

tion, energy, a resolve to initiate human interaction, if one lives alone, since a social life is never a day-to-day given. Leonard, who must be "pulled out of his own black hole," panics at making a dinner commitment. One of the New York friends who thrill her with "the sentence structure in their heads," Leonard uses his crowded calendar to delay such exposure for weeks. Laura is "all solid contact from the moment her voice hears mine." Facing a similarly overwritten date book, Laura elects not to postpone joy and shifts an appointment two days away. "There are two categories of friendship: those in which people are enlivened by each other and those in which people must be enlivened to be with each other. In the first category one clears the decks to be together. In the second one looks for an empty space in the schedule."

Mere busyness is not an antidote to isolation—despite the bright chatter of urban social life, Gornick detects the hollow sound of group depression at dinners and cocktail parties. "It's easier actually to be alone than to be in the presence of that which arouses the need but fails to address it." With age and insight, she has acquired a more complex world view but not a sense of belonging. She observes to Leonard that their chronology suggests they should feel like grown-ups, but the confusion still reigning in their lives suggests they're not: "Look at us. Forty years ago we would have been our parents. Who are we now?" she asks her ever laconic, ever depressed friend.

"They passed," Leonard says. "That's all." He describes marriage as a closet containing ready-made costumes for "wife" and another set for "husband." Our parents disappeared inside those clothes—"so stiff they could stand up by themselves"—and never came out. "Today we don't pass. We're standing here naked. That's all."

"I'm not the right person for this life," Gornick replies.

"Who is?" Leonard asks.

Approaching Eye Level is not a summary of thoughts recollected in complete tranquillity—the edginess of need is still there; echoes of the activist/revolutionary reverberate. Outing the loneliness buried in private lives, even under the cover of marriage, Gornick does not expect to reverse her recurring bouts of it. "If one cannot win over loneliness, at least one can learn that it's not fatal. Such knowledge becomes a strength, an ally, a weapon." She takes an unblinking look at the "mass depression" in her country, her city, her neighborhood, her apartment building, her bedroom...but at eye level, keeping a balance between ro-

mance and knowledge that renders longing understandable. "I have endured the loss of three salvation romances—the idea of love, the idea of community, the idea of work." This endurance allows her to keep seeking attachment, to keep appreciating the momentary connections available to

the open and questing. Like a blues singer who leaves her audience peculiarly uplifted, she delivers the gritty truth about human longing in rich metaphor and vivid detail. If there is no cure, Gornick at least suggests some comfort in knowing loneliness is a shared condition. ■

Calibrated Vitriol

JONATHAN TAYLOR

LET IT BLEED: Essays 1985–1995. By Gary Indiana. Serpent's Tail. 246 pp. Paper \$16.

Exploration of the so-called dark side of things American, the "people on the edge," if not new, has certainly become an increasingly mainstream mission: the eggheaded interpretation, in high-minded journals, of the squalid courtroom sensations of the day; the countless stories and novels that primly "reveal" the

twisted relationships behind the veneer of suburban contentment. Many of these self-congratulatory exercises feel like slumming because they are slumming, and they are slumming because the idea of the dark side, or of sides and edges in general, perpetuates in its fake duality the structure it is supposed to transgress. Gary Indiana is past this way of writing about things; for him, the edge is not "there," it is here, and it's taken for granted: "Something," as he muses about Disney, "that has death included in the sticker price." There is no other side to go to, and none to come back from, either. This should be no exceptional notion. But our culture's gift for the most irrational obstinacy is itself of frequent salience to Indiana—author also of several exceptional novels and story collections—who inserts himself without any ado into almost any aspect of American pathology.

Reflecting philosophy studied under Marcuse as much as his experience of an avant-garde film demimonde, or the emergence of AIDS viewed from New York's after-hours clubs, Indiana's essays have brought a pitiless but unstintingly self-examined voice—the exactness of Joan Didion without the brittleness, or the tact—to Jack Kevorkian, Céline, Sgt. Stacey Koon, Irving Penn, California porn and Mary McCarthy. A few, too few, of Indiana's rangy nonfiction writings have been collected for the first time in *Let It Bleed*.

Some readers will cluck at the apparent snobbery of Indiana's horrified forays among obese families at Euro Disney and

in Branson, Missouri (bustling Ozarks charity-ward to the "stars" of white-trash "family entertainment"—John Davidson, Anita Bryant, second-generation Osmonds). Having myself been dragged to Branson with the white-knuckled family of a grade-school classmate, I can assure them that Indiana's scabrous accounts aren't about contempt for the masses, just a genuine and perceptive terror of a culture that not only is mediocre but re-creates its mediocrity, then gleefully and coercively cements it, while refusing to admit the possibility or even theoretical desirability of human improvement. For Indiana, the most frightening cultural products are those that are frozen in a grotesque pose, and invite their consumers to be the same. The Japanese violinist-clown Shoji Tabuchi is, oddly enough, Branson's most emblematic showcase:

He can play anything country, and does, though after a few minutes it all sounds like the same thing. The fact that he plays it at all is the source of Tabuchi's popularity.... Tabuchi's shtick is all about being Japanese on other people's turf: pronouncing things wrong, eating raw fish, scrambling the titles of C&W standards, and in general ingratiating himself with hordes of Christians willing to forget World War II, since he's been willing to learn The Tennessee Waltz. Behind the shtick is the scrutable smile of a contented millionaire.

In Euro Disney's "Carnegie Deli simulacrum, you really feel you could be in New York, and not in your favorite place in New York, either. This impresses me as a very deft stage magician's trick, to reproduce faithfully those quotidian, republ-

Jonathan Taylor has written on books and cultural issues for The Nation, including the 1995 Jenny Jones talk-show murder case.

ROUTLEDGE

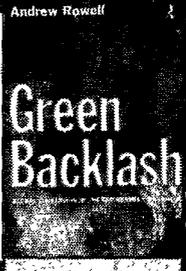


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sive details of the American everyday."

Tartly mocking the gushy farewell to Johnny Carson, Indiana sees just another million-dollar smile, "mugging behind his desk as if to guarantee the faceless millions that they, too, can repeat the same absurd gestures day after day, year after year, without an unbearable amount of suffering: entertainment is a factory like any other." A rare reference to Indiana's early life illuminates his impatience with the stubborn refusal of Carson's audience to step off this cultural hamster-wheel and "learn from the larger world." During the 1992 primaries in his native New Hampshire, he is at first simply moved by the plight of discarded industrial workers, but turns acridly to the hopelessness of which a nostalgia for factory labor is symptomatic:

It's impossible to listen to the visiting politicians jaw on about restoring New Hampshire's industrial base without remembering the sheer meaningless misery most of our relatives endured, day in, day out, some for twenty or thirty years, gluing on shoe soles or soldering circuit boards, an unending pointlessness for which no amount of quarterly raises and benefits packages could ever compensate. The idea that 40 to 60 hours a week of monotony was good enough for us, for our class of people, was sufficiently appalling to propel us both [Indiana and his cousin Kathy] into college and out of town.

"But we came from that factory world, a little more directly than most of the people we know," Indiana adds, "which is why Kathy and I, in our different styles, have nothing but contempt for New Hampshire Yuppies."

Years later, well into a career of art criticism, Indiana dismisses the controversy over Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* sculpture, preferring to "review" New York City's real contribution to site-specific public installations, a work known as "the Homeless." "The people who occupy their former homes know enough... to confront them as aesthetic objects—untouchable vehicles of 'aura,' worthy of investment on the basis of their degree of cleanliness and lucidity. A sculpture that pukes its guts out in a gutter cannot be compared in aesthetic value with one that dresses with a certain flair and has an engaging rap programmed into its circuitry." One is tempted to call Indiana's style "scathing" or "deadpan," but it has more dimensions than that. It's vitriolic, but so effective because so carefully and jadedly calibrated—never more or less outrageous than the atrocity it cata-

logues. "It isn't the scandal, it's the banality." Indiana is able to take things to their extreme, but only logical, conclusions: "I guess the ideal Disney thing would be one of those fetuses Randall Terry carries around with him, souped up by Disney's Imagineers to crawl around and deliver a tirade denouncing abortion."

Gary Indiana's calling is to expose a world determined to "turn people into things and jam life into death," and he makes it look easy because, if one looked hard enough and wrote honestly enough, it would in fact be easy. But looking hard enough and writing honestly enough are

not easy. Unfortunately missing here in this respect is his recent apotheosis of Thomas Bernhard, whose manic execration of his own Austria Indiana found usefully applicable to America—and who, like Indiana himself, deserves a wider readership here. Indiana must have thought of the languishing Austrian while visiting the Precious Moments outlet in Branson, where expensive doe-eyed ceramic figurines beseeching "Mommy, I Love You" are the objects of Sotheby's-level scrutiny: "The cost of these objects is the real proof of a parallel universe, where a glazed elf is an investment." ■

Out of Tune

ANNIE GOTTLIEB

OUT OF SIGHT. By Elmore Leonard. Delacorte. 296 pp. \$22.95.

To put spoken language into writing is a mere *trick*. And I found it—nobody else. Making spoken words *go* in literature isn't stenography: you have to change the sentences and rhythms somehow, to distort them—to use an artifice, so that when you read a book, it's as though someone is actually speaking to you. The same thing happens as with a stick plunged into water. If you want it to *look* straight you have to break it slightly—or *bend* it.... When you put one end in, a normally straight stick looks bent—and the same with language. On the page, the liveliest dialogue taken down word for word seems flat, complicated, heavy.... To reproduce the effect of spontaneous spoken life on the page, you have to bend language in every way—in its rhythm and cadence, in its words.

That isn't Elmore Leonard boasting. It's Louis-Ferdinand Céline, the literary genius (better remembered, alas, as a political moron) who smashed the formal architecture of French grammar to liberate the lowlife *vox populi* of Paris on the page. But Leonard himself might be forgiven for wondering, "When did I say that?" For there could be no better description of his own "trick," the sleight of style that lifts his crime novels above the genre. In a word, it's *street*: the savor and savvy, slyness and swagger of the talk that's talked on street corners and in bars, at taped-off crime scenes and in prison yards.

On first reading, Leonard seems simply to have recorded, with the fidelity of digital audiotape, the "spontaneous spoken life" of thieves, thugs, hustlers and the world-weary, wised-up pros who stalk them. But look again and you spot the broken stick, the language bent "in every way" so it sounds more real than real. As short a sentence as "The fuck you talking about?" is trademark Leonard. It's a matter of omission and elision, skipping the inessentials and cutting to the chase, as the mind does in its darting pursuit of satisfaction and its game of tag with the truth. Or, as Miles Davis put it, "I always listen to what I can leave out."

The Miles connection is not accidental. Céline knew that what he was really making was music—he called his distortion of language "a little harmonic tour de force"—and the music Leonard makes is Céline's favorite, jazz. Just look at him in Annie Leibovitz's classic portrait: dressed all in black like a fifties hipster, a little Olivetti on his knees, *playing keyboard*. Jazz, like Leonard's writing, can be enjoyed naively, as popular entertainment, while aficionados savor its subtle wit and artistry. And jazz (especially saxophone, that voice straight from the belly) often sounds like talk stripped of words, laying bare its emotional and psychosocial essence, whether it's the hilarity and hyperbole of a bunch of guys hanging out or the warm nostalgia of inner reverie (for of course we talk to ourselves, too). The psychological acuity of jazz, its grasp of the full range of human scams and sorrows, gives voice to the wisdom of the street. Elmore Leonard knows how to fit words

back to that music without muffling it, as words so often do.

So accurate and so smart is the man's ear that one imagines it mapped over most of his cortex, crowding out the other senses. Nearly all the information in Leonard's novels comes through the auditory channel, but he makes that channel carry it with wonderful economy and clarity, like fiber-optic cable. We never see a character except by eavesdropping on another's thoughts, with the result that we learn something about both: "She liked his type, his rough-cut bony features, big hands.... Big hands, big schlong" adds a simultaneous stroke (no *double entendred*) to the portraits of ex-con Louis Gara and sexual sponger Melanie in *Rum Punch*. Each of Leonard's memorable characters exists as a distinctive speaking and thinking voice, leitmotif and cadence, yet these creatures made of sound take on such flesh for us that we miss them after we close the book's back door.

When these characters interact, they *jam*, a couple of cops or a cop and a crook playing off each other's riffs like veteran jazzmen, old friends or rivals. Leonard's "bad guys" tend to solo compulsively, blowing gaudy flights of self-display and self-delusion that will prove their downfall, but are redeemed by inimitable style. His "good guys" listen with the acuity of hunters and the unerring good taste that for Leonard is the same as true morality. (In this he is a fifties hipster, hewing to the aesthetic and ethic of understated authenticity that was then called "cool.") Like all hunters, Leonard's law enforcers and bail bondsmen are a little bit in love with their prey; they can shoot or shackle a perp and still be entertained by him or her. But their ear for narcissistic pretension and kitsch is merciless. "Tillman wasn't her type," Karen Sisco, 29-year-old U.S. marshal and heroine of Leonard's new novel, muses about an ex-boyfriend. "It was the little annoying things about him, like saying 'Ciao' instead of so long or see you later, or the way he called her 'lady' and it made her think of Kenny Rogers." A fine romance in a Leonard book often begins when a man and woman recognize each other by what they *don't* say (see, for instance, *Touch*)—cool glades of understatement in the midst of the tropical clamor of egos.

So an alarm bell went off when the love story at the heart of *Out of Sight* began with a lengthy conversation—in the trunk of a car. Veteran bank robber Jack Foley, ripe for a midlife crisis (yes, crooks have them too), crawls out of a prison escape tunnel

Annie Gottlieb is a freelance writer and critic living in New York City.

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