

Artist's Statement

When we think of 'exile poets', Milosz or Brodsky might come to mind, but female writers qualify for that romantic label as well. I think of Clarice Lispector and Jamaica Kincaid who found their creative voices in new worlds they created for themselves wherever they woke up each day, as did America's first poet of note, Anne Bradstreet, and Phillis Wheatley, America's first black poet, brought as a slave from Africa, at age eleven. All could wear the name tag of 'exile', and yet perilous voyages across the Atlantic Ocean are not necessarily essential to a writer's self identification as an exile. A short train trip or stagecoach ride from Hadley, Massachusetts, to Amherst might make a young writer feel ever more strongly that she is an exile, even if she rarely leaves her own home, as was true of America's most famous poet, Emily Dickinson. She would perch out of sight at the top of the stairs and chat with visitors down below, an exile from family and neighbours, and yet communicating with the world through her writings.

I too was an exile within my own country. After graduating from college in Tennessee, I took a small suitcase of clothes, three books, and my Royal portable typewriter, and climbed aboard a Greyhound bus to New York City. Many writers have followed that path. Mississippi author Willie Morris wrote a memoir about his own journey, titled *North toward Home*. Many artists and writers are self-imposed 'exiles' from their childhood homes in seeking fame and fortune in other cities, other countries. To be an exile, voluntarily, requires a mix of courage and foolishness. My poem in this issue, titled "Everything I Needed to Know", includes the phrase: "we walk through the door / exiled into the future". We walk through a door in our young lives, making a bet that we will achieve something, we will find love, a steady income, our name on the cover of a slim volume of verse or even in large letters on the cover of a fat novel. Perhaps photography will prove a lady's merit (think of Margaret Bourke-White or Diane Arbus), or painting during an 'exile' career in France (Joan Mitchell) or in New York City (Alice Neel).

In my poem cited above I mention discarded dresses lying on the floor, like old ideas of social roles or old ambitions that no longer satisfy. Poets and painters must go ahead and get on that bus. As for the three books I brought to New York with me: one was a biography of artist Vincent Van Gogh, an inspiration to me as to what an exile's mission might be or should be. And the link to technology? Why my typewriter, of course! I loved that portable typewriter that accompanied me to the future.

Everything I Needed to Know

Bright sun. Polished cotton dress with swoopy skirt popular in the Fifties. We wear crinolines under those swirling skirts, a nod to Nashville in 1855, oh, but not the year I graduate from high school. I arrive for the 1955 ceremony in a Buick. Yellow shoes with little kitten heels, my first pumps date me. (This is the last year grads wear dresses and suits, in '56 robes are required, a more ceremonial approach, dignity stapled to ceremony.) The dress, shoes, white cotton gloves are purchased in chic downtown stores in the last year before the mall invasion. Our senior photographs are taken at a downtown store too, me in pearls, a borrowed necklace rests on my sweaty neck. The photographer airbrushes out teen-age flaws, providing a smooth matte skin for all of us, the class of 1955. We gaze trustingly into a lens promising everything, nothing. You be the judge. Oh, the stockings too, everything is new, in our *annus horribilis*. Oh, we are free, we will be, soon enough. Dresses with inevitable stains fall into puddles on the floor. We walk through the door, exiled into the future. Will we fail or succeed, will our deodorant protect us for the next fifty years. Sixty?