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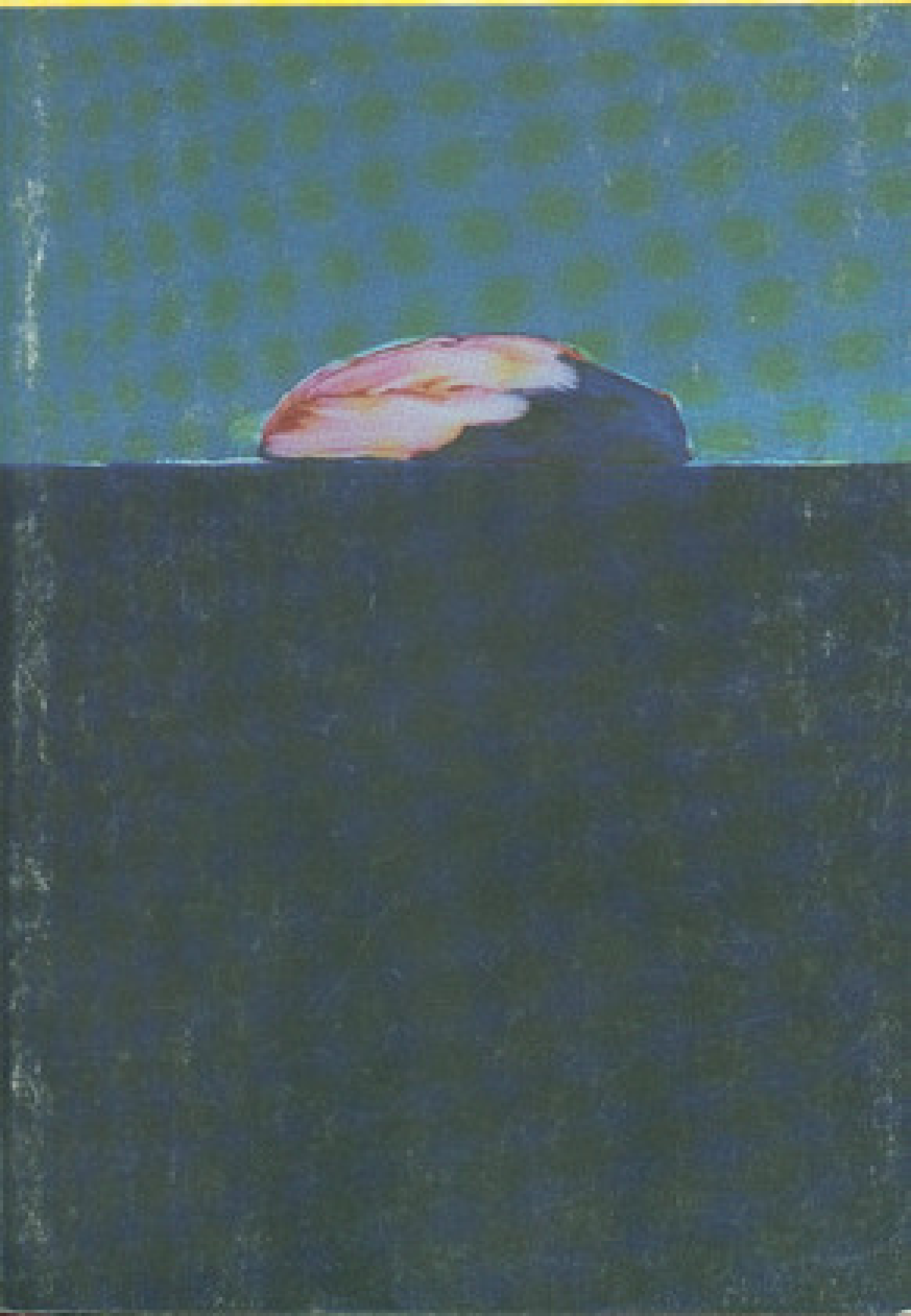

V. S. Naipaul: The Art of Fiction, No. 154

Interviewed by Jonathan Rosen, Tarun Tejpal

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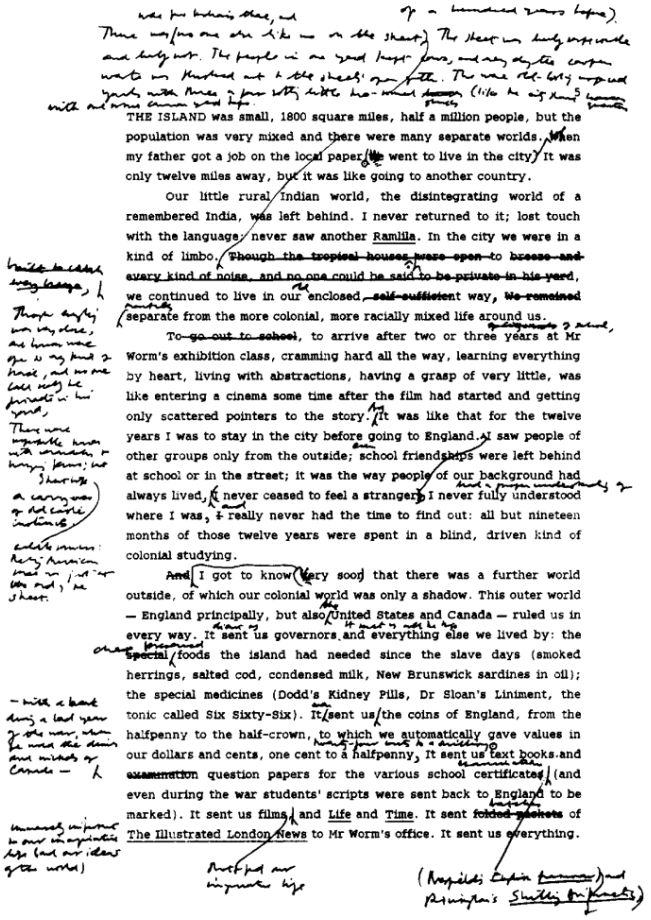

THE ISLAND was small, 1800 square miles, half a million people, but the population was very mixed and there were many separate worlds. When my father got a job on the local paper we went to live in the city. It was only twelve miles away, but it was like going to another country.

Our little rural Indian world, the disintegrating world of a remembered India, was left behind. I never returned to it; lost touch with the language; never saw another Ramlila. In the city we were in a kind of limbo. ~~Though the tropical houses were open to breeze and every kind of noise, and no one could be said to be private in his yard~~, we continued to live in our enclosed ~~self-sufficient~~ way, ~~We remained~~ separate from the more colonial, more racially mixed life around us.

To ~~go out to school~~, to arrive after two or three years at Mr Worm's exhibition class, cramming hard all the way, learning everything by heart, living with abstractions, having a grasp of very little, was like entering a cinema some time after the film had started and getting only scattered pointers to the story. It was like that for the twelve years I was to stay in the city before going to England. I saw people of other groups only from the outside; school friendships were left behind at school or in the street; it was the way people of our background had always lived. I never ceased to feel a stranger. I never fully understood where I was, I really never had the time to find out: all but nineteen months of those twelve years were spent in a blind, driven kind of colonial studying.

~~And~~ I got to know very soon that there was a further world outside, of which our colonial world was only a shadow. This outer world — England principally, but also United States and Canada — ruled us in every way. It sent us governors and everything else we lived by: the ~~Special~~ foods the island had needed since the slave days (smoked herrings, salted cod, condensed milk, New Brunswick sardines in oil); the special medicines (Dodd's Kidney Pills, Dr Sloan's Liniment, the tonic called Six Sixty-Six). It sent us the coins of England, from the halfpenny to the half-crown, to which we automatically gave values in our dollars and cents, one cent to a halfpenny. It sent us text books and ~~examination~~ question papers for the various school certificates (and even during the war students' scripts were sent back to England to be marked). It sent us films and Life and Time. It sent ~~folded packets~~ of The Illustrated London News to Mr Worm's office. It sent us everything.

A manuscript page from "Reading and Writing," an unpublished essay.

Sir Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul was born on August 17, 1932 in Chaguanas, Trinidad, where his ancestors had emigrated from India—his maternal grandfather, at the turn of the century, had traveled from that country as an indentured servant.

Naipaul, in his essay "Prologue to an Autobiography" from *Finding the Center*, has written: "Half a writer's work . . . is the discovery of his subject. And a

problem for me was that my life had been varied, full of upheavals and moves: from grandmother's Hindu house in the country, still close to the rituals and social ways of village India; to Port of Spain, the negro, and G.I. life of its streets, the other, ordered life of my colonial English school, which is called Queen's Royal College, and then Oxford, London and the freelances' room at the BBC. Trying to make a beginning as a writer, I didn't know where to focus."

After two failed attempts at novels and three months before his twenty-third birthday, Naipaul found his start in the childhood memory of a neighbor in Port of Spain. The memory provided the first sentence for *Miguel Street*, which he wrote over six weeks in 1955 in the BBC freelancers' room at the Langham Hotel, where he was working part-time editing and presenting a literary program for the Caribbean Service. The book would not be published until 1959, after the success of *The Mystic Masseur* (1957), which received the John Llewellyn Rhys Memorial Prize and *The Suffrage of Elvira* (1958), which was awarded the Somerset Maugham Award. *A House of Mr. Biswas* was published in 1961, and in 1971 Naipaul received the Booker Prize for *In a Free State*. Four novels have appeared since then: *Guerrillas* (1975), *A Bend in the River* (1979), *The Enigma of Arrival* (1987) and *A Way in the World*. Naipaul received a knighthood in 1990 for his service to literature.

In the early 1960s, Naipaul began writing about his travels. He has written four books on India: *The Middle Passage* (1962), *An Area of Darkness* (1964), *India: A Wounded Civilization* (1977), and *India: A Million Mutinies Now* (1990). *The Return of Eva Peron* and *The Killings in Trinidad* (published in the same volume in 1980) recorded his experiences in Argentina, Trinidad, and the Congo. Indonesia, Iran, Pakistan, and Malaysia are the subject of *Among the Believers: An Islamic Journey* (1981). He returned to those countries in 1995; *Beyond Belief*, an account of those travels, was published this year.

In conversation with Naipaul, one finds the issues and ideas are always highly subtle and complex—which he keeps reminding you, lest you see things only in monochrome—but the language steers clear of obfuscation and cant. Indeed Naipaul can be a difficult companion. The humbleness of his beginnings, the long struggles, the sheer scale of his artistic beginnings clearly have bred in him deep neuroses—at sixty-six, the neurotic circuitry is still buzzing. Despite the edginess, and the slight air of unpredictability it brings into any interaction with him, Naipaul proved to be an interviewer's delight.

The interview is culled from a series of conversations in New York City and India. Part of the interview was conducted (by Jonathan Rosen) at the Carlyle Hotel on May 16, 1994. Naipaul spent several minutes rearranging the furniture in the hotel suite in an effort to locate the chair best suited to his aching back. He has the habit

of removing glasses before answering a question, though that only enhances his scrutinizing expression and attitude of mental vigilance. The occasion for the interview was the publication of *A Way in the World*, but despite an initial wish to "stay with the book," Naipaul relaxed into a larger conversation that lasted several hours and touched on many aspects of his life and career.

V. S. NAIPAUL

Let me know the range of what you are doing and how you are going to approach it. I want to know with what intensity to talk. Are we going to stay with the book?

INTERVIEWER

Would you like to?

NAIPAUL

It's a long career. There are many books. If things are to be interesting, it is better to be specific and focused. It's more stimulating to me too.

INTERVIEWER

Was *A Way in the World* a difficult book to write?

NAIPAUL

In what way?

INTERVIEWER

There are so many different pieces to it, yet it fits together as a whole.

NAIPAUL

It was written as a whole—from page one to the end. Many writers tend to write summing-up books at the end of their lives.

INTERVIEWER

Were you conscious of trying to sum things up?

NAIPAUL

Yes. What people have done—people like Waugh in his war trilogy, or Anthony Powell—is create a character like themselves to whom they can attach these reinterpreted adventures. Powell has a character running through his books who is like him but not him, because he doesn't play a dominant role. I think this is one of the falsities that the form imposes on people, and for many years I've been thinking how to overcome it.

INTERVIEWER

How to overcome . . .

NAIPAUL

You didn't understand what I was saying?

INTERVIEWER

I'm guessing that you mean the space between Marcel Proust the author and Marcel the narrator of *Remembrance of Things Past*.

NAIPAUL

No, I was thinking—well, yes, put it like that. I was thinking that to write about the war, which was a big experience for him, Waugh had to invent a Waugh character. Whenever I have had to write fiction, I've always had to invent a character who roughly has my background. I thought for many years how to deal with this problem. The answer was to face it boldly—not to create a bogus character but to create, as it were, stages in one's evolution.

INTERVIEWER

I'm struck by how much your autobiography overlaps with the vast history of the West. Do you have a sense that to write about yourself is to write about the larger world? Did you strive to achieve this relationship or did you find it naturally evolving?

NAIPAUL

Naturally, it had to evolve, because that's learning, isn't it? You can't deny what you've learned; you can't deny your travels; you can't deny the nature of your life. I grew up in a small place and left it when I was quite young and entered the

bigger world. You have to contain this in your writing. Do you understand what I am saying?

INTERVIEWER

I do understand, but I was wondering about something a little different.

NAIPAUL

Try it again. Rephrase it. Make it simple and concrete so we can deal with it.

INTERVIEWER

I imagine you as having begun in a place that you were eager to leave but that has turned out—the more you studied it and returned to it—actually to be at the center of issues that are of enormous importance to the West. You call Trinidad a small place, but as you've written, Columbus wanted it, Raleigh wanted it . . . When did you become conscious of Trinidad as a focus of the desires of the West, and a great subject?

NAIPAUL

I have been writing for a long time. For most of that time people were not interested in my work, so my discoveries have tended to be private ones. If it has happened, it's just a coincidence. I wasn't aware of it. Also, it is important to note, the work has not been political or polemic. Such a work written in the 1950s would be dead now. One must always try to see the truth of a situation—it makes things universal.

INTERVIEWER

You mentioned that your readers are coming to you late: do you think that the world is now catching up with you? Is this a change in readership or a change in the world?

NAIPAUL

It's a change in the world. When I began to write, there were large parts of the world that were not considered worth writing about. Do you know my book *The Loss of El Dorado*? It contains all the research on Raleigh and Miranda. When it was published, the literary editor of a very important paper in London told me that I only should have written an essay because it wasn't a big enough subject. He was a foolish man. But it gives you an idea of how the world has changed.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think the world is more understanding now of the psychological displacement with which you deal?

NAIPAUL

It's such a widespread condition now. People still have the idea of the single cultural unit, which actually has never existed. All cultures have been mingled forever. Look at Rome: Etruria was there before, and there were city-states around Rome. Or the East Indies: people from India went out to found further India, then there was the Muslim influence . . . People come and go all the time; the world has always been in movement.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think you have become an exemplar of that mixed world?

NAIPAUL

I don't think so. I am always thinking about the book. You are writing to write a book: to satisfy that need, to make a living, to leave a fair record behind, to alter what you think is incomplete and make it good. I am not a spokesman for anybody. I don't think anybody would want me to be a spokesman.

INTERVIEWER

The three explorers in *A Way in the World* are drawn back to Trinidad at their peril. I sense from your earlier writing that you fear you might make one trip too many—that there is an annihilating aspect to that place from which you came, which might this time overwhelm you.

NAIPAUL

You mustn't talk like that. It's very frightening. I think I have made my trips there and I won't go back again.

INTERVIEWER

But imaginatively Trinidad does pull you.

NAIPAUL

No. I'm finished with it imaginatively. You see, a writer tries very hard to see his childhood material as it exists. The nature of that childhood experience is very hard to understand—it has a beginning, a distant background, very dark, and then it has an end when a writer becomes a man. The reason why this early material is so important is that he needs to understand it to make it complete. It is contained, complete. After that there is trouble. You have to depend on your intelligence, on your inner strength. Yes, the later work rises out of this inner strength.

INTERVIEWER

I am struck by your title *A Way in the World*. It reminds me of the end of *Paradise Lost*—wandering out after the expulsion. Is the world what you enter when you leave home?

NAIPAUL

I suppose it depends on the nature of where you live. I don't know whether it is a fair question or if it should be answered. Put it another way.

INTERVIEWER

I guess I'm asking what you mean by *world*.

NAIPAUL

People can live very simple lives, can't they? Tucked away, without thinking. I think the world is what you enter when you think—when you become educated, when you question—because you can be in the big world and be utterly provincial.

INTERVIEWER

Did you grow up with a larger idea of the world? An idea represented by the word *world*?

NAIPAUL

I always knew that there was a world outside. I couldn't accept that with which I grew up—an agricultural, colonial society. You cannot get any more depressing or limited.

INTERVIEWER

You left Trinidad in 1950 to study at Oxford—setting out across the seas to an alien land in pursuit of ambition. What were you looking for?

NAIPAUL

I wanted to be very famous. I also wanted to be a writer—to be famous for writing. The absurdity about the ambition was that at the time I had no idea what I was going to write about. The ambition came long before the material. The filmmaker Shyam Benegal once told me that he knew he wanted to make films from the age of six. I wasn't as precocious as he—I wanted to be a writer by the age of ten.

I went to Oxford on a colonial government scholarship, which guaranteed to see you through any profession you wanted. I could have become a doctor or an engineer, but I simply wanted to do English at Oxford—not because it was English and not because it was Oxford, but only because it was away from Trinidad. I thought that I would learn about myself in the three or four years I was going to be away. I thought that I would find out my material and miraculously become a writer. Instead of learning a profession, I chose this banality of English—a worthless degree, it has no value at all.

But I wanted to escape Trinidad. I was oppressed by the pettiness of colonial life and by (this relates more particularly to my Indian Hindu family background) the intense family disputes in which people were judged and condemned on moral grounds. It was not a generous society—neither the colonial world nor the Hindu world. I had a vision that in the larger world people would be appreciated for what they were—people would be found interesting for what they were.

INTERVIEWER

Unconnected to the family from which they came?

NAIPAUL

Yes. I imagined that one would not be subject to that moralizing judgment all the time. People would find what you were saying interesting, or they would find you uninteresting. It actually did happen in England—I did find a more generous way of looking at people. I still find it more generous.

INTERVIEWER

Did you enjoy Oxford?

NAIPAUL

Actually, I hated Oxford. I hate those degrees and I hate all those ideas of universities. I was far too well prepared for it. I was far more intelligent than most of the people in my college or in my course. I am not boasting, you know well—time has proved all these things. In a way, I had prepared too much for the outer world; there was a kind of solitude and despair, really, at Oxford. I wouldn't wish anyone to go through it.

INTERVIEWER

Do you ever wonder what would have become of you if you had stayed in Trinidad?

NAIPAUL

I would have killed myself. A friend of mine did—out of stress, I think. He was a boy of mixed race. A lovely boy, and very bright. It was a great waste.

INTERVIEWER

Is he the boy that you mention in the introduction to *A House for Mr. Biswas*?

NAIPAUL

Yes, he is the boy I had in mind. We shared an admiration for each other. His death was terrible.

INTERVIEWER

Do you still feel the wounds of your early life?

NAIPAUL

I think about how lucky I was to escape. I think about how awful and oppressive it was. I see it now more clearly for what it was: the plantation—perhaps a part of the New World but entirely autonomous. No doubt I've healed the wounds because I have thought about it so much. I think about how lucky I was not to have been destroyed utterly. There has been a life of work since then, a life of endeavor.

INTERVIEWER

Why has writing always been the central need of your life—the way out of everything?

NAIPAUL

It was given to me as an ambition. Or rather, I took my father's example; he was a writer—a journalist, but he also wrote stories. This was very important to me. My father examined our Hindu background in his stories. He found it a very cruel background, and I understood from his stories that it was a very cruel world. So I grew up with the idea that it is important to look inwards and not always define an external enemy. We must examine ourselves—our own weaknesses. I still believe that.

INTERVIEWER

You have said that you see writing as the only truly noble calling.

NAIPAUL

Yes, for me it is the only noble calling. It is noble because it deals with the truth. You have to look for ways of dealing with your experience. You have to understand it and you have to understand the world. Writing is a constant striving after a deeper understanding. That is pretty noble.

INTERVIEWER

When did you start writing?

NAIPAUL

I started work on a novel in 1949. It was a very farcical, a very interesting idea: a black man in Trinidad giving himself the name of an African king. This is the idea I tried to explore. It dragged on as a piece of writing for two years because I was too young to know much. I began it a little bit before I left home and finished it during a long vacation from Oxford. I was very glad I did finish it because at least it gave me the experience of finishing a long book. Of course nothing happened to it.

Then, after I left Oxford, really in great conditions of hardship, I began to write something intensely serious. I was trying to find my own voice, my tone—what was really me and not borrowed or acting. This serious voice led me into great shallows of depression, which dragged on for a while until I was told to abandon it by someone to whom I had sent the manuscript. He told me it was rubbish; I wanted to kill him but deep down in my heart I knew he was absolutely right. I spent many weeks feeling wretched because it had been five years and nothing was happening. There was this great need to write, you see. I had decided it was to

be my livelihood—I had committed my life to it. Then something happened: out of that gloom, I hit upon my own voice. I found the material that was my own voice; it was inspired by two literary sources—the stories of my father and a Spanish picaresque novel, the very first published, in 1554, *Lazarillo Tormes*. It is a short book about a little poor boy growing up in imperial Spain, and I loved its tone of voice. I married these two things together and found that it fitted my personality: what became genuine and original and mine really was fed by these two, quite distinct sources.

INTERVIEWER

This is when you began writing *Miguel Street*?

NAIPAUL

Yes. It is immensely hard to be the first to write about anything. It is always easy afterwards to copy. So the book I wrote—that mixture of observation and folklore and newspaper cuttings and personal memory—many people can do, but at the time it was something that had to be worked out.

Imagine writing a book like *Miguel Street* in 1955. Today people are interested in writing from India or other former colonies, but at the time it was not considered writing. It was very hard to have this book with me for four years before it was published. It really upset me and it is still a great shadow over me.

INTERVIEWER

You had written two books by 1955, *The Mystic Masseur* and *Miguel Street*, but the first book was not published until 1957 and the stories not until 1959.

NAIPAUL

My life was very hard. When you are young, when you are destitute, when you wish to make known your presence in the world, two years is a very long time to wait. I was really made to suffer. Then *The Mystic Masseur* was finally published and it was dismissed by my own paper (I was working at the *New Statesman* at the time) where an Oxford don, quite famous later, described it as a little savory from a colonial island. A little savory, which didn't represent labor.

It would be interesting to see the books that were considered real books by the reviewers at that time. It is useless to tell me now, All right, the books have been around for forty years, they are still printed. I was damaged. I was wounded by

this neglect. People today have it much easier, which is why they complain. I never complained; I just had to go on.

INTERVIEWER

You must have been sustained largely by self-belief?

NAIPAUL

Yes. I never doubted. From the time I was a child, I had the feeling that I was marked.

INTERVIEWER

You started writing *A House for Mr. Biswas* just as your first novel was published.

NAIPAUL

Yes. I was casting around in a desperate way for a subject. It was so despairing that I actually began to write with a pencil—I didn't feel secure enough. The idea I had involved someone like my father, who at the end of his life would be looking at the objects by which he is surrounded and considering how they came into his life. I wrote laboriously without inspiration for a very long time—about nine months.

INTERVIEWER

Did you write every day?

NAIPAUL

Not strictly every day because when you are not inspired you do things with a heavy heart. Also, I was trying at the same time to become a reviewer. Someone had recommended me to the *New Statesman*—they sent me one thing and then another, but I was trying too hard and it failed. Then they sent me some books on Jamaica, and this nice, easy voice came to me. So there was some achievement at the time—learning how to write short, interesting pieces about a book and to make the book absolutely real to the reader. Eventually, the novel caught fire and thereafter it was all right. I began to devote three weeks out of every four to this work. I think that I knew pretty soon that it was a great work. I was very pleased that, although I was so young, I was committing myself to a major piece of writing because I had begun rather small—thinking that only when one had trained oneself enough would one attempt grand work. If someone had stopped me on the street

and said, I'll give you a million pounds now on one condition: you must not finish your book, I would have told him to go away. I knew I must finish my book.

INTERVIEWER

How was the book received?

NAIPAUL

It was received well from the moment it was read by the publisher. It would be nice to say that there was a rush on the book when it was published, but of course there wasn't. It would be nice to say that the world stood up and took notice, but of course the world didn't. The book just clanked along in the way of my earlier books, and it was some time before it made its way.

INTERVIEWER

A House for Mr. Biswas was a departure from your first three books, which were social comedies—you moved away from light, frothy comedy toward a more grim and serious tone.

NAIPAUL

Actually the tone is not grim. The book is full of comedy. Perhaps the comedy is less verbal, less farcical but it is in everything, I assure you. I can read a page of my writing from any book, however dark you might think it is, and you will laugh. The jokes have become deeper; the comedy has become more profound. Without the humorous view, you couldn't go on. You can't give a dark, tragic view all the time—it must be supported by this underlying comedy.

INTERVIEWER

I'd like to read you a sentence from *A Way in the World*: "It was that idea of the absurd never far away from us that preserved us. It was the other side of that anger and the passion that made the crowd burn the black policeman . . ." It reminds me of the humor in your early books about Trinidad, and the other side of that humor—hysteria—in the books that followed.

NAIPAUL

It's very curious, isn't it—the same people who burned a policeman alive would dance and sing and tell a funny story about it.

INTERVIEWER

I was particularly struck by the word *us*—your inclusion of yourself in that situation.

NAIPAUL

Well, it was in Port of Spain. It has to be *us* because one is growing up in that atmosphere. It was our idea of the absurd, which comes out in the calypso—it's African, this idea of the absurd. It is something in late life I have come to understand—the hysteria and the sense of the absurd.

INTERVIEWER

And appreciate it more?

NAIPAUL

I'm more frightened by it. Understanding that the people who can be so absurd and write such funny songs also have a capacity for burning policemen. I fear cruelty.

INTERVIEWER

I can't help noticing that *A Way in the World* ends, like *The Enigma of Arrival*, with a funeral.

NAIPAUL

That was pure accident. I probably didn't think of it until you told me now. What I was aware of, as I was writing, was an emphasis on dead bodies and funerals and corpses. It begins with a man dressing a corpse and goes on to corpses in the Red House, where I worked, and there are lots of corpses in the Raleigh story.

INTERVIEWER

Is that a growing sense of mortality or is that a sense of the way of the world?

NAIPAUL

Probably it's facing it more boldly when one is older. When one is young, one has ways of dealing. Really, this is the physical thing of dying—I don't know what prompts it. It is for the reader to assess it; the writer mustn't judge himself.

INTERVIEWER

Are you conscious of reworking the elements of earlier fiction?

NAIPAUL

Yes. Getting the angle right: having acquired the material, writing about it another way and so producing new material.

INTERVIEWER

Would you agree that your later fiction takes a gentler angle? It seems to me that you now have a more accepting approach.

NAIPAUL

Be concrete. Where am I rough? Where have you found me harsh? Give me an example.

INTERVIEWER

Well, *In a Free State*.

NAIPAUL

That book was written out of great pain and very personal stress. It was written very carefully—put together like a watch or a piece of engineering. It is very well made. In 1979, for the first time, I was asked to give a reading in New York, and at the moment of the reading, I was aware of the extraordinary violence of the work—I didn't know it until then, so it wasn't conscious. I was shocked by the violence. When the jokes were made, people laughed; but what followed immediately stopped them. It was a very unsettling experience. Probably that reflects the way it was created—out of personal pain related to my own life, my own anguish.

INTERVIEWER

Can you describe the way you write?

NAIPAUL

I write slowly.

INTERVIEWER

Always?

NAIPAUL

I used to write faster when I was younger—about one thousand words a day when I was really going. I can't do that now. Now, on a good day, I write about three hundred words—very little.

INTERVIEWER

Do you ever not write?

NAIPAUL

Very often. Most days are like that.

INTERVIEWER

Hemingway called a day he had not written a day closer to death.

NAIPAUL

I'm not romantic like that. I just feel rather irritated. But I'm wise enough now and experienced enough to know that it will be all right. If it's in my head, it'll come out all right eventually. It's just finding the right way.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think language should only convey and not, as with John Updike, dance and dazzle?

NAIPAUL

Well, people have to do what they want to do. I wish my prose to be transparent—I don't want the reader to stumble over me; I want him to look through what I'm saying to what I'm describing. I don't want him ever to say, Oh, goodness, how nicely written this is. That would be a failure.

INTERVIEWER

So even as the ideas are complex, the prose stays uncluttered.

NAIPAUL

Simple, yes. Also, I mustn't use jargon. You are surrounded by jargon—in the newspapers, in friends' conversations—and as a writer, you can become very lazy. You can start using words lazily. I don't want that to happen. Words are valuable. I like to use them in a valuable way.

INTERVIEWER

Do you despair for English literature?

NAIPAUL

No, I don't despair for it. It doesn't exist now, partly because it is very hard to do again what has been done before. It is in a bad, bad way in England. It has ceased to exist—but so much has existed in the past, perhaps there is no cause for grief.

INTERVIEWER

What about writers emerging from India? Do you feel the same about them?

NAIPAUL

I haven't examined that, but I think India will have a lot of writing. For many centuries India has had no intellectual life at all. It was a ritualized society, which didn't require writing. But when such societies emerge from a purely ritualistic life and begin to expand industrially, economically, and in education, then people begin to need to understand what is happening. People turn to writers, who are there to guide them, to provoke them, to stimulate them. I think there will be a lot of writing in India now. The situation will draw it out.

INTERVIEWER

To return to the question of violence, I'd like to read a passage from *A Way in the World*: "I had grown up thinking of cruelty as something always in the background. There was an ancient, or not-so-ancient, cruelty in the language of the streets: casual threats, man to man and parents to children, of punishments and degradation that took you back to plantation times."

NAIPAUL

Yes. You always heard people saying things in calm language that were what the driver would have said to the slave: I'll beat you till you pee; I'll take the skin off your back. These were awful things to hear, don't you think?

INTERVIEWER

Yet you have always resisted simplifying the anger—blaming it on colonialism or on the white masters of black slaves. There is no easy villain for you.

NAIPAUL

Of course there is no easy villain. These are safe things to say. They're not helpful in any way, they're not additions to any argument or discussion. They are just chants. Blaming colonialism is a very safe chant. These people would have been very quiet in colonial days; they would have been prepared for a life of subordination. Now that there is no colonialism, they speak very fearlessly. But other people were fearless long before.

INTERVIEWER

You have been criticized for running into the arms of the oppressor.

NAIPAUL

Who's criticized me?

INTERVIEWER

Derek Walcott, for one.

NAIPAUL

I don't know. I don't read these things. You mustn't ask me; you must ask him. You must judge these things yourself. I can't deal with all these things. It's been a long career.

INTERVIEWER

I'd like to ask . . .

NAIPAUL

You shouldn't have asked me that question about running to the British and the masters . . . Does it show in my work?

INTERVIEWER

I wouldn't say so.

NAIPAUL

Then why did you ask it?

INTERVIEWER

Because you always have resisted the simplifications, but you have been surrounded by critics who have not resisted them.

NAIPAUL

Well, that's their problem. Have you read my book *The Middle Passage*? That book tells black people they can't be white people, which caused immense offense. In 1962, black people thought that because independence was coming, they had become closer to white people.

INTERVIEWER

The Middle Passage was your first attempt at nonfiction.

NAIPAUL

It is wrong to think of anyone as a producer of fiction because there is a limited amount of material you can work on. Yet to be a writer is to be observing, to be feeling and to be sensitive all the time. To be a serious writer is not to do what you have done before, to move on. I felt the need to move on. I felt I couldn't do again what I had done before—I shouldn't just stay at home and pretend to be writing novels. I should move and travel and explore my world—and let the form take its own natural course. Then a happy thing: a racial government, thinking they should give an appearance of being nonracial, invited me to come back and travel around the region. That's how I began to travel, and how I wrote *The Middle Passage*.

INTERVIEWER

You travel to India often. You first visited thirty-five years ago and keep coming back, both to write and to holiday. What is the source of your continuing fascination with India?

NAIPAUL

It is my ancestry, really, because I was born with a knowledge of the past that ended with my grandparents. I couldn't go beyond them, the rest was just absolute blankness. It's really to explore what I call the area of darkness.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think it is crucial to your function and material as a writer to know where you came from and what made you what you are?

NAIPAUL

When you're like me—born in a place where you don't know the history, and no one tells you the history, and the history, in fact, doesn't exist, or in fact exists only in documents—when you are born like that, you have to learn about where you came from. It takes a lot of time. You can't simply write about the world as though it is all there, all granted to you. If you are a French or an English writer, you are born to a great knowledge of your origins and your culture. When you are born like me, in an agricultural colony far away, you have to learn everything. The writing has been a process of inquiry and learning for me.

INTERVIEWER

You have written three books on India over the last thirty-five years: *An Area of Darkness, A Wounded Civilization* and *A Million Mutinies Now*. Your response to the country has varied with each book.

NAIPAUL

Actually, the three books stand. Please understand that I do not want any one to supersede another. All three books stand because I think that they all remain true. The books are written in different modes: one is autobiographical, one is analytical and the last is an account of the people's experience in that country. They were written at different times, and of course, like India, people exist in different times. So you could say that *An Area of Darkness* is still there—the analysis of the invasions and defeat, the psychological wound, is still there. With the *Mutinies* book, in which people are discovering some little voice with which to express their personality and speak of their needs—that remains true. The books have to be taken as a whole—as still existing, still relevant, still important.

In all of this, you must remember that I am a writer—a man writing a paragraph, a chapter, a section, a book. It is a craft. I am not just a man making statements. So the books represent the different stages of my craft. *An Area of Darkness* is an extraordinary piece of craft—an extraordinary mix of travel and memory and reading. *A Million Mutinies Now* represents the discovery that the people in the country are important. It's a very taxing form, in the way that a lot happens during the actual traveling—a lot happens when you meet people. If you don't know how to talk to them, if you don't know how to get them to talk to you, there is no book.

You use your judgment and your flair. I look at this and then that person, what he says about himself . . . His experiences lead you to consider something else and then something else and so on. The book happens during the actual traveling, although the writing takes time, as always. So the books are different bits of craft—always remember that I am a craftsman, changing the craft; I am trying to do new things all the time.

INTERVIEWER

Do you use a tape recorder when you interview people for your nonfiction?

NAIPAUL

I never use a recorder. It shortens the labor and makes the whole thing more precise—it puts me in control. Also, people find it hard to believe, but an hour and a half with anyone is as much as any text of mine can take.

INTERVIEWER

Do you begin an interview as soon as you meet a person?

NAIPAUL

First I'd meet you and talk to you; then I'd ask to come and see you. In ninety minutes, I can get two or three thousand words. You'll see me writing by hand and you'll speak slowly and instinctively. Yet it will be spoken and have the element of speech.

INTERVIEWER

An Area of Darkness suggests a lot of anger, as does much of your journalism about India. Do you think anger works better than understanding for a writer?

NAIPAUL

I don't like to think of it as journalism—journalism is news, an event that is important today. My kind of writing tries to find a spring, the motives of societies and cultures, especially in India. This is not journalism. Let me correct that—it is not something that anybody can do. It's a more profound gift. I'm not competing with journalists.

INTERVIEWER

But does anger work better than understanding?

NAIPAUL

I think it isn't strictly anger alone. It is deep emotion. Without that deep emotion there is almost no writing—then you do journalism. When you are deeply churned up, you know that you cannot express this naked raw emotion; you have to come to some resolution about it. It is this refinement of emotion, what you call understanding, that really makes the writing. These two things are not opposed to one another—understanding derives from what you call anger. I would call it emotion, deep emotion. Emotion is necessary to writing.

INTERVIEWER

I want to ask a question that comes from reading *An Area of Darkness*. You write about the Hindu idea that the world is illusion, which seems enormously attractive and, at the same time, terrifying to you. I'm wondering if I read that right?

NAIPAUL

I think you put your finger on it. It is both frightening and alluring. People can use it as an excuse for inactivity—when things are really bad and you are in a mess, it can be comforting to possess and enter that little chamber of thought where the world is an illusion. I find it very easy to enter that mode of thinking. It was with me for some weeks before writing *A Bend in the River*. I had the distinct sense of the world as an illusion—I saw it spinning in space as though I really had imagined it all.

INTERVIEWER

You have been to so many places—India, Iran, West Africa, the American Deep South. Are you still drawn to travel?

NAIPAUL

It gets harder, you know. The trouble is that I can't go places without writing about them. I feel I've missed the experience. I once went to Brazil for ten days and didn't write anything. Well, I wrote something about Argentina and the Falklands, but I didn't possess the experience—I didn't work at it. It just flowed through me. It was a waste of my life. I'm not a holiday taker.

INTERVIEWER

Didn't Valéry say that the world exists to be put in a book? Do you agree?

NAIPAUL

Or to be thought about, to be contemplated. Then you enjoy it, then it means something. Otherwise you live like a puppy: woof woof, I need my food now, woof woof.

INTERVIEWER

Your new book, *Beyond Belief*, returns to the subject of Islam, which you also examined in *Among the Believers*. Do you anticipate any trouble from the prickliness of Islam's defenders with the book's publication?

NAIPAUL

People might criticize me, but I am very careful never to criticize a faith or articles of a faith. I am just talking now about the historical and social effects. Of course, all one's books are criticized, which is how it should be. But remember this is not a book of opinion. This goes back to my earlier point about all one's work standing together: in the books of exploration that I have been writing, I've been working toward a form where, instead of the traveler being more important than the people he travels among, the people are important. I write about the people I meet—I write about their experiences and I define the civilization by their experiences. This is a book of personal experiences, so it will be very difficult to fault in the way you said because you can't say that it is maligning anything. I looked at personal experiences and made a pattern. In one way, you might simply say that it is a book of stories. It is a book of tales.

INTERVIEWER

Much in the way of *A Turn in the South* and *A Million Mutinies Now*?

NAIPAUL

Absolutely, yes. This book was a different challenge because I am very particular about not repeating a form, and here there were thirty narratives, which I tried to do differently—each one differently so that the reader would not understand the violation that was being done him. I didn't want the stories to read alike.

INTERVIEWER

Are you drained when you finish a book?

NAIPAUL

Yes, one is drained. These careers are so slow—I write a book, and at the end of it I am so tired. Something is wrong with my eyes; I feel I'm going blind. My fingers are so sore that I wrap them in tape. There are all these physical manifestations of a great labor. Then there is a process of just being nothing—utterly vacant. For the past nine months, really, I've been vacant.

INTERVIEWER

Does something begin to agitate you to get back to writing?

NAIPAUL

I actually find myself being agitated now. I want to get back to my work.

INTERVIEWER

Do you have a new project in mind?

NAIPAUL

I'm unusual in that I have had a long career. Most people from limited backgrounds write one book. I'm a prose writer. A prose book contains many thousands of sentiments, observations, thoughts—it is a lot of work. The pattern for most people is to do a little thing about their own lives. My career has been other. I found more and more to write. If I had the strength, I probably would do more; there is always more to write about. I just don't have the energy, the physical capacity. You know, one can spend so many days now being physically wretched. I'm aging badly. I've given so much to this career for so long. I spend so much time trying to feel well. One becomes worn out by living, by writing, by thinking.

Have you got enough now?

INTERVIEWER

Yes.

NAIPAUL

Do you think I've wasted a bit of myself talking to you?

INTERVIEWER

Not, of course, how I'd put it.

NAIPAUL

You'll cherish it?

INTERVIEWER

You don't like interviews.

NAIPAUL

I don't like them because I think that thoughts are so precious you can talk them away. You can lose them.

Source: http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/1069/the-art-of-fiction-no-154-v-s-naipaul