



Jan & Marica Vilcek

preface

The Vilcek Foundation supports, honors, and celebrates the contributions of immigrants to the United States working in the arts and biomedical science. Each year since 2006, the Foundation has awarded prizes to foreign-born professionals who have made outstanding contributions in their field. The Foundation gives two sets of prizes in science and the

arts. The Vilcek Prize is for preeminent leaders in their fields, while the Vilcek Prize for Creative Promise is for younger artists and scientists. Whereas the science prizes are awarded each year in the field of biomedical science, the arts category changes from year to year, with visual arts, architecture, music composition, filmmaking, and the culinary arts honored in the last five years.

For 2011, the arts field for the Vilcek Prizes is literature. We are delighted that our jury of experts awarded the Vilcek Prize in the Arts to the distinguished poet, essayist, and philosopher Charles Simic, who moved to the United States from his native Yugoslavia at the age of fifteen.

For the Vilcek Prize for Creative Promise, we solicited applications from

young non-native-born writers. (The age limit was set, somewhat arbitrarily, at thirty-eight.) We were pleasantly surprised to receive eighty-one applications, many of them from highly accomplished novelists, short story writers, and poets. The applications were judged by a distinguished panel of writers, heads of creative writing programs, editors, and a literary agent. As the jurors read the work, they were struck by the high quality of many submissions. They selected a winner (Dinaw Mengestu) and four finalists (Ilya Kaminsky, Téa Obreht, Vu Tran, and Simon Van Booy), but it was clear that many other applicants also deserved awards. And so, to help recognize and introduce some of these talented and original writers, we decided to publish an anthology that would more broadly reflect

the power of young non-native writers living in the United States. The resulting *American Odysseys: Writings by New Americans* contains selections from the work of twenty-two novelists, short story writers, and poets. The accomplishment of these writers is remarkable. Writers are different from the other artists we have honored in the past. Visual artists, architects, composers, filmmakers, and culinary artists use the various materials of their art, and they of course use words to some extent. But for writers there is no choice: they must use language; language is really all they have. It is amazing that nineteen of the twenty-two very accomplished writers represented in *American Odysseys* are writing in their second language of English. The experience of one of them, Yiyun Li, is exemplary: "In 1996,

after graduating from college in China, I came to the United States to study for a PhD degree in immunology only to discover my love for writing, and particularly writing in English, which is not my mother tongue.”

Foreign-born writers have been represented in the literary world of America since colonial times, when almost all were immigrants, though they were mostly Anglophone. But what of the phenomenon of immigrant writers in the United States making careers writing in their second language of English? In the twentieth century, there were not so many as now: Vladimir Nabokov is a treasured example, and another is our laureate this year, Charles Simic.

The last few decades of the twentieth century and the first one of the twenty-first

have seen a flourishing of young immigrant writers. When *The New Yorker* devoted its June 24, 2010, issue, “20 Under 40,” to writers “who capture the inventiveness and the vitality of contemporary American fiction,” nine of the twenty were born outside the United States, and seven were writing in their second language of English—a startling testament to the significance of immigrants in contemporary literature.

One of the writers in *American Odysseys*, the novelist Laleh Khadivi, has beautifully expressed the situation of writers and immigration in our time: “The twenty-first century will see an unprecedented movement of individuals, families, lifestyles, religions, currency, ideas, and dreams, and as I too am one of these nearly 250 million people who will

die far from where they were born, my author's eye is drawn to the human mosaic forever shifting in and around me."

We are deeply indebted to many individuals who have contributed in important ways to the publication of *American Odysseys*. Our gratitude goes to Arthur Klebanoff, a member of the jury for the 2011 Vilcek Prize for Creative Promise in the Arts, who suggested that we consider publishing an anthology containing the submitted contributions. We are grateful to our distinguished panel of jurors, who have so enthusiastically devoted their time and energy to the demanding task of reading and ranking the submitted applications. Norman MacAfee greatly exceeded his role as copy editor by helping to establish a unique shape of *American Odysseys*. Vilcek Foundation staff mem-

ber Joyce Li worked intelligently and enthusiastically to handle the many administrative tasks associated with the processing of the Creative Promise Prize applications, and later with the assembly and publication of *American Odysseys*. Our book designer, Joe Shouldice, continually surprised and delighted us with his outside-the-box thinking. Most importantly, we wish to thank the authors who agreed to contribute their writings to *American Odysseys*: they helped build this small monument to the power of literature created by the young generation of non-native American writers in the first decade of the twenty-first century.





Charles Simic

“Refugees,” she said. “How could you not love them? Who else has it worse?”

—Dinaw Mengestu

foreword

If you wish to have an interesting life, become an immigrant or a refugee. Of course, no one in their right mind would volunteer for the role. Most of us grow up expecting to live and die close to where we were born. Being a displaced person, speaking with a thick accent, unable to give a coherent account to a border policeman of how one ended up so far from

home and asking to be given the rights every one of the locals takes for granted, is one of the most humiliating and terrifying experiences one can have. It takes a force beyond our control, like dire poverty, war, political oppression, or some other form of injustice, to make us pack our bags and take to our heels. Whatever our background, whether we happen to have been a professor, a doctor, a ditch digger, an old woman, or a child, our new identity will be that of a pariah seeking mercy or justice. We'll resemble that old peasant in Kafka's story "Before the Law," who keeps pestering the doorkeeper to let him enter some grand, forbidding state institution, even though the gate stands open, giving the impression he can just walk in. But the doorkeeper warns him that if he goes in, he will encounter in-

side many other doorkeepers standing in his way, each one more powerful than the last, and far less sympathetic.

As a young man newly arrived in the United States, I would overhear immigrants recounting stories of their lives that had more fantastic adventures in them than anything I had read in books. Russian émigrés who left after the Revolution were the first ones from whom I heard tales of epic proportions. I once knew a lady whose parents first went to China from St. Petersburg in 1918, and then after a few years, moved to Berlin, Amsterdam, Paris, Lisbon, Caracas, and Havana, all of which they thought would become their permanent home, before finally ending up in New York City some forty years later. Every time I attempted to write down her memories of those jour-

neys and those cities, my narrative struck me as implausible. I had no reason to doubt her veracity; rather, the problem is familiar to almost all immigrants who try to describe what happened to them: they find that their own lives sound unbelievable, not just to strangers, but even to their own ears. To paraphrase Joseph Brodsky, if one were to assign immigrants' confessions a genre, it would have to be tragicomedy. Nonetheless, is there any other way to make sense of our experience but to turn it into a story? Isn't that what literature is for, to give voice to such as ourselves who have no voice?

I've been asked from time to time if being a refugee made me a poet. I don't know the answer, but I'm pretty sure it made me the kind of poet I am. Reading this marvelous collection of immi-

grant writings confirms me in that feeling. While a number of the stories and a few of the poems address directly the immigrant experience, and sound autobiographical—like Ellen Litman’s description of her elderly, well-educated parents from Russia, taking résumé-writing workshops, interview-going workshops, memorizing hundreds of simple dialogues and learning how to write the perfect thank-you letter—a greater number of the selections deal with it obliquely, without being disloyal to their unusual backgrounds. What one finds in their writing is an awareness of the perennial immigrant anxieties about split identities, divided families, the difficulty of translating one’s experiences and emotions from one language into another, plus all the hard questions regarding the

degree to which one should assimilate or stay faithful to one's origins. Some people are changed more, some less, by the experience of being torn from their roots. A lot depends, of course, on the individuals' history, whether they were persecuted and impoverished in the old country and whether they plan to return there one day, or simply can't or won't. If they had a rich family life, a good job, and a vast number of friends in the previous life, and lost everything because of some war or some eruption of ethnic hatred and violence, it is difficult to imagine that they can ever be entirely contented in their new country. As this collection of writings by poets and writers from seventeen different countries demonstrates, to be an immigrant is to live in perpetual inner turmoil, with no hope of ever re-

solving any of these issues.

While some may view the immigrant's inner turmoil as a curse, for a writer it is an ideal opportunity. Finding oneself in such a pickle brings us overnight to an understanding of the human condition that would ordinarily take a lifetime to achieve. It is strange, therefore, that until about thirty years ago, there was little good immigrant writing in this country. The anthology *Becoming Americans*, published by The Library of America in 2009, which covers four centuries of immigrant writing, noticeably improves in literary quality in recent decades. When I started writing and publishing poetry in the United States in the 1950s, and for a long time after, I didn't know of a single poet or fiction writer whose second language was English. Now they are every-

where. The explanation must lie in the prevalence of college education among the children of immigrants, which was fairly rare in the past, and the way in which American popular culture, language, and even literature have become familiar the world over. Thus, newcomers to this country are not as alienated from their new surroundings as their fellow immigrants a hundred years ago were, when they had to start from scratch and learn everything about the United States. It is amazing how fluent and idiomatic the writing is in this anthology. I'm impressed by the variety of the authors' literary approaches, the richness of their imaginations, and the depth of their analyses of everything from family relationships to politics. Exposed to many cultures, curious about people, both similar and different from them,

used to negotiating several identities of their own, and savvy about the life in this country, they enrich American literature not only with new subject matter but with a quality of compassion for others that, in our present-day narcissism, we often lack as a nation.

“I believe in storytelling as deeply as Scheherazade did,” says the Iranian novelist Laleh Khadivi. Poets believe that, too, though they have their own bag of tricks to cast a spell on the reader. Whatever your preference, you will find more great writing here than you would have believed possible between the covers of a single book.

