

Also by WALTER ABISH

Alphabetical Africa (novel)

Duel Site (poems)

MINDS MEET

Walter Abish

A NEW DIRECTIONS BOOK

it repaired, Tom sold it to a junk dealer from Denver who happened to be passing through. It gave Tom an excuse to spend a few more days in Vienna. Mary was furious when he told her what he had done.

But she felt better when the desk clerk at the Palace Hotel greeted them by name. That night as they were eating their Wiener Schnitzel, Tom spotted the President and his entourage entering the hotel dining room. It's the President, he whispered to Mary and George. As the

President was sitting down at a table only a few tables away from theirs, George heard him mention the name Frank. George was so startled that he spilled his mug of beer. While a waiter was mopping up the

beer, Tom rose from his seat and waved his flag at the President. The President's friend pointed out Tom to the President, who laughed, and promptly invited Tom and his friends to join him. They sat down at the President's table and watched him eat. They also listened to him

as he spoke somberly to Tom and Mary about uniting this country. He also patted George lightly on the knee, and then, in a slightly lowered voice, asked him if he would care to join the Presidential party, since

owing to the terrible mishap there was one vacant seat on the helicopter. Showing no surprise whatever, George cheerfully said, yes, and then went upstairs to fetch his knapsack.

The helicopter never made it to Washington. It was shot down over North Carolina. There were a great many malcontents in the nation, and people everywhere were dropping words, such as: "hegemony" and "plurality." In all, there were three fatalities on board the helicopter, but the President pulled through, and so did George. It was the beginning of a lasting friendship.

When George regained consciousness in the hospital, he thought of poor Ludmilla being consumed by a fireball. Poor, poor Ludmilla. Now he would never hold her in his arms.

A pretty young nurse asked George if he wanted anything.

Yes, he said. I'd like to know who I am.

She left the room, presumably to find out who he was. This gave George a few minutes to think. . . he also tried to touch his scar, and discovered that his forehead was swathed in bandages.

You must be Frank, said the nurse, when she returned to his room. Thank you, said George. I've suspected it all along. For the time being he felt pretty content. In a matter of days he had made so many friends.

HOW THE COMB GIVES A FRESH MEANING TO THE HAIR

THE ROADS

Some of the roads of Albuquerque permit the people to view the fine scenery from outside the city. The Pueblo Indians used to build roads that dissolved in the vastness of what lay outside of their experience. With a detachment quite unknown to the late settlers of Albuquerque, the Indians observe the growing Albuquerque network of roads until its grid system finally encompasses "The Brook of the Running Spirit," and splits into two "The Mountain That Is Too Hot to Touch." Now and then a new road will provide a visitor access to a museum. Now and then a road will also launch a new cabbie. . . There are already far too many cabbies stationed in front of the Albuquerque railroad station. There are also far too many cabbies blocking the roads, blocking with their battered vehicles what the Pueblo Indians describe as "The Elsewhereness of Things." The cabbies won't budge until their demands are met. But they suffer from poor leadership. They also suffer from a lack of public sympathy. They are not retarded, at least not according to the prevailing medical standard, and therefore cannot expect to elicit sympathy for their plight.

The retarded children have managed to live through another hot summer. They are now staying among the Indians in a pueblo that is less than an hour's drive from Albuquerque. The terrible events that took place on the blocked roads just outside of Albuquerque have not marred their memories. They have emerged unscathed by the experience. In any event, they are still considered as being sacred by the Indians, who have taught them to make ceremonial masks and weave baskets for the tourist trade. Following the events that have been described in some detail in a voluminous eight-volume work entitled *The Remembrance of Albuquerque*, the children traveled in a Greyhound bus, flew in a helicopter, and on one unforgettable occasion sailed on a yacht on the Potomac. This was on the occasion of their visit to the capital to receive the Medal of Merit for Retarded Children. A memento of their visit is a large wall-sized map of Washington. Back in their small adobe and stone house in the pueblo, the map hangs on the wall of their playroom. They do not yet understand the meaning of the map. The map, in their minds, resembles a sand drawing for a ceremonial Navaho dance. How can they, existing as they do in a state of retardation, distinguish a network of streets from a network of elaborate mythological destinations.

THE COMB

The comb parts the hair and exposes sections of the white scalp underneath. The comb gives a fresh meaning to the hair. It serves as an indicator. It provides a sort of explanation. The comb is made of plastic, but in the children's retarded hands this hard resilient material is kneaded into a softer and more rubbery substance resembling the unparalleled softness of their faces.

NAMES (1)

The retarded children have names. They do not always remember their names. They do not, consequently, always respond to their names... They are not even sure what a name is meant to be. They are called: Harry, John, Dwight, Lyndon, Dick, Frank, Bess, Jackie,

Minnie, Lady, Pat, and Eleanor. In themselves the names do not with any specificity indicate the nature of their abnormality. The Pueblo Indians are convinced that their abnormality is sacred, and that everything that is related to the children is equally sacred. The children's names are listed on their medical reports and on their birth certificates. The certificates are stamped: RETARDED. The children and the Pueblo Indians take sacredness for granted.

MRS. DIP

Mrs. Dip arrived in Albuquerque three years ago. Her first name is Clara. Naturally, she visited the Pueblo Indians, and examined their weary faces. She also climbed the tall wood ladders that lead into their ceremonial chambers by herself, quite unafraid, somehow radiating a purity and confidence. It came as no surprise to anyone when the town council by a unanimous vote elected Mrs. Dip to work with the poor retarded children who had been left in the care of the city fathers.

MARRIAGE

Even the retarded children cheered when Mrs. Dip said: I do. They now formed a nuclear family. The ceremony was a simple one. Mrs. Dip walking barefoot down the aisle to be purified by the priest, as the children knelt and the Pueblo Indians in their ceremonial robes danced outside. The event, like so many of the events that are to follow, has been preserved on slides. Mrs. Dip at first failed to understand what the Indians meant when they spoke of the children's sacredness. But she is finding out... Shall we have a barbecue tonight, asked Mr. Dip. Yes darling, she answered, thinking, this is the bliss I've always wanted to experience.

GLASS

Mrs. Dip is only twenty-four. Her young shining face is visible through the windshield. The shatterproof windshield increases the distance between her and the retarded children who are clamoring for her attention, for her love, for her unbearably sweet embraces.

They have grown accustomed to being caressed by her. But once inside her car Mrs. Dip is unapproachable. Sadly the children stand on the promontory of the pueblo and watch her drive away in a cloud of dust. It is the sweeping cloud of the spirit, say the Pueblo Indians, consoling the children.

TO THE PUEBLO

Each day Mrs. Dip drives from a small suburb of Albuquerque to the pueblo. In order to reach the pueblo she drives across a narrow bridge spanning a canyon. She and the few other drivers who have business at the pueblo drive at a snail's pace, because the bridge is old and unsafe. At the other end of the bridge the children are waiting to dribble their saliva on her freshly starched blouse. They are waiting to scrutinize her carefully, to examine her wardrobe, to register every nuance of change, every minute alteration.

FINGERNAILS

Her fingernails are painted a bright red. The bright red shatters the already tense atmosphere of expectation. Mrs. Dip may not be aware of it, but to the children her hands are sending out signals which they are trying very hard to interpret. The reasoning behind this is simple. If they can comprehend what she is saying with her hands, they may, in the future, be able to understand the other more intimate signals of her slim and sweet body. The children, naturally, have spotted her bright red fingernails and become unusually unruly. Mrs. Dip hurriedly enters the small room on her left, and firmly closes the door, locking it on the inside. A hush falls over the children. Mrs. Dip has disappeared from sight. Is she in the peeing room? Is she in the Pueblo Indian room of the running water dance, or has she somehow become invisible? They strain their ears, listening for the sound of running water, and dare they hope, for the sound of something else, the intimate sound, the distant sound of Mrs. Dip's body dissolving.

SLIDES

In volume one of his great work of fiction, Marcel Proust described a few intimate details of his childhood. He also described his dependence upon his mother. In general, the people he described spent most of their time in sitting rooms. They frequently spoke about their travels, past and future. They compared different cities, cities he had never seen. Like him, all of them were pale. Like his mother, they were afraid of the harmful rays of the sun. It stood to reason that they too would in time imbue him with their fear. In the sitting room they discussed truth, mythology, and relativity with the disconcerting assuredness of people who are convinced that what they are discussing did not exist. In volume one Marcel as a young boy borrowed books from a lending library. Most of the books were about aristocrats. Somewhat timidly Marcel mimicked their laughter. In the books he so avidly read all the salons of the aristocrats were rectangular in shape just like the sitting rooms of other people, except that the salons of the aristocrats were slightly larger to accommodate the pianos and the huge mirrors.

MARCEL'S CHILDHOOD

did not know where the center was located. He spoke the language but had great difficulty in making himself understood. There are cracks in the mirrorlike surface, but these are carefully disguised. When Marcel first arrived he was particularly struck by the cleanliness and the silence.

Have you come here to study the Pueblo Indians, he was asked, or do you, instead, wish to write about the retarded children?

THE CITY

It is built on a large mirrorlike surface. The streets are polished daily. The people avoid looking at the ground in order not to be blinded by the sun. When Marcel Proust first entered the city he

lawn mower and of the table set for breakfast. The children may be retarded, but they are quite capable of recognizing the glasses of milk and fried eggs on the table. Their reward, it turns out, is a journey through the vaguely familiar-looking world of Mr. and Mrs. Dip. Breathlessly the children wait for the breakfast shown on the slides to be consumed.

THE BED

Mr. Dip has also taken a few slides of their double king-sized bed. These slides were taken during the hopeful period of his marriage. Seeing the bed, the children begin to squirm in their retarded fashion. The bed is inviting. It is large and spotless. It is the place where Mr. and Mrs. Dip spend the night. The children are well informed. The Pueblo Indians smile tenderly as they hear the children laugh. But the slides of the bed are misleading, since on one or more than one occasion Mr. Dip has informed his wife that she smells of retarded children. Everytime she undresses he can see the children's saliva trickling down between her two firm but small breasts.

THE RECKLESSNESS

Marcel Proust did not hesitate when the recklessness came pounding on his door. Despite the lateness of the hour, he permitted it to enter. There is no truth, no mythology, and only a few books of relative merit. Half groggy with sleep he dressed and left the house. Overcoming his innate shyness, he approached a man on the street and asked him where he might find the members of the upper class. You'll find most of them hunting rats in the basement of the Hotel Marigny.

Where's the hotel?

Any cabbie will take you there, said the man. As Mr. and Mrs. Dip sat in their living room they could hear the recklessness pounding on the door of their neighbor. I don't like to hunt rats, even if one gets to meet members of the upper class in an informal setting, said Mr. Dip thoughtfully.

THE SILENCE

Marcel may have come here because the people of Albuquerque are well known to be tolerant and exceedingly friendly to strangers. However, odds are that he came here because of the stillness. He arrived at midday and was immediately overcome by the silence. Then, after visiting several real estate agencies, he bought a three-story brick building in an overwhelmingly lower-middle-class neighborhood. The previous owner of the house had been killed by the local butcher after a petty altercation. It did not really concern Marcel. He never met the man's widow. He only dealt with the real estate agent. Do you remember your childhood? the agent asked Marcel. Vividly, replied Marcel. You are lucky, said the agent. You should cherish those memories.

THE FOOTPRINTS

They belong to Marcel. He takes a walk early in the morning. He leaves footprints. Everyone in Albuquerque is startled by Marcel's footprints because the footprints are so small and, somehow, because they appear to be so insidious . . . their ingratiating and self-effacing outlines negating the otherwise determined stride of his walk. People are convinced that anyone capable of walking furiously yet with such a single-mindedness is clearly headed for the peak of fame.

Welcome back little Marcel, welcome back, cry Marcel's sallow-faced lower-middle-class neighbors, as he returns from his walk, invigorated, and filled with ideas for the next incident in his book.

THE FIRST NAME

This is an introduction to the unreliability of the first name. In this instance the first name is Albertine. It is the name of a young woman in Marcel's eight-volume masterpiece. Day after day people keep ringing Marcel's front doorbell. Enough, he pleads, enough, I've got all the information I can use. But they insist on providing him with the latest about the retarded children, calling them the Rets. It took Marcel days to catch on. The rats, he said wondering-

ly, you don't say. . . They also bring him news about the cabbies and the whereabouts of the woman he loves. . . The one thing they do not bring him is the love he craves. But Marcel was waiting, and when the bell rang, he easily slipped into a faded silk dressing gown and answered the door.

My name is Albertine, said the woman. It happened to be the correct name. Marcel, as it turned out, was anticipating her arrival. There was a fire burning in his study. He stood aside to let her enter, then rushed back to his study and doused the fire. Only some notes for my book, he said in his self-deprecating way. She wasn't aware of the significance of the event at the time.

ALBERTINE'S FALSEHOOD

I don't wish to leave you, she told Marcel. I like this quaint building, and your quaint neighbors, and all your quaint friends, and I'm dying to hear what you've written about me today.

THE LONGING

The cabbies in Albuquerque long for new streets and for new driving regulations. For Marcel, longing is as familiar as the quilt on his bed. He craves for the company of people who are not instantly recognized by the cabbies. Having been invited by the local RET club to participate in a panel discussion on the merits of starvation in the modern novel, Marcel refers to his hunger. I'm starved for Albertine, he declares, when it is his turn to address the twelve people in the audience, but she's never there when I want her. I have compiled a long list of her lies, infidelities, and deceptions. My longing fills me with gloom, just as I know her death will fill me with dejection. I have decided that she will be trampled to death by a horse in the fifth volume of the English edition. That much has been decided. It will give my longing a long needed respite.

THURSDAY (7)

Marcel had arrived in Albuquerque on a Thursday. The cabs were drawn up outside the railroad station. A solid phalanx of cabs. Only four passengers besides Marcel got off at Albuquerque. As soon as the drivers caught sight of Marcel they broke into a run. Something about his face perhaps. . . He had planned to check his luggage at the station and then enjoy a leisurely walk to the center of the city before proceeding to a hotel, but seeing the angry faces of the cabbies he instructed the porter to put his luggage quickly into the first cab. If someone had told him that the blue sky had suddenly turned the color of lead, Marcel would have believed him.

VISITORS

While Marcel was amusing the members of the upper class at a fashionable resort which was only four hours by train from the

center of the city, Mr. and Mrs. Dip moved into the house next door. Occasionally, while redecorating their new home, laughter from the garden next door would drift over to where they were working. Generally the laughter had an elegant ring to it. Sure enough, when Mrs. Dip peered out of the front windows she could see a large Bentley parked at the curb. Naturally, the Bentley and the uniformed chauffeur attracted a good deal of attention. People from all over came to stare quietly, without any rancor, at the old Bentley and the uniformed chauffeur. Little Marcel is having another important visitor, some said, taking pride in Marcel, taking pride in their neighborhood. No, someone else said. Marcel is away for the month. But this did not in any way diminish the pride.

THE BENTLEY

To this day the old bullet-proof Bentley is the favorite vehicle of the upper class. They prefer it to the Rolls because it is less ostentatious. They like the smooth ride, the leather upholstery, besides, they also save a hundred and twenty dollars on the grill. In his own inimitable manner, Marcel has tracked down all the people with a Bentley in their garage. He now feels free to call their chauffeurs by their first names. During Marcel's absence, one of his numerous society friends dropped by unannounced. Finding Albertine at home, he, out of courtesy, paid her a brief visit. It was this man's elegant laughter that drifted up to the second floor of the house next door, just as Mrs. Dip was musing over her choice of a wallpaper for the bedroom.

DOUBTS

Marcel sees Albertine dancing with another woman at the Hotel Marigny. They are laughing. It is a coarse, disagreeable laughter. Marcel almost faints.

THE MAP

The map shows the large sprawling city, its squares and parks, museums and theaters, hotels and taxi stands, all within a thirty-minute drive from the large estates that surround the city. Once Marcel unfolded the map and discovered where he was located in relation to the estates, the future, it seemed to him, seemed more promising. The map also indicated the whereabouts of the small airport, and the garages where the taxi cabs are parked at night. The red circles on the map indicate where the cabbies wait for their fare. . . After nine in the evening, most of the men they pick up wish to be taken to the Albuquerque rat hunt. . . The cabbies can instantly recognize a ratter. By now all the cabbies know Marcel. He is a good tipper. They drive past his house and honk their horns, not knowing that the walls of his room have been soundproofed.

MR. D/P

Mr. Dip is reading because he has time on his hands. He has time on his hands because he is waiting. He wears a clean suit. Ever since his wife started to work with the retarded children, Mr. Dip has worn a freshly laundered suit each day. Mrs. Dip's salary has helped to cover the large cleaning bill, and maintain the immaculately polished interior of their house. Mr. and Mrs. Dip are not planning to have any children in the near future since they already have twelve retarded ones. Soon Mr. Dip is planning to find a companion for his five-hundred-dollar armchair.

NAMES (2)

The retarded children have names. Most of the time they will acknowledge their names. Sometimes they'll pretend to have more

names than one. Marcel's impromptu visit was just such an occasion. It threw everyone into a great fever, and each one of the retarded children claimed to have at least one dozen names, thereby hoping to remain at the center of Marcel's attention for the duration of his stay. Mrs. Dip introduces the children. Without being aware of it, she has introduced Marcel to the great pathos of retardation. It is not, however, an unendurable pathos for a ratter.

RATTING

Some attempts have been made to explain ratting. The rats were pierced with hatpins or beaten with sticks. The people who attended these hunting parties soon discovered that their everyday conversations took on a new significance when certain words, such as: return, rattle, retribution, startle, tar, rather . . . were mentioned. Was Marcel aware of this when he volunteered to visit the retarded children.

WHAT ARE THE RETARDED CHILDREN THINKING? (1)

They are thinking that it is soon time for supper. They are also stimulated by the slides taken by Mr. Dip. In their retarded minds they are desultorily drifting through the as yet incompletely furnished house of Mr. and Mrs. Dip. In their disturbed minds they are covering the black smooth leather of the elegant chrome armchair with the imprints of their passionate kisses. They also believe, not incorrectly, as it would appear, that Mrs. Dip is dressing to give them pleasure, that she is painting her fingernails and toenails to bring some brightness into their bleak lives. If only they knew that the saliva they drooled on Mrs. Dip's blouse was depriving Mr. Dip of his pleasure, they would in their retarded fashion most likely intensify their ardor, intensify their passionate embraces . . .

Mr. Dip gazes at the breakfast table and then looks out of the window at the New Mexico sky, thinking that another beautiful day is awaiting him at the office.

WHAT ARE THE CHILDREN THINKING? (2)

What are the children thinking? Their thinking can be said to be at a standstill. It is colored by the fingernails of Mrs. Dip. It is colored by her long blonde hair. The children are retarded and are learning to tie their shoelaces. Each day they are taught to use a comb. The comb has become a familiar object for their retarded minds. They have become accustomed to its presence and no longer recoil when it is put into their hands. Somehow the hair keeps growing on their retarded heads. It was hair in the first place that necessitated the invention of the comb. The comb is green with a long handle.

THE LETTER

Marcel is attached to his mother. He writes from a resort hotel. He is suffering from hay fever. He has dislocated his right arm. Who is the strange man in boots who is constantly spying on poor Albertine, he wants to know. He's not a member of the upper class, that's for sure, responds his mother. Does she save my letters, wonders Marcel. So much depends on it . . . so much . . .

NEIGHBORS

Marcel failed to see Mr. and Mrs. Dip move their giant bed, section by section, into the house next door. Marcel is away at a resort hotel, said his mother when Mr. Dip knocked on their door. I'm your new neighbor, explained Mr. Dip. I just wanted to borrow a cup of sugar.

ALBERTINE

Marcel maintains that I conspire against him. He questions me about the man who was seen following me yesterday. In volume six he discovers my secret life. It is a lie. In volume five I am thrown by a horse. Another blatant lie. Marcel feeds on the endless lies he loves to fabricate. He feeds on my presence and then spews

out the crap that his friends, the cabbies, read while waiting for their evening fares.

LAUGHTER

Despite the cork-lined walls, Albertine's laughter penetrates his room. Who is she embracing now? Each time she laughs he has a fleeting glimpse of her being thrown by a horse . . .

INTIMACY

Albertine reluctantly joins Marcel in his cork-lined room. She complains that it is too hot and disrobes. Carefully she lies down on his papers that are scattered all over his bed. Tell me Marcel, would you still love me if I was someone else?

You are someone else, replies Marcel. That's why I love you.

THE DOOR

The door is attached to hinges which have been oiled. It swings open noiselessly. It permits Albertine to slip out furtively. There is no truth, there is no mythology, and there's hardly any relativity left in the world. She has by now become accustomed to the distortions in Marcel's notebooks. Still, as she intends to prove, the distortions are open to change. However, Marcel doesn't waste any time on regrets. He doesn't challenge Albertine's not entirely unforeseen departure. He simply invalidates it by chipping away at the stone steps, and in place of the entrance he has a large bay window installed, obliterating all signs of her hasty exit.

THE FENCING LESSON

The count's footman watches as his master gives Albertine a fencing lesson. They have to improvise a bit, because the count has sold his foils. They make do with sticks. The count is extremely watchful because there are one or two valuable vases in the room. Albertine is beside herself with excitement. Later that afternoon

they go riding on the count's estate. How easily she has slipped away from Marcel. . . How skillfully she managed to open the front door after oiling the hinges. She will change her name if necessary. Marcel will never find her again.

THE CABBIERS

Marcel is the only one who sides with the cabbies after they have announced a wildcat strike. Marcel, for shame, says the count. The cabbies are blocking all the roads leading to the city. They are well organized. They also pose a certain threat to our safety. Their families, furthermore, have gone into the streets. Their loathsome faces are peering into our bedrooms. But nothing will change Marcel's position. In the evening his mother makes egg salad sandwiches and distributes them to the starving cabbies who are lying next to their idle machines.

THURSDAY (2)

No doubt about it, Albuquerque has made a deep impression upon me, said Marcel, but it's time that I change my frame of reference. The Thursday after Albertine's departure he packed his belongings, but when he opened the front door he saw a phalanx of cabs drawn up at both ends of the street. I am a prisoner, Marcel concluded. These people need my support. They won't let me leave.

IMPATIENCE

The silence of the city only intensifies Mrs. Dip's impatience. She can't bear to sit down with a book. She can't bear to remain inside a room for more than ten minutes. She can't bear to hear the laughter from next door knowing that she can't join in. She gets into her small car. She is protected by the windshield as the car hurtles forward. People can see her but they can't spray her with their saliva. She drives down the highway until darkness sets in. Mr. Dip is unaware that she has left the house. He is sitting on his new chair. He is sitting contentedly on his hands, humming to himself. He can't wait for it to be time to go to work again, and for

the safety of the office. Yet Mr. Dip is well liked in his neighborhood. He smiles a good deal of the time. People refer to him as the cheerful young man whose wife works with retarded children. Each fresh leather armchair he acquires helps obliterate the threat of retardation. Late into the night he thinks of the perfection of furniture.

THE AIRPORT

Albertine flies over Albuquerque in a single-engine plane. It is her first solo flight. The view from the open cockpit is exhilarating. Somewhere down below Marcel is sitting in his cork-lined room writing about her. He wanted me to be thrown by a horse, but I wasn't. If only he could see her now. Sitting at his desk, engrossed by what he is writing, Marcel doesn't even hear the sound of the explosion that rips the plane apart.