

This place is as large as any other town. Each new day there is the coming through of sunlight between the oaks. Things fall and because of this there is a kind of discontinuous innovation. What influences the Richardsons? What influences the Saintsburys? The two questions go hand in hand. How do we cope with the privacy of various domestic characters? The letter, of course, the familiar letter, we employ it. Dear Mrs. Barbauld, It is primarily for the sake of your reorientation to our town that I write to you today. There are more interesting letters, of course. There are no doubt letters with unreserved emotions, just as there are many ways of communicating that are, especially in retrospect, alien to one's own individual experience. It's difficult enough to take in the results, all the sordid aspects. Only gauge what's arisen during old Mr. Anderson's lifetime! The changes have imposed themselves on our features. What does it signify? Flowers, birds, churches, planes, resorts, malls, green

places. Industrial clusters and country houses. Today I fell asleep in the tall grass near the old train station. It was a complete picture. A fashionable park. Yet the picture had its sordid and selfish aspect. I can't seem to say what I mean, Mrs. Barbauld, but with some urgency I hope to inform you what a triumph the big city has become. I am a secular individual but even I can feel the shift in the horizon utterly alien to the constitution of things, the habitual. Sincerely, etc. I move in shade on the edge of a parking lot under walnut trees in the early morning around the edge of a curve in an accidental manner. I walk the sidewalk and ripple the surface of it. From this condition I have a view of the world. Magazines provide images of half-cooked food products. Glazed and slick they seduce us like any raw material. Books offer helpful suggestions about how to lead our lives (let the kitchen sparkle, become fully insured, do not approach the sidelines). On the evening news the periphery is always in decline, but we are able to project our own great men into its material present as if extending ourselves into other cultures—an archipelago somewhere west of Hawaii (and pineapple rings on grilled hot dogs make “Hilo Franks”). After this we return to normative-centralizing activities, such as the time we made a replica of our town out of sugar

cubes, or when we gathered to string garland around every phone booth on Main Street. But Haywood defends himself against my moral intrusions. He stands in the kitchen holding a knife and a mushroom. He says, "Clothe your instructions in less abstract examples." He is angry because he was raised to be a substantial Protestant, with stories of utility to tell the women, and relevance. Without it he gets cranky. I prevail. I appear to be free from design or discretion. It is an easy discovery of the "feminine." I walk through the doorway wearing my aggressively orange hat. I do it over and over. I do it as a kind of series and then I do it in reverse. I do it as an indicator of a particular lifestyle, to redefine myself and exclude others. First I do it in a red pantsuit and then I do it in the nude. I do it and I say, "I doubt it." I twirl a little when I do it. I do it and am striking when I do it because I do it in a frilly dress like meringue. Afterward, we eat bread, corn, cupcakes, cheese, and two chickens, and then we argue about it. We ingest liquids and a bunch of different fruits. Together we forget where we parked the car. We go into houses to witness the presentations. Domestic life appeals to us as well rounded. When we lick each other we do it without any sense of "before" or "nowhere," so you can see we do it as suggested.

Also, we worry for money and are employed worrying about things. While it's been proposed that we are more interesting than characters on television, one day soon we will be characters on television. The story is well told. The water tower can be taken up as a challenge to the mist. It invokes a center relative only to the imperceptible pattern I leave with my footsteps, mostly at night. Feeling like a mist, I look at things, trees. The water tower takes on sonnet form. In my dreams I embellish it with tacky Christmas decorations. I sit at the kitchen counter with the cat by my feet and watch the lights of the city in the distance and a skyscraper. Helicopters and planes revolve around it in peculiar orbit. Meanwhile, the book in my hands says we should try to hone our "sensation of *of, if, the, and some* as well as *tree, smoke, shed, and road.*" I put the book on the counter and go into the yard. I do a little dance somewhere near the fence. I raise my arms above my head and swing my hips. I lower my arms and tap my feet on the grass. I do this for a while, and then I sit on cold lawn furniture, and then I finish cooking dinner. In this place, we eat chicken and peas at least once a week. Once a month we organize three weeks' worth of leftovers and once upon a time Mrs. Richardson introduced a new trend that was spatially interesting; it was intended to

embellish our looks like poodle skirts or microwaves. We smoked clove cigarettes and stood in the Millers' backyard. I refer to these as "the early times." And other trends: We wrote poems. I wrote them with Lisle. I wrote her poems and she wrote mine. The subject matter was Egypt. We followed each other around town without looking, like tribal migrations. This was one whole epoch of my life. Later it seemed incomprehensible. Today Haywood uses language to articulate a room and I'm supposed to move inside it. I bump my hips against edges of tabletops, but I'm surprised to find each detail intact and some dramatically more effective than what preceded (two eggs on a white linen tablecloth). It's a kind of new Industrial Age and all our information is encoded or reproduced. I take three or four showers a day, but this would never make it into a biography of the town. What we want is a "true celebrity," an automatic pop star who can supervise the details of our lives. What we lack in inspiration we make up for in public charity, like the time we bought cowboy hats for the nameless kids who wander the town, or the time we all fainted at the murder of Sara Patterson. It's a whole universe of suggestion. There are all sorts of trends in the hedges (pornography, garbage, toxins, booze) and all over the countryside (atomized families, ro-

bots, child-rearing, etc.). Mrs. Agnew is vilified for her intake of candy, the unfortunate part she plays in American culture, her red-headed remoteness. I stare at her front yard and try not to be there at all. So I close my eyes and become lightened and shadowed by clouds in the background and the foreground. There are dirty dishes in the sink and blooming roses on the countertop. On the table is a white tablecloth, a honeydew melon, two peaches, a paper napkin, two plates, two spoons, a lollipop. Also there is a ripeness, some strange flavor, erect and curious in my mouth. So I start on foot. For a while I pass nothing but the usual ribbon of lawn, then after a while I pass something else and a dog. Soon I pass Mrs. Clark and Mrs. Aubrey. I say, "This is a really nice lip balm." Then I say, "Set the table," then "Gems!" then "Nope." Later, I ignore myself on purpose, which takes practice. The book in my hands offers an analysis and sometimes a celebration; it says there is an "ascendancy of private, individualized transport." It's true we have ample parking and this is almost impossible to reverse. In the middle of the street are several small household appliances and a round yellow cake, which must have crossed into my path like a glass plate broken in a fit, or a healthy lawn, or a jar of grape jelly at the supermarket. All these

things overlap and line up at the same time. I write letters on the white linen tablecloth and the dark blue ink enhances the effect of the cloth by providing stark contrast. Meanwhile, the crows in the yard act like dogs and Mrs. Wick leans over to tell me she's on a journey she likes to call "Mrs. Wick." This gossip involves listening and is for my own good. On the evening news there's a report about a national hero and a story on the two types of food: packaged and unpackaged. I learn there are many methods of preparation, such as freezing, freeze-drying, condensing, and dehydrating. I learn that last year a woman died from tuna fish, which doesn't require mixing or cooking so it's easy for you and your guests. The reporter says top chefs in major cities are using a new type of packaged food; they prepare the food themselves (liver, salmon, ribs, carrots), and seal it in plastic, and freeze it for up to eighteen months. One chef is interviewed. He says the whole world has been cooking the same way for over two hundred years and this has got to change. He shows his tongue to the camera to indicate playfulness and drops a lobster in boiling water. According to the reporter, this gourmet-packaged food can be served at four-star restaurants and to first-class passengers on airplanes and the armed forces defending liberty and free-

dom in all its forms. So I stand in front of the television holding the remote control. I aim it at myself for what must be twenty years. Then I turn south and take a long walk down sidewalks. There is a range of real activities in this place. One kid says, "Bring me an ice-cream cone," but sometimes you have to read between the lines. There are haircuts and play dates along with corporal punishment, orders, increased comforts, spinning, sleeping, eating, etc. There is love for people named Brittany and people named Jack, and most of us display some skill at pressing faces, or pressing people for information about what we like and what we find comfortable, or comforting. For example, we enjoy waterways, car races, immunizations, gymnastics, murals, hamburgers, flowering vines, babysitters, policies and programs, encircling verandas, skateboards, shrubs. Also, we like hoeing and bathing. When he returns from his job in the city, Haywood cleans his ears and asks for a drink. He sits by the fire and talks to the television. He says, "I've been to the outskirts and back again several times." The arrival of cars was one particular epoch in this place. We bought cars whole families could fit in, cars with convertible tops, and tin trays for eating, and wonderful colors, and musical horns. Today we have cars with satellite mapping systems and

antilock brakes. Also, we have latent perversions and other luxuries and good dinners and youth movements and next year we will not feel more or less crowded or more or less confined than we do tonight. Meanwhile, there is heavenly weather and a letter arrives. Among other things it eloquently and wittily hints at upcoming events. It's a very warm letter, ultra-comfortable. I spend the whole day sitting prominently on the porch, sunbathing in winterish sun, watching a massive and continuous flow of migrating birds. Large birds land on my lawn and flap their wings and shake. I associate myself strongly with them, with the way they put one foot in front of the other, and how they keep their heads aimed at the ground. They eat well. They have a huge and panoramic view of my house, yard, and automobile. We look across the wide green lawn and by the end of the day they've eaten several snails. I make two ribs of beef for dinner, one tuna, four omelets, one iced cucumber soup, two Chinese cabbages, two salads, five hams, one chicken liver, and for dessert I make pears in wine, one strawberry tart, one lemon tart, three apple pies, one bananas foster, and three chocolate cream pies. It's important to consider the effort it takes to survive. The world actually has signs with skulls and crossbones, vermin, separation anxiety, night-

mares. But one highly respected tradition in this place is to get away from all that. The organization is based on the theme of American history and has fundamentally changed the feeling of this once-bucolic setting. Nevertheless, everything surprises me, everything I've forgotten, townsmen who belong to me and townsmen who do not, hula hoops, garlic peelers, gulls, sunsets, swimming pools, asphalt, eggs, buttons on the stove, algae, credit cards, crops. I nod and return to my book: "Take any normal street of average length and just consider all that fucking!" Different views: we look at them sideways, up and down roads, transforming trees and boulders into eloquent minilandscapes with subtle lighting and fountains. A kid on the street says, "Rocketry." Another kid says, "Oomph." Then one day there's a broccoli quiche on the edge of my dining room table. It's like a mysterious omen. I'm aroused and I almost lift it up and take it to myself like some seed I'd already planted, but instead I walk around it, all the way around, leaving a crescented track in the carpet with my spike-heeled shoes. Meanwhile, someone is shouting at someone else in Spanish, on the sidewalk, someone in a gray truck. I can't make it out. Dear Mrs. Baxter, Welcome. Your earnest and expensive skepticism is otherworldly. For this reason, I advise you to

take two or three sheets of paper and make a journal of anything remarkable that occurs in the next few days. Idle romances, typographical reproductions, eye- and ear-witness testimony, the reality of our special community—I recommend all these pleasures to you now. You'll need to keep track. You'll have to be strong, Mrs. Baxter. Everything is different, but over time, to a certain extent, nothing really happens. Such is the critical authenticity of every historical moment. Focus on apprehensible objects and their previously unapprehended relationships to other objects around your house or this place (your body to fish, glass to a quality of mind). It's a deal of fun. Yours, etc. Noise of a cat running over stiff grass, but the cat doesn't matter so much as the feelings its tiny feet feel. It bends a sort of emptiness around. Haywood goes out very naturally and then he comes back in. He tells people there is such a thing as cultural enchantment. He presents me with all sorts of failed objects. He holds them up against my body so that I harden into wrinkles and strange postures. This is in our bedroom or at home in front of a whole shelf of very terrible books. His arm reaches out and rests on the table and I hesitate to stand and turn and look. Instead I might function on a practical level, such as people who hardly ever articulate what they

know, or I might behave in a way to be admired, mounted, like a pretty hen, or a comprehensive weapon to be polished. I stand upright in the garden like a tulip. I stand beside lawn furniture and am more than comfortable. I warm coffee for the chickadees and call them *fellers*. The backyard is thick with blackbirds and squirrels. I walk the whole distance of it. If you go back and forth all day it's like dozens of miles from one end of our house to the neighbor's. Then I go inside and walk past one coffee cup, one spoon, one cherry, eight cherry pits, a half-eaten pear, two paper towels, and a paper napkin on the edge of the dining room table. That afternoon, Haywood plans exacting labors. We close the blinds and in this connection we cannot refute the following statement: "Oh Haywood, Haywood." I bake croutons and stand in the kitchen. Later, I cut across the lawn and run into a dog. Once upon a time this place was home to bears and muskrats, hunters, rum, whip-poor-wills, carts, mud turtles, minks, ducks, loons, donkeys, rabbits, hickories, highway robbery, a stranger with a bun in her hair, and other things you can read about. Today the color blazes, the tulips in the box—violet and vivid green. Our own brand of localism is traced back to settlers of specific persuasion and beautification. These settlers expressed concern for