



**“Where is America?” – Sermon by Eric Liu
Civic Saturday – February 4, 2017
Jones Playhouse, University of Washington, Seattle**

A long time ago, in a city far, far away, it was unclear how the people of this vast land would respond to the words and deeds of an unstable president in unholy alliance with autocrats abroad and white nationalists at home.

That was last week. And now we know.

We know just how we the people have responded – and how we are capable of responding. With passion. With presence. With purpose. With power. And with a fair amount of joy. (I’ll have more to say later about joy).

We – and I mean not just social-justice progressives but liberty-loving conservatives and skeptical independents too; not just in the cities of the coasts but the towns of the heartland; not just at airport terminals but in Facebook groups and coffee shops; not just those most at risk of persecution but all those determined to prevent it – we have reminded ourselves and the current executive that while he for a time may control the machinery of state we forever control its *legitimacy*.

Political legitimacy is the acceptance by the people of a leader’s claim to authority. It is a fragile unspoken hybrid of laws and norms. It is one of the most fascinating aspects of civic power because you can’t put your finger on it, yet you can’t lift a finger without it. You can be legally elected and have no legitimacy, like Nixon in 1974, or you can be powerless under the law yet have plenty of legitimacy, like Mandela in 1989.

At 5:12 this morning Donald Trump tweeted about the “so-called judge” who blocked his anti-refugee and anti-immigrant executive order. This is tantamount to calling the Constitution the “so-called Constitution.” To Trump the Constitution is just another contract to break, another terrible deal he inherited and refuses to honor.

And you know what? There is in fact nothing magical about the Constitution that forces us to abide by it. Just like there’s nothing magical about the office of the presidency that

forces us to respect him. As a minority president aided by an adversary of the United States, Trump craves legitimacy. But he forgets what that great philosopher Tony Soprano once said: “Those who want respect, give respect.”

If Trump wants legitimacy, let him earn it. He can start by showing the people and the Constitution some more respect. Because legitimacy is in the eye of the collective beholder. It is always contested, not just on Election Day. It is what *we* say it is.

There will be countless more challenges to our Constitution and the norms that give it life. For the moment, however, we have reminded each other that the president does not *wield* power except as we *yield* it. And we are not in a yielding mood.

At the same time, of course, folks can be excused for feeling a bit out of breath. The last week or two have been testament to Trump’s impressive ability to speed up time while slowing it down. His barrage of executive orders, real or notional, vetted or not, sparks an accelerating cycle of action and reaction. But out of all that action and reaction accumulates a residue of spent emotion and stress, clogging our neurons, making a day feel like a month, a week like a year.

For many folks, including me, it’s been hard sometimes to make sense of things. Paranoia creeps in. We lose our moral bearings. So I thought one simple approach would be to share some moments from the last week of my life – and ours. And what I’ve been wondering during these days of peril is this:

Where is America?

I mean that in a specific way. Not really “Where is public opinion?” (Answer: not with Trump). Nor do I mean where is our attention? (Answer: it’s the day before Lady Gaga plays the Super Bowl). And though I acknowledge, angrily, that a president of the United States who owes his election in part to Vladimir Putin cannot rightly be called the Leader of the Free World – and that his alienation of allies and his disregard for freedom is creating a vacuum of moral leadership in the world – that also is not the sense in which I mean “Where is America?” No, I mean something even deeper. I mean: Where can we find the true spirit of this country, especially in such extraordinary times?

There are days when it appears that the United States is devolving into a society like modern Russia, where there is a thin crust of cosmopolitan capitalist comfort atop a rotting core of mistrust and conspiracy thinking. Then there are days when it appears that we are evolving into a truly participatory democracy and experiencing, from the inside out and the bottom up, a new birth of freedom.

The truth is not somewhere in between. The truth is both at the same time. We are in a thoroughly rigged system of radical inequality. We are in an exhilarating age of bottom-

up power. And the challenge is to ask the question “Where is America?” in a way that can nudge the answer toward hope and not despair.

So this morning I want to explore three propositions with you:

America is in the laws. America is in the acts. America is in the heart.

Let me be clear: I’m not sure any of these is right. But I hope that examining them will reveal something useful about our times and ourselves.

AMERICA IS IN THE LAWS

On the citizenship exam that naturalizing immigrants take – a test, by the way, that I bet most native-born Americans would fail – there are many simple fact-based questions about how many states there are or who the first president was. But there is one ringer of a question that I am *certain* would stump most native-born Americans:

What is the rule of law?

One conception of America is that it is a nation of laws. It is a place built not on blood or soil or religion but on a set of neutral rules that are universally applied and that derive from our creed and our foundational documents like the Constitution and Declaration. This is the notion we heard last night when my friend Bob Ferguson, our attorney general here in Washington, sought and secured in federal court a nationwide stay on Trump’s refugee and immigration ban. “Nobody is above the law,” the AG said.

But another, more complicated conception is implied in the title of today’s first reading: “What to the slave is the Fourth of July?” What, to someone tormented or oppressed by the law, is the value of celebrating the law?

Donald Trump, from minute one in the Oval Office, has tested the premise that rule of law trumps all else. Deliberately, with the persistence of a toddler and the menace of a sociopath, he has broken rules of every kind. Rules governing how rules should get made. Rules about courtesy to other heads of state. Rules for how to staff one’s own agencies. Rules about self-dealing and venality and nepotism and conflicts of interest.

Some of these rules are written in the form of law. Some are unwritten and take the form of convention and tradition. Trump delights in breaking them all. And what many of his critics don’t seem to get is that when you say he is an amateurish wrecker of institutions, he and his base hear that as praise. They take it as a badge of honor and as a marker of success. Because he promised, and his base took him to mean, that he would in fact blow up an establishment power structure – rules, norms, conventions, and institutions – that they felt had screwed them all their lives.

Are they wrong to think that, to wish for that? Were the poor, indebted farmers who brought Andrew Jackson to the White House wrong to wish for the destruction of the Hamiltonian power structure in Washington, with its national bank and Wall Street bias? Was Frederick Douglass – may he rest in peace – was Douglass wrong to wish for the obliteration of a power structure that had extracted wealth and dignity from his body and the bodies of countless millions of other African Americans?

Now, hold on a minute, you must be thinking: How can you equate the self-pity of status-anxious white Trump voters who in fact still has loads of privilege with the existential suffering of enslaved black Americans who were defiled by American life?

I can't. I don't. But I do point out that at various points in history, very different kinds of people have had cause to disrespect and reject the rule of law.

We will see just how regularly this president brings the country to the brink of constitutional crisis. Will the people who work in his agencies abide by court orders and temporary injunctions? Will they respect the judicial branch? Will enough of us know enough to know what's at stake?

Two days before Trump issued his executive order against refugees and Muslim immigrants, I had coffee with a friend who served in the administration of President George W. Bush. Though she now works at a nonpartisan organization, she has her beliefs and she knows they're different from mine. But I was struck in this conversation by two things: first, her strong sense of the threat that Trump's behavior poses – not to specific groups but to the rule of law itself; and second, her fear that if other Republicans knew just how she felt, she might be called a RINO (Republican in Name Only) and this would kill her ability to advance reform. That's why I am not even naming her. She is a Republican. She is a patriot. And she has limited room for maneuver.

So what is the rule of law? It is still too often what men – and it's mainly men – say it is.

The new nominee to the United States Supreme Court, Neil Gorsuch, is a member of the Federalist Society. So were all the men on Trump's short list. The Federalist Society is a conservative legal organization that has been remarkably effective over recent decades at building out a network of law school chapters that feed a network of educators, litigators, and jurists that then generates candidates for the High Court.

To many progressives, the Federalist Society is a bogeyman, a key node in what Hillary Clinton once called the "vast right-wing conspiracy." But I think this organization has a lot to teach people across the political spectrum. One of their initiatives is called the Article I Project. As in: the first Article of the Constitution is about the legislative power – *not* the executive power, which is in Article II. They began this project in 2015 out of

frustration with what they regarded as President Obama's overuse of executive orders and administrative rules. Their goal was to reassert Congress's primacy.

But in truth, the growth of what scholars call "the imperial presidency" has been a multi-generational and bipartisan affair. And shortly after the election, U.S. Senator Ben Sasse, Republican of Nebraska, gave an interesting and thoughtful speech at the Federalist Society conference. You can YouTube it. Sasse is a rising star: a principled conservative, a Gen X leader who was a college president before he became a politician, and a Republican who never got on the Trump Train.

Sasse praised the Federalist Society for the Article I Project. He buttered them up. And then he challenged them. He said that if the conservatives in the room believed Congress should rein in presidential powers when the president was named Obama, they should also believe it when the president is named Trump. This, he said, was the very meaning of conservatism: consistent humility in the exercise of state power.

Well, in the first two weeks of the Trump presidency, GOP leaders have said little about Article I or taming an out-of-control executive branch. Trump has issued one after another executive order as if Congress didn't even exist. Congressional Republicans have acted as if Congress didn't exist. A few have dared to suggest that perhaps the executive orders weren't perfectly well-drafted. Not quite profiles in courage.

And yet before I get too righteous about presidential overreach and congressional diffidence, I am obligated to ask myself: where was I when President Obama interpreted *his* power expansively? I didn't complain when he used executive orders or rulemaking authority to shut down polluters or to welcome undocumented Dreamers or to advance the radical idea that financial advisors shouldn't stack the deck against their own clients. Why? Because I *liked* those outcomes.

Perhaps I should have spoken up then on principle. Let me amend that: I should have. I should have said that although I support the outcome I have qualms about the process. I know that's easy for me to say now, when President Obama already seems a distant memory, but I am saying it so that someone will remind me when it's *not* easy for me to say. I should have been as vocally concerned then as I am now about a creeping imbalance of constitutional power.

Why? Because the alternative plays right into Trump's hands. The alternative is to say, as senators on both sides of the aisle now say through their actions on Supreme Court nominations, that rules are just window dressing for who has the muscle to get what they want. And each side blames the other, placing the origin of the problem at 2009 or 2000 or 1994 or some other year where it all broke down.

The question of "who started it" is not unanswerable – I can say the Republicans started it in the mid-1990s when they blew up the norms of Congress and impeached a

president for having an affair. Someone else might say it started when Court nominee Judge Robert Bork, the good soldier of the Saturday Night Massacre, was “Borked” by Senator Joe Biden and the Democrats on the Judiciary Committee in 1988. But it is irrelevant now. What matters now even to people who care not about process but only about outcome is that *President Trump is the outcome*. He and his institution-destroying ways are the product of years of this kind of corrosive gamesmanship.

Rules matter. Attorney General Ferguson was right, and so was U.S. District Court Judge James Robart, the Bush 43 appointee based here in Seattle, who granted Ferguson the stay of Trump’s immigration order. Rules have to be something more than a cloak of convenience for the powerful. Not because rules are always right or fair but because they are the agreement we make to keep each other aloft, above the stinking pit of cynicism that other societies have long fallen into. Rules force us to take actions and make choices that are inconvenient. Which brings me to my second proposition:

AMERICA IS IN THE ACTS

One of the ways that Jená and I count ourselves lucky is that we have neighbors we love, who are good friends and something like family. Some of them are here today. Our little block – not even quite fully a block, but more like a rectangle of homes – has something that is hard to describe, much less to replicate. It’s trust, to be sure. It’s also a spirit of mutual aid. We’re always helping each other, cooking for each other, taking each other to light rail. It’s a sense of ease, making the street and sidewalks that separate our dwellings into a common area – an outdoor room – and not just a thoroughfare. But most of all, it’s a sense that we’re in this thing together.

I’ve been cherishing this good fortune lately because I know how little neighborly love there is in so much of this broad land. We are a people who’ve become isolated and atomized and insensate to the human hearts aching and striving and singing right alongside our own. And in that isolation Americans have become susceptible to people selling untruth as truth, scapegoating as solution, and crisis as purpose.

I’ve also been thinking about what it means to be a neighbor because a week ago my Citizen University colleagues and I were in the other Washington. We were at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum for two gatherings we had helped to organized. The first was a meeting of the Civic Collaboratory, a mutual-aid society of catalytic civic leaders from the left and right who meet every quarter. The second was a leadership summit of campus leaders from ten colleges across the country.

Downstairs at the Museum, there is an exhibition that our groups toured and that I wish every American could experience – and indeed, you can see much of it on the Museum’s website. It’s a departure from Holocaust histories that focus on the Nazi machinery of state. Instead it focuses on everyday acts of complicity by ordinary people.

Friends betrayed friends, joining the mobs that ransacked the homes and businesses of Jews. Classmates informed on classmates, co-workers sent co-workers to the camps and took their possessions, out of jealousy or greed or a desire to please authority or the inability to resist the tide. The exhibition is called “Some Were Neighbors.”

Some are always neighbors. Indeed, whenever authoritarianism takes hold, its most effective agents are neighbors. There are only so many uniformed officers of the government. Only when the people become collaborators can the leviathan truly work. Their capacity for mutual aid must be redirected to mutual suspicion and containment.

All of that collaboration and complicity boils down to acts. To simple choices that then compound and become contagious.

Do you choose to rush to the airport to stand in solidarity with a refugee you never met who’s being detained without cause? Or do you choose to tell Homeland Security that you have suspicions about your Arab neighbor when in fact all you have is a beef with him about the property line or his noisy parties or something else so mundane?

Small acts. Small compromises. Small stands. Small choices that turn large tides. That’s what every nation’s culture is made of. Where do we find America today? In the infinite catalog of unseen and unrecorded acts that we the people commit. You – not just the president of the United States – have the power to rewrite that catalog.

I recently read a powerful article in *New York* magazine about life in Putin’s Russia. It was by a reporter named Michael Idov who’d been born in the Soviet Union but emigrated here as a child and returned for five years to write about Moscow. It began with an anecdote about being in traffic on a Moscow highway when an ambulance siren started blaring. Instinctively, as an American, Idov expected cars to yield and make way. No one moved. The ambulance crawled along with everyone else. Why? The driver explained that “everyone knows ambulance drivers make money on the side selling VIP airport rides. Who knows who’s in that van right now?”

Who knows? The safe bet, the smart bet, was not to trust. And so it went. Idov chronicles the deep kleptocracy, the expectation of corruption that implicates you in the corruption, the absolutely self-fulfilling way that “everyone knows” life is just a series of bribes and betrayals. Add a few laws pushed through by Putin to criminalize protest. A few mysterious deaths of dissident activists. The rest takes care of itself. The title of his piece is “Life After Trust.” It is a story of cynicism as a way of life. It is chilling.

What inoculates us from that kind of cynicism is acts, repeated acts of principle. We have to build our principle reflex into a principle muscle. We can’t just have a twinge of conscience. We have to have bursts of it, sustained bursts that enable us to move great

obstacles and surmount high walls. We learn to trust by being trustworthy. We become trustworthy by trusting. I do not want to find out what Life After Trust is like in America.

This is a time to sharpen our moral faculties, to contemplate what we will do when principle is tested. This is what I told those student leaders we organized at the Holocaust Museum. We were gathered on the day after the refugee ban was issued. The day after the president failed to mention Jews in his statement marking Holocaust Memorial Day. The warning of history was self-evident but also sobering. In 1938 over 70 percent of Americans recognized that Germany was oppressing Jews – and over 70 percent opposed letting in any Jewish refugees. Which is why no American politician, from Franklin Roosevelt down, felt the need to act with moral courage on behalf of the Jews. Their inaction *became* action. Our borders closed first in their hearts.

Which brings me to the final proposition to explore today.

AMERICA IS IN THE HEART

In 1942 a teenager named Gerda Weissmann was delivered from her hometown in Poland, via the trains of the Third Reich, to a Nazi labor camp in Czechoslovakia. Her parents had been sent a different direction – to Auschwitz. She survived the extremity, the unspeakable horrors of the Holocaust, by holding on to a dream of a new life, by honing her will to live into something vivid. She dreamed of the small details of freedom, picturing the ball she would one day attend, and deciding whether to wear the red dress or the blue dress. She imagined her way to freedom.

When Gerda Weissmann was liberated at war's end she was 21 years old and weighed 68 pounds. She had not had a bath in three years. Her hair had turned white. She was liberated by an American GI named Kurt Klein. He had been born in Germany, a Jew, and had fled to America to escape the Nazis. His parents too had been sent to Auschwitz, never to be heard from again.

When Kurt met Gerda, he did a simple thing that restored her to humanity: he held a door open for her. Gerda would eventually marry that GI Kurt Klein, move to America and raise a family to live a life both extraordinary and beautifully ordinary. She wrote a bestselling memoir called *All But My Life*, which became an Oscar-winning film, and created a nonprofit called Citizenship Counts. She was given the Presidential Medal of Freedom. But as she says, she didn't cure cancer. She wasn't Mother Theresa. All she did was enjoy the simple freedom to be a wife and a mother and a grandmother, and to make friends who would become like family to her. A subsequent book she titled *A Boring Evening At Home*. That was her wish, her ambition: the humble, grateful experience of everyday freedom.

Gerda and I have become like family. She has a magical spirit in her heart and eyes. And I suppose she is drawn to my earnest idealism. She demands that I call her Grandma instead of Mrs. Klein. And though we speak in the idioms of different generations, we are asking the same question. What does it mean to be American?

On Thursday night I had dinner in Los Angeles with my friend Melvin Mar. Melvin is what they call a “showrunner.” He’s the creator of the pioneering and acclaimed ABC sitcom *Fresh Off the Boat*, about a Taiwanese American family, and another new sitcom called *Speechless*, centering on a boy with a disability that prevents him from speaking. And Melvin’s got other ideas for shows that will include the faces and voices of once-marginalized Americans into this most American format of myth-making.

Melvin told me something that his dad, an immigrant from the Toishan region of China, once said to him. It’s something I think many children of immigrants have heard at one time or another. It’s basically this: *You’re not of them, and they are not of you. Don’t kid yourself. Keep your head down and don’t speak your mind.*

Thank God Melvin didn’t internalize that message. Thank God he believed he belonged and decided to make the change he wanted to see. His body of work embodies and literally broadcasts a message: I *am* of them, because they are of me. He is claiming America. He is redefining America by rewriting the storyline of who *us* is.

The next morning, I had breakfast with another such claimer and rewriter. My friend Jose Antonio Vargas, who I’ve spoken of before, is a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist. He is a creator of an organization called Define American, which is using popular culture and campus activism to spark more inclusive conversations about immigration reform. And he is perhaps America’s most famous undocumented immigrant.

Born in the Philippines, brought to the U.S. as a two-year-old, raised by his grandparents in California, growing up an average American suburban kid, Jose didn’t learn he was undocumented until he was in high school. He kept it a secret for many years, with the complicity and collaboration of teachers and neighbors and mentors and bosses. Then finally, a few years ago, he came out as undocumented in the New York Times. Since then he’s been a representative and a heat shield for other undocumented people. He is courage incarnate. And now, every day, he gets tweets from gleefully malicious Trump trolls telling him “Tick tock – you’re getting deported any minute now.”

It’s true that Jose and 11 million other undocumented people in this country now live in great peril. His stress is palpable. And what made my heart hurt was hearing him say how much he loves this country – the only country he has ever known, the country to which he has contributed so much. Jose quoted the Filipino American novelist Carlos Bulosan yesterday, not in a flight of rhetorical fancy but to console himself. Wherever he may live, America *is* his heart. And all he wants is simply to enjoy freedom. To not have to look over his shoulder. To enjoy a boring evening at home.

So now I must ask: does my love of Jose outweigh my belief in the rule of law? How do I reconcile what I just said about rules mattering with the fact that his residence here breaks the rules? Here's how. I remember that *ruleness* is not what makes a rule legitimate. Justice is. And a rule that would deport Jose to the Philippines, where he has no memories or life and where the Trumpish strongman Rodrigo Duterte has set loose murderous vigilante gangs against journalists and dissidents, is unjust.

That was the day before yesterday. After a day of meetings and events, I flew home from LAX – a place Jose is now afraid to enter – to Sea-Tac, where seven days earlier a spontaneous throng of people arrived to defend not just the suddenly disfavored but the rule of law itself. I drove straight to Benaroya Hall to meet Jená and our friends and neighbors Tom and Barb. We heard a Seattle Symphony concert that opened with an ambitious project called “All of Us Belong.”

This project takes four pieces by the early 20th century composer Charles Ives that he combined into a symphony for New England holidays. Quiet dissonance and roiling storms of sound, all interleaved with snippets and faint echoes of old American folk tunes. Ives, if you don't know the music, can be described as *cacophony plus memory*. America, if you don't know it, can be described the same way.

The performance Thursday night combined the music of Ives with images of and by many homeless Seattleites, projected onto a great screen. And it combined all that, in turn, with four gorgeous poems composed and read by Seattle's current Civic Poet, Claudia Castro Luna. We heard today her poem for the Fourth of July movement of the symphony. It moved me so much to hear the music of her words, the spirit of her Americanness: “We are equally susceptible to kindness and to cold.”

In the program for the performance it says “Home is Where the *Art* Is.” And with Jose in my heart, I scribbled on the program: *What are we made of? Are we a cruel, indifferent people? Or a people with basic decency? Do we stand and speak when others won't? Or do we too bend like serfs to power?*

We Americans are made of more than fear. We are made of more than shame. We are made of more than loss and pain.

ODE TO JOY

I want to close with some words about joy.

Joy? Really? In these times? Yes, really. Not a Pollyanna joy that can't or won't see what's dark and terrible out there. But a defiant joy. Last night in front of the new Trump hotel in DC there was a protest. It was a dance party. That's what I'm talking about. At

Citizen University we've launched a project called The Joy of Voting that's bringing raucous creativity and art and fun communal rituals to voting in cities around the U.S.

Joy is not frivolity. Joy is the generative spirit that emerges when there is underlying trust, respect, imagination, openness. Joy is a symptom that we haven't given in.

And we haven't. Certainly the citizen surge of the last two weeks shows that. People are willing to fight. But it's not just about giving in to Trump. It's about giving in to the thing that feeds Trump, which is self-fulfilling cynicism.

Don't fall into doom loops of conspiracy theory and powerlessness. I can't tell you how many people have asked me what I make of the article on Medium depicting the actions of Bannon and Trump as a dry run for a coup. De-staff agencies like State and Justice of its professionals. Stack decision-making councils like the NSC with loyal insiders and remove independent generals who could check them. Attack the courts. Lie incessantly. Enrich self. Punish minorities. Claim to represent the majority.

To be sure, these are all things the Trump circle is doing. And I know the weird thrill that smart people get when they read a piece that suggests sophisticated hidden motives and plans. But having worked in American government, I'm here to tell you: any inner-circle master plan cannot move very far or fast. Our institutions, though weak, are not so weak that they could be that easily captured. At the same time, they are just weak enough that they would be inefficient and unresponsive tools for would-be autocrats. The bureaucracy is a quagmire for the good and evil alike.

And in any case, the answer to world-class levels of cynicism is not more cynicism. We who believe in inclusion and integrity can't out-cynicism the likes of Bannon and Trump. We can out-believe them. We can out-love them, out-trust them, out-mobilize them, out-imagine them. Out-joy them. Have you ever seen Donald J. Trump smile with joy? He cannot. We must. We must do that at home. With our neighbors. With strangers we encounter face to face. And with strangers we can't see or touch but can imagine.

Trump is weak, not strong. That's why he has to use a strategy of chaos-creation. The people are strong, not weak. That's why we mustn't panic. Persist, believe, organize. Do so with love, and with joy. In our laws, our acts, and our hearts, this land is *our* land.

Readings to Precede the Sermon
February 4, 2017

Frederick Douglass
From his speech, “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?”
July 5, 1852

Fellow-citizens! I will not enlarge further on your national inconsistencies. The existence of slavery in this country brands your republicanism as a sham, your humanity as a base pretense, and your Christianity as a lie. It destroys your moral power abroad; it corrupts your politicians at home. It saps the foundation of religion; it makes your name a hissing, and a bye-word to a mocking earth. It is the antagonistic force in your government, the only thing that seriously disturbs and endangers your *Union*. It fetters your progress; it is the enemy of improvement, the deadly foe of education; it fosters pride; it breeds insolence; it promotes vice; it shelters crime; it is a curse to the earth that supports it; and yet, you cling to it, as if it were the sheet anchor of all your hopes. Oh! be warned! be warned! a horrible reptile is coiled up in your nation’s bosom; the venomous creature is nursing at the tender breast of your youthful republic; *for the love of God, tear away*, and fling from you the hideous monster, and *let the weight of twenty millions, crush and destroy it forever!*

Claudia Castro Luna
“Summer Sparks”
From the *All of Us Belong* project
February 2017

In New York a colossal woman raises
a burning torch, a promise to harbor
the tired, the poor, the homeless, the tempest-tossed.
In Seattle another woman fades,
homeless in a park, with the racing butterfly
of her child’s heart her only compass.
A pendulum swings, all over the land,
from the luscious forests of generous imaginations
to the ruinous bigotry that clipped
Emmett Till’s wings. Echoes of yesteryear’s
Ghost Dance over Wounded Knee,
that sideway shuffle call for ancestors’ aid,
beats time before us again and again.
Fruit plump on summer’s light
in a New England vale ripens
alongside Southwestern’s border

bruised and battered fruit.
4th of July fireworks bravado,
the feeling of losing yourself in the jubilee
of the crowd after winning, collapses
under the crushing evidence
of the country that we've never been.
The sparks lighting up the sky then falling,
folding back into night,
are they a celebration, the best part of summer,
or more of a weeping?
Love and pain don't strike
some over others with different strength.
We are equally susceptible to kindness
and to cold, and board together
the destiny of our shared country.
On an occasion like this,
from sea to shining sea,
it is a good place to begin not end.

Carlos Bulosan

From his novel *America is in the Heart* (1946)

America is also the nameless foreigner, the homeless refugee, the hungry boy begging for a job and the black body dangling on a tree. America is the illiterate immigrant who is ashamed that the world of books and intellectual opportunities are closed to him. We are all that nameless foreigner, that homeless refugee, that hungry boy, that illiterate immigrant and that lynched black body. All of us, from the first Adams to the last Filipino, native born or alien, educated or illiterate – We are America!

Gerda Weissman Klein

From her memoir *All But My Life* (1957)

“Wasn't it traumatic to make the transition to normality?” How often I have been asked that question, and I have come to the conclusion that, yes, perhaps it was. But I didn't know what the word “trauma” implied, and I would have been ashamed to admit any dissatisfaction, believing it to be selfish and ungrateful to complain about anything here. In retrospect, I think that coming to America was like stepping out of a dark, oppressive room in which I had been locked up for a long, long time. Once I was free and exposed to light again, the most ordinary objects, the simplest things acquired an aura of extraordinary beauty, desirability, and value. I reveled in the joy of discovery, and my gratitude was boundless.