GEORGE SAUNDERS

George Saunders was born in 1958 in Amarillo, Texas. He trained as a scientist at the Colorado School of Mines and after graduation worked in Sumatra and Indonesia, analyzing seismic data in order to prospect for oil. During that time he was also writing, and eventually graduated from the M.F.A. program at Syracuse University. He is the author of the collections CivilWarLand in Bad Decline (1996), a PEN/Hemingway finalist, and Pastoralia (2000). Known for his hilarious and often absurd depictions of contemporary life, Saunders follows the tradition of great American satirists, such as Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.

In an interview with the Atlantic, Saunders talked about how he achieves humor in a story: “I’ve been asked if when I’m writing I know it’s funny, and I think the answer is generally no. Because I think funniness has something to do with compression. When I write I know that I’m going to have to produce 40 percent more than I need. Sometimes I’ll write a whole page and there’ll be just one little schtick that’s good in there. I’ll eventually just cut the rest and go with that, and if I’m lucky I get to something funny. A lot of it has to do with knowing how to cut, so that you get a juxtaposition of strange elements.”

My Flamboyant Grandson

I had brought my grandson to New York to see a show. Because what is he always doing, up here in Oneonta? Singing and dancing, sometimes to my old show-tune records, but more often than not to his favorite CD, “Babar Sings,” sometimes even making up his own steps, which I do not mind, or rather I try not to mind it. Although I admit that once, coming into his room and finding him wearing a pink boa while singing, in the voice of the Old Lady, “I Have Never Met a Man Like That Elephant,” I had to walk out and give it some deep thought and prayer, as was also the case when he lumbered into the parlor during a recent church couples dinner, singing “Big and Slow, Yet So Very Regal,” wearing a tablecloth spray painted gray, so as to more closely resemble Babar.

Being a man who knows something about grandfatherly disapproval, having had a grandfather who constantly taunted me for having enlarged calves—to the extent that even today, when bathing, I find myself thinking unkind thoughts about Grandfather—what I prayed on both occasions was: Dear Lord, he is what he is, let me love him no matter what. If he is a gay child, God bless him; if he is a non-gay child who simply very much enjoys wearing his grandmother’s wig while singing “Edelweiss” to the dog, so be it, and in either case let me communicate my love and acceptance in everything I do.

Because where is a child to go for unconditional love, if not to his grandfather? He has had it tough, in my view, with his mother in Nevada and a father unknown, raised by his grandmother and me in an otherwise childless neighborhood, playing alone in a tiny yard that ends in a gravestone wall. The boys in his school are hard on him, as are the girls, as are the teachers, and recently we found his book bag in the Susquehanna, and recently also found, taped to the back of his jacket, a derogatory note, and the writing on it was not all that childish-looking, and there were rumors that his bus driver had written it.

Then one day I had a revelation. If the lad likes to sing and dance, I thought, why not expose him to the finest singing and dancing there is? So I called 1-800-CULTURE, got our Promissory Voucher in the mail, and on Teddy’s birthday we took the train down to New York.

As we entered the magnificent lobby of the Eisner Theatre, I was in good spirits, saying to Teddy, The size of this stage will make that little stage I built you behind the garage look pathetic, when suddenly we were stopped by a stern young fellow (a Mr. Ernesti, I believe) who said, we are sorry, sir, but you cannot be admitted unless you have your Promissory Voucher, are you kidding us, you must take your Voucher and your Proof of Purchases from at least six of our Major Artistic Sponsors, such as AOL, such as Coke, and go at once to the Redemption Center, on Forty-fourth and Broadway, to get your real actual tickets, and please do not be late, as latecomers cannot be admitted, due to special effects which occur early, and which require total darkness in order to simulate the African jungle at night.

Well, this was news to me, but I was not about to disappoint the boy. We left the Eisner and started up Broadway, the Everly Readers in the sidewalk reading the Everly Strips in our shoes, the building-mounted miniscreens at eye level showing images reflective of the Personal Preferences we’d stated on our monthly Everly Preference Worksheets, the numerous Cybex Sudden Emergent Screens outthrusting or down-thrusting inches from our faces, and in addition I could very clearly hear the
sound only messages being beamed to me and me alone via various Kakio Aural Focussers, such as one that shouted out to me between Forty-second and Forty-third, “Mr. Petrillo, you chose Burger King eight times last fiscal year but only two times thus far this fiscal year, please do not forsake us now, there is a store one block north!,” in the voice of Broadway star Elaine Weston, while at Forty-third a light-pole-mounted Focuser shouted, “Golly, Leonard, remember your childhood on the farm in Ononta? Why not reclaim those roots with a Starbucks Country Roast?” in a celebrity rural voice I could not identify, possibly Buck Owens, and then, best of all, in the doorway of PLC Electronics, a life-size Gene Kelly hologram suddenly appeared, tap-dancing, saying, “Leonard, my data indicates you’re a bit of an old-timer like myself! Gosh, in our day life was simpler, wasn’t it, Leonard? Why not come in and let Frankie Z. explain the latest gizmos!” And he looked so real I called out to Teddy, “Teddy, look there, Gene Kelly, do you remember I mentioned him to you as one of the all-time great dancers?” But Teddy of course did not see Gene Kelly, Gene Kelly not being one of his Preferences, but instead saw his hero Babar, swinging a small monkey on his trunk while saying that his data indicated that Teddy did not yet own a Nintendo.

So that was fun, that was very New York, but what was not so fun was, by the time we got through the line at the Redemption Center, it was ten minutes until showtime, and my feet had swollen up the way they do shortly before they begin spontaneously bleeding, which they have done ever since a winter spent in the freezing muck of Cho-Bai, Korea. It is something I have learned to live with. If I can sit, that is helpful. If I can lean against something, also good. Best of all, if I can take my shoes off. Which I did, leaning against a wall.

All around and above us were those towering walls of light, curving across building fronts, embedded in the sidewalks, custom-fitted to light poles: a cartoon lion eating a man in a suit; a rain of gold coins falling into the carot of a naked rain-forest family; a woman in lingerie running a bottle of Pepsi between her breasts; the Merrill Lynch talking fist asking, “Are you kicking ass or kissing it?”; a perfect human rear, dancing; a fake flock of geese turning into a field of Bebe logos; a dying grandmother’s room filled with roses by a FedEx man who then holds up a card saying “No Charge.”

And standing beneath all that bounty was our little Teddy, tiny and sad, whose grandfather could not even manage to get him into one crummy show.

So I said to myself, Get off the wall, old man, blood or no blood, just keep the legs moving and soon enough you’ll be there. And off we went, me hobbling, Teddy holding my arm, making decent time, and I think we would have made the curtain. Except suddenly there appeared a Citizen Helper, who asked were we from out of town, and was that why, via removing my shoes, I had caused my Everyly Strips to be rendered Inoperative?

I should say here that I am no stranger to innovative approaches to advertising, having pioneered the use of towable signboards in Ononta back in the Nixon years, when I moved a fleet of thirty around town with a Dodge Dart, wearing a suit that today would be found comic. By which I mean I have no problem with the concept of the Everyly Strip. That is not why I had my shoes off. I am as patriotic as the next guy. Rather, as I have said, it was due to my bleeding feet.

I told all this to the Citizen Helper, who asked if I was aware that, by rendering my Strips Inoperative, I was sacrificing a terrific opportunity to Celebrate My Preferences?

And I said yes, yes, I regretted this very much.

He said he was sorry about my feet, he himself having a trick elbow, and that he would be happy to forget this unfortunate incident if I would only put my shoes back on and complete the rest of my walk extremely slowly, looking energetically to both left and right, so that the higher density of Messages thus received would compensate for those I had missed.

And I admit, I was a little short with that Helper, and said, Young man, these dark patches here on my socks are blood, do you or do you not see them?

Which was when his face changed and he said, please do not snap at me, sir, I hope you are aware of the fact that I can write you up!

And then I made a mistake.

Because as I looked at that Citizen Helper—his round face, his pale sideburns, the way his feet turned in—it seemed to me that I knew him. Or rather, it seemed that he could not be so very different from me when I was a young man, not so different from the friends of my youth—from Jeffie DeSoto, say, who once fought a Lithuanian gang that had stuck an M-80 in the ass of a cat, or from Ken Larmer, who had such a sweet tenor voice and died stifling a laugh in the hills above Koi-Jeng.

I brought out a twenty and, leaning over, said, Look, please, the kid just really wants to see this show.

Which is when he pulled out his pad and began to write!
Now, even being from Oneonta, I knew that being written up does not take one or two minutes; we would be standing there at least half an hour, after which we would have to go to an Active Complaints Center, where they would check our Strips for Operability and make us watch that corrective video called “Robust Economy, Super Moral Climate!,” which I had already been made to watch three times last winter, when I was out of work and we could not afford cable. And we would totally miss “Babar Sings”!

Please, I said, please, we have seen plenty of personalized messages, via both the building-mounted miniscreens at eye level and those suddenly out-thrusting Cybec Emergent Screens, we have learned plenty for one day, honest to God we have—

And he said, Sir, since when do you make the call as far as when you have received enough useful information from our Artistic Partners? And just kept writing me up.

Well, there I was, in my socks, there was Teddy, with a scared look in his eyes I hadn’t seen since his toddler days, when he had such a fear of chickens that we could never buy Rosemont eggs, due to the cartoon chicken on the carton, or, if we did, had to first cut the chicken off, with scissors we kept in the car for that purpose. So I made a quick decision, and seized that Citizen Helper’s ticket pad and flung it into the street, shouting at Teddy, Run! Run!

And run he did. And run I did. And while that Citizen Helper floundered in the street, torn between chasing us and retrieving his pad, we raced down Broadway, and glancing back over my shoulder I saw a hulking young man stick out his foot, and down that Helper went, and soon I was handing our tickets to the same stern Mr. Ernesti, who was now less stern, and in we went, and took our seats, as the stars appeared overhead and the Eisner was transformed into a nighttime jungle.

And suddenly there was Babar, looking with longing toward Paris, where the Old Lady was saying that she had dreamed of someone named Babar, and did any of us know who this Babar was, and where he might be found? And Teddy knew the answer, from the Original Cast CD, which was Babar is within us, in all of our hearts, and he shouted it out with all the other children, as the Old Lady began singing “The King Inside of You.”

And let me tell you, from that moment everything changed for Teddy. I am happy to report he has joined the play at school. He wears a scarf everywhere he goes, throwing it over his shoulder with what can only be described as bravado, and says, whenever asked, that he has decided to become an actor. This from a boy too timid to trick-or-treat! This from the boy we once found walking home from school in tears, padlocked to his own bike! There are no more late-night crying episodes, he no longer writes on his arms with permanent marker, he leaps out of bed in the morning, anxious to get to school, and dons his scarf, and is already sitting at the table eating breakfast when we come down.

The other day as he got off the bus I heard him say, to his bus driver, cool as a cucumber, See you at the Oscars.

When an Everly Reader is reading, then suddenly stops, it is not hard to trace, and within a week I received a certified letter setting my fine at one thousand dollars, and stating that, in lieu of the fine, I could elect to return to the originating location of my infraction (they included a map) and, under the supervision of that Citizen Helper, retrace my steps, shoes on, thus reclaiming a significant opportunity to Celebrate My Preferences.

This, to me, is not America.

What America is, to me, is a guy doesn’t want to buy, you let him not buy, you respect his not buying. A guy has a crazy notion different from your crazy notion, you pat him on the back and say hey, pal, nice crazy notion, let’s go have a beer. America to me should be shouting all the time, a bunch of shouting voices, most of them wrong, some of them nuts, but, please, not just one droning glamorous reasonable voice.

But do the math: a day’s pay, plus train ticket, plus meals, plus taxis to avoid the bleeding feet, still that is less than one thousand.

So down I went.

That Citizen Helper, whose name was Rob, said he was glad about my change of heart. Every time a voice shot into my ear, telling me things about myself I already knew, every time a celebrity hologram walked up like an old friend, Rob checked a box on my Infraction Correction Form and said, Isn’t that amazing, Mr. Petrillo, that we can do that, that we can know you so well, that we can help you identify the things you want and need?

And I would say, Yes, Rob, that is amazing, sick in the gut but trying to keep my mind on the five hundred bucks I was saving and on all the dance classes that would buy.

As for Teddy, as I write this it is nearly midnight and he is tapping in the room above. He looks like a bird, our boy, he watches the same musical fifteen times in a row. Walking through the mall he suddenly emits a random line of dialogue and lunges off to the side, doing a dance step that resembles a stumble, spilling his drink, plowing into a group of incredulous,
snickering Oneontans. He looks like no one else, acts like no one else, his clothes are increasingly like plumage, late at night he choreographs using plastic Army men, he fits no mold and has no friends, but I believe in my heart that someday something beautiful may come from him. (2002)

AKHIL SHARMA

Born in New Delhi, India in 1972, Akhil Sharma immigrated to the United States in 1979. He studied creative writing at Princeton University, was a Wallace Stegner Fellow at Stanford University, attended Harvard Law School, and works as an investment banker in New York. By the time he was twenty-three, he had already published stories in such magazines as the Atlantic and the New Yorker. In an interview with the Atlantic, Sharma talked about what drives his characters: "My characters are motivated by a desire to improve themselves. I think this notion—that one can really conquer all—represents a very 'immigrant' hopefulness." Sharma's first novel, An Obedient Father, was published in 2000 and won the PEN/Hemingway award for first fiction. Three of his stories, including "Surrounded by Sleep," have been selected for the Best American Short Stories. Discussing how he begins a story Sharma has said, "When I was younger I started with an incident that could be anywhere in the story. The difficulty of starting this way is that the story is no longer plot-driven. You have to keep your reader hooked through urgency or interest in the way you tell the story instead of through the promise of a payoff."

Surrounded by Sleep

One August afternoon, when Ajay was ten years old, his elder brother, Aman, dove into a pool and struck his head on the cement bottom. For three minutes, he lay there unconscious. Two boys continued to swim, kicking and splashing, until finally Aman was spotted below them. Water had entered through his nose and mouth. It had filled his stomach. His lungs collapsed. By the time he was pulled out, he could no longer think, talk, chew, or roll over in his sleep.

Ajay’s family had moved from India to Queens, New York, two years earlier. The accident occurred during the boys’ summer vacation, on a visit with their aunt and uncle in Arlington, Virginia. After the accident, Ajay’s mother came to Arlington, where she waited to see if Aman would recover. At the hospital, she told the doctors and nurses that her son had been accepted into the Bronx High School of Science, in the hope that by highlighting his intelligence she would move them to make a greater effort on his behalf. Within a few weeks of the accident, the insurance company said that Aman should be transferred to a less expensive care facility, a long-term one. But only a few of these were any good, and those were full, and Ajay’s mother refused to move Aman until a space opened in one of them. So she remained in Arlington, and Ajay stayed, too, and his father visited from Queens on the weekends when he wasn’t working. Ajay was enrolled at the local public school and in September he started fifth grade.

Before the accident, Ajay had never prayed much. In India, he and his brother used to go with their mother to the temple every Tuesday night, but that was mostly because there was a good dosa restaurant nearby. In America, his family went to a temple only on important holy days and birthdays. But shortly after Ajay’s mother came to Arlington, she moved into the room that he and his brother had shared during the summer and made an altar in a corner. She threw an old flowered sheet over a cardboard box that had once held a television. On top, she put a clay lamp, an incense-stick holder, and postcards depicting various gods. There was also a postcard of Mahatma Gandhi. She explained to Ajay that God could take any form; the picture of Mahatma Gandhi was there because he had appeared to her in a dream after the accident, and told her that Aman would recover and become a surgeon. Now she and Ajay prayed for at least half an hour before the altar every morning and night.

At first, she prayed with absolute humility. “Whatever you do will be good because you are doing it,” she murmured to the postcards of Ram and Shivaji, daubing their lips with water and rice. Mahatma Gandhi got only water, because he did not like to eat. As weeks passed and Aman did not recover in time to return to the Bronx High School of Science for the first day of classes, his mother began doing things that called attention to her piety. She sometimes held the prayer lamp until it blistered her palms. Instead of kneeling before the altar, she lay face down. She fasted twice a week. Her attempts to sway God were not so different from Ajay’s performing somersaults to amuse his aunt, and they made God seem human to Ajay.