



# *In My Own Words ...*

## **Both Cheer and Sad**

**H**ere's an example of what seems to me to be a classic description of young maleness. I have taken it from pages 12 and 13 of Don DeLillo's *Underworld*. It is about a young adolescent boy who wants to see the ball game at Yankee Stadium but has no money to buy the ticket. It could just as well be about any young man at any period in history and anywhere in the world who has a burning desire but must perform a feat in order to achieve his goal. And in the doing and in the daring, the young male child smithies a sense of self. Here goes:

*He stands at the curbstone with the others. He is the youngest, at 14, and you know he's flat broke by the edgy leaning look he hangs on his body. He has never done this before and he doesn't know any of the others and only two or three of them seem to know each other but they can't do this thing singly or in pairs so they have found one another by means of sidy looks that detect the fellow foolhard and here they stand, black kids and white kids up from the subways or off the local Harlem streets, lean shadows, banditos, 15 in all, and according to topical legend maybe four will get through for every one that's caught....*

*The youngest boy is also the scrawniest, Cotter Martin by name, scrawny tall in a polo shirt and dungarees and trying not to feel doom-struck—he's located near the tail of the rush, running and shouting with the others. You shout because it makes you brave or you want to announce your recklessness....*

*Cotter thinks he sees a path to the turnstile on the right. He drains himself of everything he does not need to make the jump. Some are still jumping, some are thinking about it, some need a haircut, some have girlfriends in wooly sweaters and the rest have landed in the ruck and are trying to get up and scatter. A couple of stadium cops are rumbling down the ramp. Cotter sheds these elements as they appear, sheds a thousand waves of information hitting on his skin. He picks up speed and seems to lose his gangliness, the slouchy funk of hormones and unbelonging and all the stammering things that seal his adolescence.*

*Then he leaves his feet and is in the air, feeling sleek and unmussed and sort of businesslike, flying in from Kansas City with a briefcase full of bank drafts. His head is tucked, his left leg is clearing the bars. And in one prolonged and aloof and discontinuous instant, he sees precisely where he'll land and which way he'll run and even though he knows they will be after him the second he touches ground, even though he'll be in danger for the next several hours—watching left and right—there is less fear in him now.*

Bravo! Bravo! When I read these lines over and over as I have done, I get a lump in my throat, and when I read them out loud to a friend, I actually started to cry. And she did too. It's a terribly emotional piece. We want to cheer this young male on, we want him to succeed, we laughed out loud right through our tear-brimming eyes when we came to the "... flying in from Kansas City with a briefcase full of bank drafts." It's the ambivalence. That's why we laughed and cried at the same time. That's why it tugs so. The ambivalence contained in this piece hints, even as Cotter flies over the turnstile in the best tradition of an Olympic pole vaulter, though without his training, it hints at something sad. The sad is that this kid up from the subway can perform the feat—but then what? Who will he be for the rest of his life? What other challenges will tear at him and how will he handle them without clear training, without tradition, without role models and all that? Well, as I said, the ambivalence is both cheer and sad and it has to do with a state of becoming and then being a man in our time.

We women have had at least 25 years of honing ourselves. This has been our work. This has been our privilege. In the Guild we've had the privilege of learning who we are collectively and individually through writing. And through this process we have learned to shed false roles, false responses and make the discovery of courage to be truthful with ourselves, as well as to speak truthfully to others. Of course, I mean the kind of truthfulness that is based on a genuine sense of humanity and not the kind that feels as though someone spat in your face.

And now after ample time has passed, I wish to ask: "What about our brothers? What have they been up to?"

Back to Cotter: He is no different than any young brave who has had to prove his mettle in the early days of the Americas, or in Africa, or wherever or whenever—but then having passed the tests of puberty, he was assured an honorable and permanent position within his community. And therefore I ask: "What about young Cotter? What does the future hold for him? Does his community see him as the sleek and unmussed businessman flying in from Kansas City as does DeLillo? Hell no. His pole vaulting over the turnstiles of Yankee Stadium gets him nothing except a free seat for the duration of the game, if he is lucky. It does earn him a sense of self in terms of having dared and having risked and also in terms of his physical prowess which defied the authorities, or the elements in days of yore, or the odds in

our present time.

Well, that's not nothing. But is he going to get hooked on trying to defy the odds, like getting deeper into unlawful activities, or playing number games, or might he be heard to say, if and when he becomes a presidential candidate when asked if he ever did anything *bad*—"Well, I once jumped over a turnstile at Yankee Stadium"—reminding of the reply of some recent presidential candidate who when asked if he ever took drugs said: "Yes, I smoked pot but only once," or similar mealy-mouthed words to that effect. You tell me. What do you think? What do you think are the odds these days for a young male child up from the subway or up like a blade of grass on the constantly coiffed lawn in front of his suburban home? If he comes from an economically disadvantaged background, as did Cotter, is he more likely to take his role models from the underworld, or from sports figures, although the latter are not exactly a cut above being bought and sold to the highest bidder. Or, if he is some middle class or rich kid aiming to get into an Ivy League school so he can earn six figures as soon as possible, what are the odds these days that he, as the years pass, is going to be the kind of man deeply rooted within himself who speaks from an inner sense of self, not manically driven by competition, consumption, numbers, self-aggrandizement—all too often based on a strong sense of inadequacy and diminished by a limited linear view of things?

And what are the chances that he speaks from an inner code of honor as the men who fought in the Second World War did and still do, deflecting publicity from themselves for heroic deeds and saying to the media: "The real heroes are the guys who didn't come back"?

Or what are the chances that it will be said of him, as was said of a young man the other day: "I don't think this is the same John"—words spoken by the manager of a McDonalds after being told that the reliable and predictable John Taylor he supervised for 14 years as his assistant just shot five people at a Wendy's in Queens for no apparent reason whatsoever?

After 25 years of personal transformation, I think it is time for us to take a look at those who sit on the "other side of the aisle."  
Stay tuned.

In the spirit of the Guild.

Hannelore Hahn

Hannelore Hahn