a kind of tabloid version of baseball, played with a broom handle as a bat and a pink rubber ball manufactured by the A. G. Spalding Co. In every street in New York, this ball was called a spaldeen. The spaldeens had vanished during the war and the game was played for awhile with hairy tennis balls, until even they had disappeared. But coming home from Fox Lair Camp, I felt a special excitement spreading through the neighborhood: Spaldeens are back! . . .

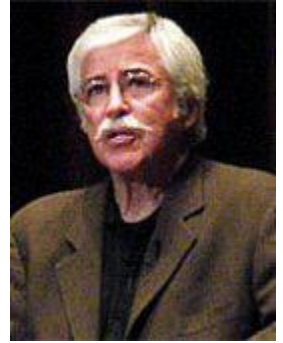
Stickball ruled us. On Saturday mornings, the older guys played big games against visitors from other neighborhoods or went off themselves to play beyond our frontiers. Money game! someone would shout, and suddenly we were all moving to the appointed court and the great noisy fiesta of the stickball morning. The players drank beer from cardboard containers on the sidelines and ate hero sandwiches and smoked cigarettes. They were cheered by neighbors, girlfriends, wives, and kids. And standing on the sidelines during those first games were the veterans, holding the spaldeens, bouncing them, smelling them in an almost sacramental way.

The men played on summer weekends; we kids played every day. There were still very few cars on the streets in that year after the war, so the "court" was always perfectly drawn, with sewer plates marking home and second base, while first and third were chalked against the curbs. The rules were settled before each game: one strike and you were out; off the factory wall or off a passing trolley car was a "hindoo"--which meant the play didn't count. The great hitters could hit the ball at least "three sewers," and it was said of Paulie McAleer of the Shamrock Boys that he once hit a ball an incredible five sewers. In memory, the games seem continuous and the days longer, richer, denser, and emptier than any others in my life. We did nothing and we did everything. You would wake, the radio playing, the rooms thick with the closed heat (and sometimes the sour smell of drink), grab something to eat--bread and butter covered with sugar, a piece of toast--and then race down the stairs, to burst into the streets. On a perfect Saturday in August, Twelfth Street would be wet from the water wagon, the air fresh, nobody else around, the tenements brooding in Edward Hopper light, and then a door would open and Billy Rossiter would appear with the bat and the spaldeen, and that was all we needed. We'd play off the factory walls until the others came down; we'd play ten hits a piece until there were enough players to choose up sides. And then we'd play until dark.

* Pete Hamill's A Drinking Life was published in 1994 by Little, Brown and Company.

Since its publication in 1982, Blue Highways has become a significant part of American travel literature. In the book, William Least Heat-Moon (the pen name of William Trogon) explores the country's backroads "in search of places where change did not mean ruin and where time and men and deeds connected."

In this passage from Chapter 14 of Blue Highways, Least Heat-Moon describes a cafe in Darlington, South Carolina. Note his reliance on detailed lists to convey a sense of place.



The Deluxe Cafe in Darlington from Blue Highways* by William Least Heat-Moon

Then Darlington, a town of portico and pediment, iron fences, big trees, and an old courthouse square that looked as though renovated by a German buzz bomb. But on the west side of the square stood the Deluxe Cafe. The times had left it be. The front window said AIR CONDITIONED in icy letters, above the door was neon, and inside hung an insurance agency calendar and another for an auto parts store. Also on the walls were the Gettysburg Address, Declaration of Independence, Pledge of Allegiance, a picture of a winged Jesus ushering along two kids who belonged in a Little Rascals film, and the obligatory waterfall lithograph. The clincher: small, white, hexagonal floor tiles. Two old men, carrying their arms folded behind, stopped to greet each other with a light, feminine touching of fingertips, a gesture showing the duration of their friendship. I went in happy.

I expected a grandmother, wiping her hands on a gingham apron, to come from the kitchen. Instead I got Brenda. Young, sullen, pink uniform, bottlecaps for eyes, handling her pad the way a cop does his citation book. The menu said all breakfasts came with grits, toast, and preserves. I ordered a breakfast of two eggs over easy. "Is that all you want?"

"Doesn't it come with grits and so forth?"

"Does if you ast fort."

"I want the complete, whole thing. Top to bottom."

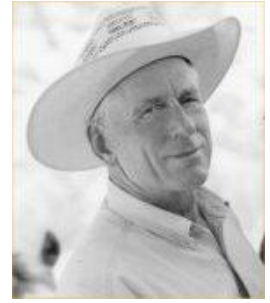
She snapped the pad closed. I waited. I read the rest of the menu, the Gettysburg Address, made a quick run over the Pledge of Allegiance, read about famous American women on four sugar packets, read a matchbook and the imprints on the flatware. I was counting grains of rice in the saltshaker (this was the South), when Brenda pushed a breakfast at me, the check slick with margarine and propped between slices of toast. The food was good and the sense of the place fine, but Brenda was destined for an interstate run-em-thru. Early in life she had developed the ability to make a customer wish he'd thrown up on himself rather than disturb her.

* Blue Highways: A Journey Into America by William Least Heat-Moon was published by Little, Brown and Company in 1982. The book is currently available in a paperback edition published by Back Bay Books (1999).

In this paragraph from the essay "Me and My Bike and Why," American novelist Thomas McGuane describes his first motorcycle.

Matchless 500 from "Me and My Bike and Why"* by Thomas McGuane

Unwatched, I can really examine the bike. Since I have no notion of how to operate it, it is purely an object. I think of a friend with a road racer on a simple mahogany block in front of his fireplace, except that he rides his very well. The bike was rather beautiful. I suppose it still is. (Are you out there? If you read this, get in touch care of this magazine. All is forgiven.) The designation, which now seems too cryptic for my taste, was "Matchless 500," and it was the motorcycle I believed I had thought up myself. It is a trifle hard to describe the thing to the uninitiated, but, briefly, it had a 500-cc., one-cylinder engine--a "big single" in the patois of bike freaks--and an eloquently simple maroon teardrop-shaped tank that is as much the identifying mark on a Matchless, often otherwise unrecognizable through modification, as the chevron of a redwing blackbird. The front wheel, delicate as a bicycle's, carried a Dunlop K70 tire (said to "cling") and had no fender; a single cable led to the pale machined brake drum. Over the knobby rear curved an extremely brief magnesium fender with, instead of the lush buddy-seat of the fat motorcycles, a minute pillion of leather. The impression was of performance and of complete disregard for comfort. The equivalent in automobiles would be, perhaps, the Morgan, in sailboats the Finn.



*Originally published in Sports Illustrated (Feb. 21, 1972) as "Finally, Just Me and My Bike," the essay "Me and My Bike and Why" was reprinted in the collection *An Outside Chance: Essays on Sport* by Thomas McGuane (Houghton Mifflin, 1980; revised 1990).