

## Two Essays for Aloud · *Allan Gurganus*

### LOCAL, USUAL AND RARE

ONCE UPON A TIME at Hamburg Inn Number Two (or was it Hamburg Inn Number One?) breakfast cost you sixty-nine cents. We're talking 1974, and you got your two eggs any style, wheat toast paddled with butter, two pretty if chemical jellies, hashbrowns done 'al dente' and something called bottomless coffee. My great teachers at the Workshop were: John Cheever, Stanley Elkin, Stephen Becker, Jack Leggett, John Irving, and Miki, chief waitress at Hamburg Inn Number Two, or was it Number One. Such are the caprices of memory.

I'd arrived from a semi-self-congratulatory school in the Northeast and, at twenty-three, was sophisticated as only an undergraduate in commuting distance of Manhattan weekends can be. Basted in Dickens, Chekhov, James and Proust, my idea of fiction hovered somewhere between Europe and the nineteenth century, my own morbid sensitivity and a Bloomsbury dream of perfect company that'd be as intellectually erotic, that'd say funny things, that would have just enough money not to mention it, a crowd that would enjoy frequent sex and even more frequent publication and—of course—look good.

Then the plane landed amongst corn, more of it than seemed either possible or necessary. I arrived overdressed. Some things never change.

I'd been told that the Middle West grew persons doughy, deacon-like, devoid of eccentricity, slaves to duty. In Iowa City, the cab passed a service station, its foreyard planted with huge sunflowers and, again, corn, stalks eight feet high. Was this a joke, a pun? I didn't understand. Arriving at my Victorian boarding house, I opened the bathroom door, I noticed a handsome young woman seated on the commode. She said quite plainly, "We share. I don't know you. But, I'm here just now."

I said, "Hi," closed the door and fell against a wall.

Sharing bathrooms with strangers—very un-Bloomsbury.

All I'll say about the Seventies being the Seventies is that they came between the Sixties, which you've heard too much about, and the Eighties

which, for better or worse, we're in—so in—and that whatever we did during the Seventies, we probably would've done—in different hairstyles and bellbottoms—in other decades, using different reasons to explain ourselves. Or maybe I just think that because the Seventies were, like—so . . . Seventies, right? But let that go.

Porn movies were being shot in my boarding house's front apartment. Hogging the bathroom, trim young people applied body make-up from gallon jugs. I hoped to be asked over, if only as a consultant. I was not. I found our white bathroom specked with flesh-colored droplets. My education cranked up. My conception of the Middle West began to thaw.

On Iowa Avenue, an old man walked his young cat on a leash. But the cat went everywhere cats do—under fences, beneath cars—and you soon saw: a young cat out walking its old man.

My fellow students looked wild and ready—but decent compared to how the town was acting up. I sensed there was more English and Philosophy jostling on the streets than in a building named for E. and P.

And then I met Miki. A type-A waitress, short, Mason-jar shaped, gloomy, brilliantly efficient, semi-mean. I'd seen her make younger, fellow serving persons weep behind the coffee tanks. Miki wore hushpuppy shoes stained nurse-white against their will, she had wing glasses and, under a double-hairnet, pin-curls even then long out-of-date. She carried twelve (count them) steaming coffee mugs contorted around the usual ten fingers. Not at gunpoint would Miki call anybody "Sugar."

I settled—dressed down now—on a counter stool, I ordered the same breakfast three days running. Morning four, it happened, over the heads of others fueling up for work, Miki called to me, "The usual?" I nodded, hard. "Usual, Mik." (I was, as my grandmother might say, "entering in.")

True, a week later, eating the usual, I had un-monogamous thoughts about French toast—but I stuck with my standard fare. Otherwise, the usual would *not* be.

This was to become a great discovery. It's hard to explain how the bullying reigning waitress provided an algebra I needed. I began wondering about Miki—whose last name I never knew. When she dreamed, if she dreamed—did she dream about fishing, about waitressing in a better place, growing strawberries, did she dream she was the mother of three, headed home to cook supper? What was Miki's hidden poem? The more

unlike me she seemed, the more I needed her news. I could not dismiss her. Can you name one rounded sympathetic working-person in the novels of Virginia Woolf? I'd arrived with some elitist notion of separation between artist and subject matter. Now I found Us and Them becoming uncomfortably synonymous.

At local thriftshops, I perfected my Iowa disguise. I got a battered green Schwinn and—with a story freshly finished—I'd pedal it to a friend's place. While he read me indoors, I paced the porch like an expectant father. And friends rushed their fiction to me. We were entranced with each other. We were our own news. Talking shop about Kafka, we ate truckstop breakfasts late at night. We took certain drugs, we fell in love with each other and out again and ended up with broken hearts but my God what subject matter.

Meantime, weekly, on the Workshop's worksheet, Iowa City itself always presented the best poem or story:

A vague young woman from my boarding house explained: *She* lived here to be around the school's symphony conductor—a man she'd never said one word to, not aloud. She didn't *need* to. She attended all his rehearsals. She hid at the back of Hancher Auditorium—picking up the conductor's every in-joke, all his loving thoughts beamed her way—via transistors cleverly implanted in her molars. “We all have a mission here,” she smiled. I nodded. I began to believe her.

“The usual?” Miki called as I brushed snow from my hair. It was already January. (Such hair I had then, and cascading down to here.) “Usual,” said I, imagining all the menus banqueting in her head, forty years' worth. Maybe even Flannery O'Connor's yen for a morning's dry toast, served eucharist-plain, with a large side of tabasco. (I just made that up.)

The coffee mug clomped before me, not a drop spilled as Miki, oracle, went, “Guess you heard.”

Miki was like Time itself: An express making only local stops.

“No,” I said. “Haven't . . . heard.” You *had* to say that to get the stuff out of her. First you admitted not being from around here, then—an artist having humbled you, Miki—as folks will—told:

“Not heard? Seems—man down to Aetna Realty. Working late. Stepped in the elevator. Nothing there. Fell clear down the shaft. Busted both legs . . . compound. Lay in the grease and gunk for nine full hours. Janitor

heard the screaming. Man's a regular. Always sits there, not two stools from *your* favorite. He's American cheese omelette. He's hold the fries. He's hot tea, plenty of lemon on the side. He's danish. Not much of a tipper, short-fused fellow. Still . . . wouldn't wish that on somebody else's dog."

A nightwatchman, just off duty at the gas plant, slumped onto the stool beside mine. "Usual, George? Guess you heard. No? Where *you* been? Man down to Aetna Realty. Working late. Stepped in the elevator. Nothing there. Fell clear . . . "

Then—happy to be sitting among other non-Bloomsbury workers—(me, headed to my little Hermes portable—*Somebody* had to do it)—an idea opened like the morning's first sweet caffeine: Chekhov had taught me back East, Workshop classes showed me and now Miki reiterated, but she did it best: "The usual" isn't really.

"The usual"—two words—must mean something different for every customer.

It was definitely snowing outside Hamburg Inn Number One or Two. I felt weightless with the heaviness of my own discovery. I was really young then. We all were.

Like everybody, I believed I was the first.

Returning in 1986, I planned to walk to every house I'd ever rented (or—thanks to love affairs, however brief—spent even one night in). And I did. Which is why I came a day and a half early.

I had a Miki fantasy: I would step in after twelve years' absence. She'd frown at me over today's young customers. Then something would unlatch behind her glasses and, over other workers' heads, over a dozen years, she says, "The usual?" I nod. Like nodding to the world. Very un-Bloomsbury, nodding greedily to the word "usual."

The new waitress told me. Miki died last year—died after falling down behind her counter here while serving others omelettes and dark news. For a while there, about her, strangers on these stools must've muttered to each other, "I guess you heard . . . Miki."

"Work-shop"—a shop where work is done.

I was a worker, in thrift-store coveralls, planted at her counter among other laborers—no better or worse than me—all of us lined there in a row

like . . . corn or something. I loved Iowa City then. It and my writing were the same things. I loved my friends and their work, equally. I loved being so young and having so far to go and believing I could manage it.

For me then, “Meltdown” might’ve meant some Hamburg Inn blue-plate special. Reagan was a toothless has-been B actor. AIDS, you took for indigestion. I am lucky, still alive. We all know how many aren’t. Those of us left, we’re still trying, aren’t we?

Once we wanted to get into this school, and we did.

Now we wanted to come back here, and we have.

We are the lucky ones—despite all our whining about grants and jobs and who got what. Writing is still manual labor. We must take our cue from Miki: we’re in it, not just for the tips—but for the job’s sake. Here we are now—a Bloomsbury of the Prairie—only better. I glance around. We look okay. And yet, I ask myself, if *we’re* doing fairly well—then why is the world such a mess? How do we get the two better lined up—us, its chroniclers—and it, our breakfast bread-and-butter?

To the workers in our field, still waiting to learn to breathe then speak then sing—I’d say, when in doubt about subject matter, common geography, a place to start—begin with “Right here.” The truth is always local first—and then, if true enough, it spreads. Settle in a room and read to one another. Read talkingly and—afterwards—about the poem or story—talk readingly.

Okay, change from mimeo to Xerox. But keep it real untechnological. Keep the simple, ordinary and decent there at your workshop table’s very center. Maybe that will save us.

Miki? I think we’re ready to order. You—total memory of menus—you, newsworthy in the Iowa Ballroom tonight—we don’t ask for eternity. But we’ve had fifty years of something good here.

So, could you, please, bring us fifty more of the same, please?

Of, yes,

The usual.