

The Baby and the Berlin Wall

An Essay by Mario Spann

Don't rush into my title. This baby is neither German, nor was he born in the German's capital city; they share no geographic link. Only, they relate—the baby and the Wall—in their falling in the year 1989, me to my being and the wall to its destruction. Thus, the crumbled wall and I share an inceptive bond, for that year Earth entered a truly global capitalism and a young soul dropped into the dredges of Mississippi, one who has beheld, from day one, the beast with the starkest amazement and respect. This is why I write, "The Baby and the Berlin Wall".



What else would I do? What more could I do? I dread to waste my precious minutes on anything else. Sustainable interest in any other occupation I lack; trying other things has convinced me that my energies are ill prepared for any other serious occupation of time, save for the writing down of that which I suppose others would benefit from reading.

Perhaps my aptitude predisposed me to writing. Intelligence I possess, though not the type highly profitable to a man in my society; creativity, yes, but I produce more blank pages than filled ones; and perseverance, indeed, but I admit to enjoying a day or two away from the writing table. I paint no masterpieces, I build no rocket engines, I create little capital nor do I have the desire to do so. But to find myself alone to create, through word and phrase, various heavens and mountains and valleys and peoples to inhabit those spaces is my only wish.

Then perhaps my past compels my composing. Born into the average working-class family I was. No poet fathered me, neither did a troubled scribe nurse me in my infancy, but instead a mechanic and a clerk brought me up in the simplicity of life and the fear of the Lord. My mother contented herself in watching me cry much and say little, warding over her home with a sober mind,

thoughtfully disengaging at times, leaving my sister and me to our own faculties for much of the day. My father evaded my grip, validating through his absence a tempest turned angry. For the lack of male justification, young lions do roar, and cast away from guidance to my own reasoning, I retreated to the wildness of my independent imagination.

The Southern ghetto, the tail of the Union, housed me. Despite its cyclical, numbing woes, the poor urban South hides many treasures. The neighborhoods of the Deep South foster the next great wave of English writers. Caught at the intersection of unique landscapes and diversity, a dynamic language and a history full of lore, and coupled with new economic compulsion, a Southern writer is being fashioned who, if only told that he could, will provide the vanguard of the English literary future.

In such a place I was raised, a genial project. In many ways my neighborhood was, in the framework of American society, the seafloor of the Union. From the sands I'd peer upward, amazed by the murky blue shapes of the behemoths swimming overhead, while my fellow bottom dwellers scurried from the predation into insufficient covers. But that childish bliss soon departed, for the spectral shapes then swam close with destructive intentions, eyeing with keenness and smiling through dripping mouths. Life, with age, revealed itself.

How sobering was poverty to this child. For that ever-evolving consciousness of my world and my humble position within it robbed me of what I had supposed should have been a carefree childhood. But little did I know that the struggle of humanity mirrors writing's propensity to erect hurdle after hurdle before the writer, with no end in sight, except for the fleeting completion of the enterprise. Life taught first what education later needed only to confirm.

I could say that the writing process found me as a child, that at elementary desks I tamed character and plot while the other kids counted such to be both a joy and a lie. Life and experiences guided me toward the pen. I gamed with the best of my peers, the crux of my literary activity being the telling of lies. Until my early twenties, my literary portfolio amounted to a single short story written in the second grade—a simple stump of prose about a snake and a mouse gaining friendship, written in an attempt to alter the snake's subtle and wicked character I had always read about. A natural grasp of language went largely unnoticed, and besides the occasional school essay or test, the perfection of the physical body, not the writer's arsenal, occupied my time and focus. Before I wrote, I sported.

Sport, of long the master of the South, dominated my childhood. That master, though it ruins young, dark bodies, also aids the intellectual futures of the physically gifted; it did so for mine. Despite my distaste for physical duress, my foot was as light as a deer's. More the student of written stuff than playbooks, I jumped at the final intersection of the two; the University of Southern Mississippi traded scholarships for the physical talent. In exchange for my body, I received the liberal training of the mind in the classrooms and libraries of the American university. Whereas my secondary school reading assignments of Malcolm X and Charles Dickens fired my social imagination, the university's Sir Thomas More, Orwell and Kant tempered it, showing the world, its histories and its Creator as the most dynamic entities recorded—worthy of reverence and study. The education of the mind followed the education of the body in grand Socratic tradition, and the latter revealed an appetite for language comprehension and use. A later political quake would inject pride and compulsion into my craft.

When a despised and mocked America chose Mr. Obama, a member of my despised and mocked class, to lead its government, English at last became my tongue and its history my history.

Elected in the diehard days of Trayvon Martin, sororities in blackface and an economics coordinated by color, Mr. Obama gained the helm of this storied nation, exemplifying the transformative power of language use. He grasped the English language; he pursued its clarity; English became his tongue, its history his history, thus enabling him to navigate comfortably through the corridors of American social directly to its highest office. He wrote clearly, he spoke clearly, carefully perfecting his use of his language until his vision became more paramount than his complexion. His conversation, the fruit of clarified thought, muffled the stigma of his blackness enough that he gained the consideration of the United States of America. I caught the wisdom he shared and found a home in the language of my countrymen and women, becoming convinced, by trial, that clarity and vision took precedent over my pigmentation in many cases, and that when the proper word and phrases are sought, the attention of others, the prize of any language, is found.

Regardless of how the writer reaches the foolish conclusion that he should write, whatever he shall write, he eventually makes peace with the mortality of his world and the instability of his language, despite its might. As all things eventually wither and die, all the earth's beauty and its dangers and its contradictions must be admired and recorded before its time expires. Thus cast into a fray the writer will be to become with hope a fruitful world of his own, not easily stirred or enveloped; he will bask in his era before it wanes and implodes, unless he expires first. When he finds his allotted stage, he will record as much as what he sees while the gravity of time pounds into shape, one strike at a time, his greatest tools—his political purpose his cry for his language — his hope.

