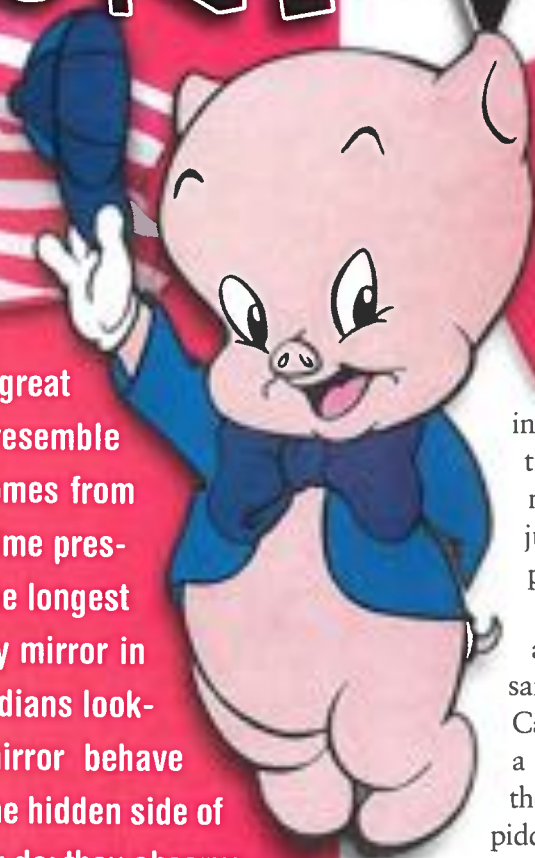


THROUGH THE ONE-WAY

THE NOSES of a great many Canadians resemble Porky Pig's. This comes from spending so much time pressing them against the longest undefended one-way mirror in the world. The Canadians looking through this mirror behave the way people on the hidden side of such mirrors usually do: they observe, analyze, ponder, snoop and wonder what all the activity on the other side means in decipherable human terms.



The Americans, bless their innocent little hearts, are rarely aware that they are even being watched, much less by the Canadians. They just go on doing body language, playing in the sandbox of the world, bashing one another on the head and planning how to blow things up, same as always. If they think about Canada at all, it's only when things get a bit snowy or the water goes off or the Canadians start fussing over some piddly detail, such as fish.¹ Then they regard them as unpatriotic; for Americans don't really see Canadians as foreigners, not like the

1. some piddly . . . fish: a reference to the occasional clashes between U.S. and Canadian fishers over the boundaries of their fishing territories.

MIRROR

Margaret Atwood

WORDS
TO
KNOW

analyze (ă-n'ə-līz') v. to study carefully by separating into parts

Mexicans, unless they do something weird like speak French or beat the New York Yankees at baseball. Really, think the Americans, the Canadians are just like us, or would be if they could.

Or we could switch metaphors and call the border the longest undefended backyard fence in the world. The Canadians are the folks in the neat little bungalow, with the tidy little garden and the duck pond. The Americans are the other folks, the ones in the sprawly mansion with the bad-taste statues on the lawn. There's a perpetual party, or something, going on there—loud music, raucous laughter, smoke billowing from the barbecue. Beer bottles and Coke cans land among the peonies. The Canadians have their own beer bottles and barbecue smoke, but they tend to overlook it. Your own mess is always more forgivable than the mess someone else makes on your patio.

The Canadians can't exactly call the police—they suspect that the Americans are the police—and part of their distress, which seems permanent, comes from their uncertainty as to whether or not they've been invited. Sometimes they do drop by next door, and find it exciting but scary. Sometimes the Americans drop by their house and find it clean. This worries the Canadians. They worry a lot. Maybe those Americans want to buy up their duck pond, with all the money they seem to have, and turn it into a cesspool or a water-skiing emporium.

It also worries them that the Americans don't seem to know who the Canadians are, or even where, exactly, they are. Sometimes the Americans call Canada their backyard, sometimes their front yard, both of which imply ownership. Sometimes they say they are the Mounties and the Canadians are Rose Marie.² (All these things have, in fact, been said by American politicians.) Then they accuse the Canadians of being paranoid and having an identity crisis. Heck, there is no call for the Canadians to fret about their identity, because everyone knows they're

Americans, really. If the Canadians disagree with that, they're told not to be so insecure.

One of the problems is that Canadians and Americans are educated backward from one another. The Canadians—except for the Québécois,³ one keeps saying—are taught about the rest of the world first and Canada second. The Americans are taught about the United States first, and maybe later about other places, if they're of strategic importance. The Vietnam War draft dodgers got more culture shock in Canada than they did in Sweden. It's not the clothing that is different, it's those mental noises.

Of course, none of this holds true when you get close enough, where concepts like “Americans” and “Canadians” dissolve and people are just people, or anyway some of them are, the ones you happen to approve of. I, for instance, have never met any Americans I didn't like, but I only get to meet the nice ones. That's what the businessmen think too, though they have other individuals in mind. But big-scale national mythologies have a way of showing up in things like foreign policy, and at events like international writers' congresses, where the Canadians often find they have more to talk about with the Australians, the West Indians, the New Zealanders⁴ and even the once-loathed snooty Brits, now declining into humanity with the dissolution of empire, than they do with the impenetrable and mysterious Yanks.

But only sometimes. Because surely the Canadians understand the Yanks. Shoot, don't they see Yank movies, read Yank mags, bobble

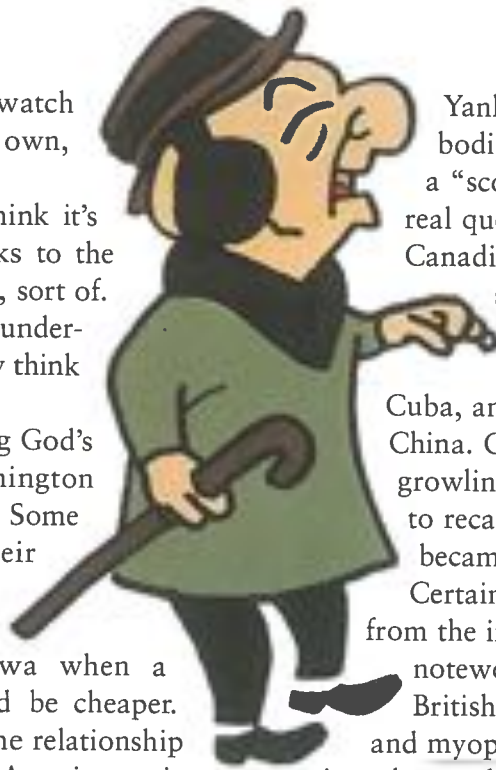
2. **Mounties . . . Rose Marie:** a reference to the 1926 operetta *Rose Marie* (later the basis of a popular film starring Nelson Eddy and Jeanette MacDonald), in which the main characters are a Royal Canadian Mounted Policeman and the woman he loves.
3. **Québécois** (ka be kwä'): the French-speaking residents of the Canadian province of Quebec.
4. **Australians . . . New Zealanders:** peoples whose countries were, like Canada, once part of the British Empire.

around to Yank music and watch Yank telly, as well as their own, when there is any?

Sometimes the Canadians think it's their job to interpret the Yanks to the rest of the world; explain them, sort of. This is an illusion: they don't understand the Yanks as much as they think they do, and it isn't their job.

But, as we say up here among God's frozen people, when Washington catches a cold, Ottawa sneezes. Some Canadians even refer to their capital city as Washington North and wonder why we're paying those guys in Ottawa when a telephone order service would be cheaper. Canadians make jokes about the relationship with Washington which the Americans, in their thin-skinned, bunion-toed way, construe as anti-American (they tend to see any nonworshipful comment coming from that gray, protoplasmic fuzz outside their borders as anti-American). They are no more anti-American than the jokes Canadians make about the weather: it's there, it's big, it's hard to influence, and it affects your life.

Of course, in any conflict with the Dreaded Menace, whatever it might be, the Canadians would line up with the Yanks, probably, if they thought it was a real menace, or if the



Yanks twisted their arms or other bodily parts enough or threatened a "scorched-earth policy" (another real quote). Note the qualifiers. The Canadian idea of a menace is not the same as the U.S. one. Canada, for instance, never broke off diplomatic relations with Cuba, and it was quick to recognize China. Contemplating the U.S.-Soviet growling match, Canadians are apt to recall a line from Blake: "They became what they beheld."

Certainly both superpowers suffer from the imperial diseases once so noteworthy among the Romans, the British and the French: arrogance and myopia. But the bodily-parts threat is real enough, and accounts for the observable wimpiness and flunkiness of some Ottawa politicians. Nobody, except at welcoming-committee time, pretends this is an equal relationship.

Americans don't have Porky Pig noses. Instead they have Mr. Magoo eyes, with which they see the rest of the world. That would not be a problem if the United States were not so powerful. But it is, so it is. ❖

5. Blake: the British poet and artist William Blake.

Thinking Through the Literature

1. **Comprehension Check** What is the "one-way mirror"?
2. **ACTIVE READING COMPARE AND CONTRAST** Examine the list of details about life in the United States and life in Canada that you compiled in your **READER'S NOTEBOOK**. What do you think are the most important similarities and differences?
3. Why do you think Atwood uses Mr. Magoo to describe the Americans and Porky Pig to describe the Canadians?
4. What does Atwood really think about Americans and Canadians? Cite evidence from her essay to support your opinion.

WORD TO KNOW **construe** (kən-strōō') *v.* to interpret
myopia (mī-ō'pē-ə) *n.* near-sightedness



my family, although miles away, is with me daily. The huge telephone bills and the steady stream of letters and cards are a long-distance version of the web of caring we once created around kitchen tables. Our family web just happens to stretch across these United States, a sturdy, elastic web steadily maintained by each in his or her own way.

Oh, I miss the meals seasoned with that family phrase, “Remember the time when . . . ?” But I’ve learned through the year to cherish our gatherings when I’m in the thick of them, to sink into the faces and voices, to store the memories and stories like the industrious Ohio squirrel outside my window stores her treasures.

I’ve enjoyed this furry, currying companion as I’ve enjoyed the silence of bare tree limbs against an evening sky, updrafts of snow outside our third-floor window, the ivory light of cherry blossoms. I feel fortunate to be experiencing the geographical center of this country, which astutely calls itself the Heartland. If I’m hearing the “heart,” its steady, predictable rhythms, what am I missing from this country’s southern border, its margin?

Is it other rhythms? I remember my mixed feelings as a young girl whenever my father selected a Mexican station on the radio, feelings my children now experience about me. I wanted so to *be an American*, which in my mind, and perhaps in the minds of many on the border, meant (and means) shunning anything from Mexico.

But as I grew I learned to like dancing to those rhythms. I learned to value not only the rhythms but all that they symbolized. As an adult, such music became associated with

celebrations and friends, with warmth and the sharing of emotions. I revel in a certain Mexican passion not for life or about life, but *in* life—a certain intensity in the daily living of it, a certain abandon in such music, in the hugs, sometimes in the anger. I miss the *chispas*, “sparks,” that spring from the willingness, the habit, of allowing the inner self to burst through polite restraints. Sparks can be dangerous but, like risks, are necessary.

I brought cassettes of Mexican and Latin American music with us when we drove to Ohio. I’d roll the car window down and turn the volume up, taking a certain delight in sending such sounds like mischievous imps across fields and into trees. Broadcasting my culture, if you will.

Foreign Spooks

*Released full blast into the autumn air
from trumpets, drums, flutes,
the sounds burst from my car like confetti
riding the first strong current.
The invisible imps from Peru, Spain,
Mexico grin as they spring from guitars,
harps, hand claps, and violins,
they stream across the flat fields of Ohio,
hide in the drafts of abandoned gray barns,
and the shutters of stern, white houses,
burrow into cold cow’s ears and the crackle
of dry corn, in squirrel fur, pond ripple,
tree gnarl,
owl hollow, until the wind sighs
and they open their wide, impudent
mouths, and together *con gusto*²
startle sleeping farm wives,
sashaying raccoons, and even
the old harvest moon.*

2. *con gusto* (kôn gōōs’tô) *Spanish*: with pleasure.

WORDS
TO
KNOW **astutely** (ə-stoot’ē) *adv.* with keen perceptiveness; wisely
impudent (ĩm’pyū-dent) *adj.* bold and shameless

On my first return visit to Texas, I stopped to hear a group of *mariachis* playing their instruments with proud gusto. I was surprised and probably embarrassed when my eyes filled with tears not only at the music, but at the sight of wonderful Mexican faces. The musicians were playing for some senior citizens. The sight of brown, knowing eyes that quickly accepted me with a smile, the stories in those eyes and in the wrinkled faces were more delicious than any *fajitas* or *flan*³.

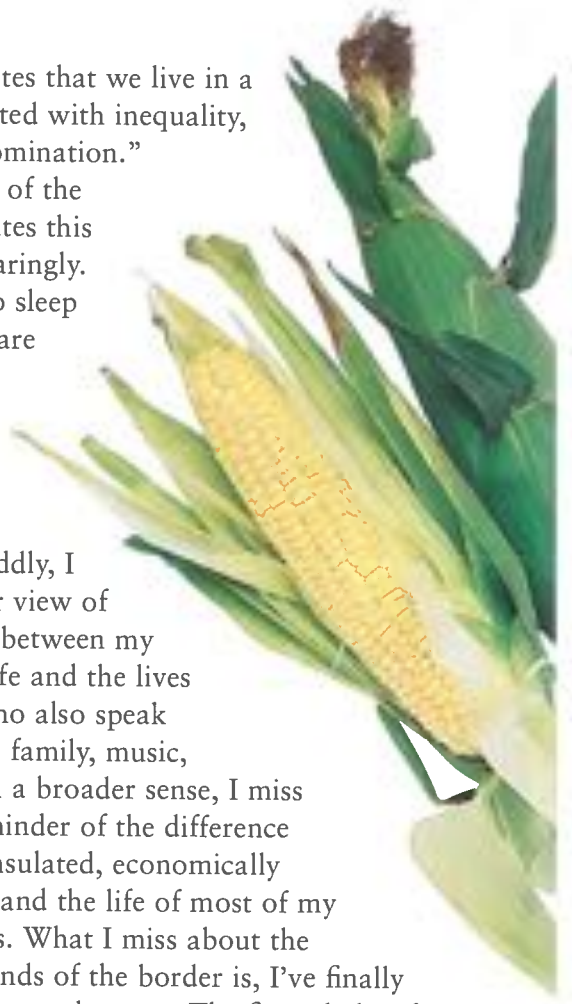
When I lived on the border, I had the privilege accorded to a small percentage of our citizens: I daily saw the native land of my grandparents. I grew up in the Chihuahua desert, as did they, only we grew up on different sides of the Rio Grande. That desert—its firmness, resilience, and fierceness, its whispered chants and tempestuous dance, its wisdom and majesty—shaped us as geography always shapes its inhabitants. The desert persists in me, both inspiring and compelling me to sing about her and her people, their roots and blooms and thorns.

The desert is harsh, hard as life, no carpet of leaves cushions a walk, no forest conceals the shacks on the other side of the sad river. Although a Midwest winter is hard, it ends, melts into rich soil yielding the yellow trumpeting of daffodils. But the desert in any season can be relentless as poverty and hunger, realities prevalent as scorpions in that stark terrain. Anthropologist Renato Rosaldo, in his provocative challenge to his colleagues, *Culture*

and *Truth*, states that we live in a world “saturated with inequality, power, and domination.”

The culture of the border illustrates this truth daily, glaringly. Children go to sleep hungry and stare at stores filled with toys they’ll never touch, with books they’ll never read. Oddly, I miss that clear view of the difference between my comfortable life and the lives of so many who also speak Spanish, value family, music, celebration. In a broader sense, I miss the visible reminder of the difference between my insulated, economically privileged life and the life of most of my fellow humans. What I miss about the sights and sounds of the border is, I’ve finally concluded, its stern honesty. The fierce light of that grand, wide Southwest sky not only filled me with energy, it revealed the glare of truth. ❖

3. *fajitas* (fa hē'tās) . . . *flan* (flän) *Spanish*: two popular Mexican foods—the first a dish of grilled meat wrapped in tortillas, the second a custard dessert.



WORDS
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KNOW

prevalent (prēv ə-lənt) *adj.* widespread; common