



BRETT BUSANG

Ah, Amesbury

BUSANG

Amesbury, Massachusetts, was settled in the late 17th-century by hardy souls whose spades were often broken on its rocky soil, but worked it anyway. Over time, other, more suitable occupations sprang into existence. Occupations that have a charmingly archaic sound to them: millstone-grinder, hostler, commission agent, stone-cutter; stamp-collector, glazier, foundry-man, provender specialist. Yet it wasn't until the 19th century that the town found its *métier* and occupied, for a time, a place on the world's stage. The carriage-factories with which it made such inroads are with us today, in the form of condominiums, yoga and artists' studios, and real estate offices. They have the sober dignity of workplaces that were built with no regard for aesthetic niceties, but are paradoxically celebrated for them. The water-source that powered them comes to a head in the small downtown, where it lashes brick and stone with a terrifying vigor. Where it's quiet, ducks and geese float upon its

glassy surface, reflecting the triple-sashed windows from which workmen were afforded visions of cloud-rack and sunshine. It musn't have been a happy place.

It is happier now - at least for some.

When I was there recently, good weather compelled the outdoor activities that grind to a halt after the first big snow. Outdoor people there are outdoors every day. They run with the singular intensity of runners across our land. Or they walk while seeming to do math problems in their heads. They have fine-looking children who are either home-schooled or go to learning academies where they will be individually nurtured. Unlike their working-class counterparts, the women look good. They are attractively thin; their skin-tone could be described as glowing; and they dart in and out of renovated storefronts with discreet little packages they haven't necessarily bought for themselves. Mostly, they're with their children, who scamper about like tadpoles in a small pond. Everywhere you look, they're around you. Obdurately childless friends call these children parasites; gathering at the foot of the town to bite off its toes, these parasitic creatures are, they say, a blight and scourge: diversity-killers and New Economy ragdolls. These friends do not care for this new population trend, which has taken their birthright - which included having no children

at all – from them. Yet such a disgruntled minority can be dismissed; it has no clout and a squeaky little voice which schoolyard activities and child-oriented events easily drown.

Where so many children thrive, adults often drag around, clutching at whatever free time they might be able to manage. But not here in Amesbury. Here parental oppression seems only a now-and-again thing. Running and shopping seem to happen easily, without having to be scheduled days in advance. The men have a capable look about them; the women are juggling experts who've not been worn to a frazzle. They're living advertisements for the notion of women having the best years of their lives when they become young mothers. As they conquer fears their predecessors took for granted, these parenting virtuosos have a handle on their jobs. The women are sure enough of themselves to wear their many hats; the men fool with a bat or baseball glove as they jostle a child forward. They don't seem to resent having their youth stolen from them by the obligations for which their overtired parents were cautionary tales. Left to learn their lessons in a small place, they have discovered that happy medium between selfish pleasure and delighted nurturing.

The working people of the town are so vastly differ-

ent that an inevitable divide occurs between their older, murkier culture and the child-oriented culture that has, in large part, taken it over.

For a moment, however, I want to digress. I want to talk about the town's leading citizen – a long-dead poet who isn't read much today, but colors Amesbury's self-image.

This is John Greenleaf Whittier, whose name appears on streets, bridges, and the occasional product-line. He wrote a comfortingly down-home narrative that struck a chord in the America of the mid-19th century. It was about the charms and perils of living in a sleepy village that was, during wintertime, covered with a snow-blanket that kept its fluffy contours for months on end. Ruts from sleigh and horse would appear, but they would be covered up. The blar of toil might disfigure a godly contour, but subsequent snows would repair it – and send the toiler home until the Spring.

Whittier created, in comely rhymes, a kind of perfect winter, to which the rest of the country could only aspire. Its frosty glitter was more luminous than it was in other places. Its snow-banks exuded less danger than snow-banks did in Vermont or New Hampshire. And, when you took that sleigh-ride, there were no troublesome avalanches or appalling highwaymen. You saw

the plume of smoke from a distant homestead, felt a hearth-nostalgia that shook your body – even as it shivered with the cold – and you aimed the sleigh toward the smoke-plume that was in your heart, if nowhere near a working chimney.

Snow-bound wasn't a great poem, but it got you in the mood for a hot little drink by the stove. And wrapped you in the warmth of its cliché-ridden wonder.

Whittier was a good man. Not only did he celebrate an unpopular season and make it appealing, he was advanced in his views about equality and fraternity. It was through his social network that former slaves were smuggled to freedom. Every small Massachusetts town had a grandfatherly sort of guy – a village chieftain, if you will – who did not preside over much of anything, but was seen as the sort of person who could. If you happened to have a squabble over a name for the baby, you brought the baby to him. If somebody had shot your dog and you wanted satisfaction, you asked him to mete out justice. And if a woman/harlot ceased treading the straight and narrow, you flung her down at his doorstep hoping that he'd cast her out like the faithless strumpet she was. From all reports, Whittier was a Christlike man who would have taken the strumpet in and given her a cup of coffee. And if she showed any aptitude for work, he would have

let her stay in a back room in return for some virtuous house-keeping.

John Greenleaf Whittier probably thought his fellow citizens bigots and bum-sitters, but his fellow citizens prefer the kindly old man to the freethinking radical.

Stranger in a strange land, he made the best of it.

Whittier's good cheer did little to affect the overall mood. In spite of its rolling hills – crowned, in the fall, by the flaming foliage that draws pilgrims from down South, New England makes the average person sad. He or she can't help it. There is a guilt-ridden past to be reckoned with; once guilty, man tends to want to keep it that way. It provides certainty, creates structure, and you can bank on it when there isn't anything else. The puritanical strain that crept into the region covers Amesbury like a shroud. It has gotten into clean-limbed houses, which are boxes with a pitched roof over them. The oldest are punctured with mullioned windows – whose crisscrossing panes keep an angry God inside. Some are painted white, a kind of wishful thinking that could never assuage all that guilt. So many were, and are, painted bilious colors, which include sad-eyed blue and a death-fearing purple. Before I visited New England, I had never seen this kind of purple before. It is very close to eggplant, but lacks its buoyancy. Nor is it brown. And

to call it black would impugn its subtlety. It's the color of repression; the visible exhalation of a guilty soul. It is brimstone in a bottle. It is human history's darkest phase summoned, with a paint-brush, for the eye to contemplate and the mind to worry over.

Nearby Salem is famous for tricking out its women-folk in brazen witch-craft. It got so bad there that some of the lucky survivors moved from Salem Village to higher ground. The town that sprang up is called Danvers and it's as sweet a little village as you'll find anywhere. It has winding lanes, fine-looking trees, and 17th-century houses with casement windows. Danvers evokes the Mother Country – the country that had disgorged an outspoken citizenry that found itself in a bright new land.

Amesbury's working-people are not a shadowy population, but they don't set the tone anymore. The tone is tonier than it was when everybody worked the factories and mills. It is set by the child-bearers I was talking about earlier on. Some of these new folk don't come from Amesbury, but decided, after losing a job in Boston – or finding that a Boston commute wasn't really so bad – to live here because they longed for a place where you didn't have to lock the front door and always knew where your children were. How they figured that Ames-

bury could offer that is somewhat of a mystery. Perhaps a great many moms and dads-to-be came up with the idea at the same time and shouted down all other possibilities

Working-people in Amesbury fill up the chinks and passageways, where you are likely to request draft beer instead of Chardonnay and chain-smoke without the shame aerobically inclined people attach to carbon dioxide. Working-people here are not entrepreneurial. Nor do they go in for food that is strictly healthy. Food that is strictly healthy is too strict. If they serve you something, it doesn't have soy in it. Nor will there be much concern over butterfat – or fatty tissue of any kind. They are proudly obese or worryingly thin. Their face-color ranges from deathly pale to coronary scarlet. The skinny ladies don't often have much in the way of hips. Their faces have the angularity of a hard-edged gable. Occasionally, they seem to sneer, when, in fact, crooked or missing teeth have punched away at their jaws and mouths. When they raise their voices, braying sounds come out. They can move jerkily, just as the men fall to lumbering in their middle years. Their rounder brethren wear the standard fat-lady outfit: sweat-pants tied loosely with a string, a long-sleeved cotton blouse, and running shoes that don't get the workout they were made for. Smoker's coughs are evenly distributed between the two.

Neither smile as they slog off on an errand, but they snap out of it when they meet somebody. They have a lot on their minds and are glad to be hearing about somebody else's problems.

The young have a wildly uncoordinated energy that could go snaking off into drugs; onto a football field; or along the stops and frets of a musical instrument. Like the young everywhere, they've cultivated their own aesthetic. I discern hip-hopolatry in baggy jeans and put-on slouches. But the kids aren't comfortable. Their true allegiance is to heavy-metal – the need for head-banging that can occasionally quiet the soul. They've inherited smoking from their parents, but they're trying to make it cool. Most are sexually conscious and eager to exploit what is inside of their jeans and britches.

There is a sense of resignation among young and old, as if there's not a damned thing they can do about where they are – and where they're most likely going to end up. The young want what's available to the disaffected minds they're not aware of having. Their parents cultivate acceptable substance abuse like cigarettes and alcohol. At forty-five, they look like older people who will have to start slowing down – though they're stronger than they appear to be and probably won't slow down, ever. To imagine them as younger people, you have to

look at the younger people themselves. Sometimes you can see a teenager's fault-lines: a tendency to stand slack; a mouth that frowns easily; hair that is between lustrous and thinning.

It is possibly condescending to enumerate such things, let alone pity them. Perhaps everybody's doing just fine. But when I see the joggers putting on lip-gloss or stowing expensive groceries in an SUV, I'm alternately angry and, like the inveterate smokers and lovers of draft beer, unhappily resigned. Will these two "classes" ever come together? Probably not. And do they need to?

The fitness of the cool set, the mommy and daddy hierarchy, is cultivated. In working-folk, it is broad-muscled and built-in. It comes with the territory and isn't the physical accessory it is among the self-consciously weight-bearing. It is amusing to see a carpenter and a lawyer together. Not that you do very often, but places like the post office are social nexus points that are less rigid here than in Washington, DC. The carpenter stands with a natural-born grace. The lawyer looks at his appointment calendar and says things into an iPhone. A nervous tension radiates from the hard-packed threads of a suit and tie. The guy in the t-shirt that celebrates a rock concert schedule has an equanimity that's rather inspiring. Here's a man who may not be totally at peace

with himself, but he seems to have a shot at it. Whenever work's coming in and the kids are healthy, things are pretty all right. The lawyer does his business distractedly. The carpenter leans against the counter and lets things take their course. When the post office gal fires her questions at him, he answers her briskly and that's that. The lawyer has a second thought and wants stamps. *Never mind. I don't need them after all.* He leaves with the iPhone shoved up against his ear. And he's saying something about subleases, which he doesn't seem to prefer.

I shouldn't try to make things so generic. There are fuzzy boundaries that defy easy distinctions. But for the most part, there is a social divide here that is as conspicuous as it is disturbing. Amesbury once made things for people. Its hierarchy wasn't so complex. You had your workers and the people who managed and supervised them. The town's smallest cemetery, which is wedged between an inactive fire station and a convenience store parking-lot, testifies to the town's old-fashioned make-up – which was a lot more homogenous. There are no showy tombstones, only more or less readable ones. And they are not arranged as carefully as tombstones in stuck-up cemeteries such as the ones I knew in the South. If I could liken it to a living situation, I'd call it “drunken parade dress.” People who have formed a line now stagger

towards one and, once they stop, the line goes in mazy directions. I don't recall any names, but they were all English-sounding. Unpretentious, right-angled names that are easily forgotten because you've heard so many like them. Scions must live in the town; on military holidays, American flags are planted on the gravesites of veterans. The place is well-mown, if not orderly. Bits of sabotaged or accidentally broken headstones have been piled up, here and there, against monuments they half-obliterate. The writing on the oldest is remarkably clear. The stone-cutter's gouge goes to a critical depth; when the sunlight hits it, its characters ring out. A permanent stroke made by a person without frivolous intentions. Centuries of rain and snow won't wear it down; like it or not, it's here for the ages. Sometimes the stone-cutter bothers to sign his name, as on a painting. Mostly, however, you get the decedent's name, birth and death-dates, and a bit of poetry. Or a didactic sentiment that tells the living what to do, should the living care to be instructed.

Working-class folk are guarded, but they actually want to help – in part, because they often make a living that way; and in part because it beats doing nothing. The new guard consumes, the old provides services.

For a town of its size, there are a lot of haulers and movers in Amesbury. It's as if every piece of junk must,

like a dead body, have a final resting place - and there must be minions to ensure it. Here in Washington, you give your old stuff away. The rest the sanitation people will get. It is not so cut-and-dried in Amesbury. You put something out and people notice. Eventually, somebody will come by in a truck and offer to move it. It seems an informal transaction, but it is this guy's business. We who deal with ephemeral things don't relate to the heft of a mattress or the earthbound quality of a writing-desk. But these guys do. And they roam the village in search of fresh opportunities to size the stuff up, settle it inside of a truck, and move it to an official dumpsite, where the lot of it is weighed, translated into a kind of bill of lading, and paid off.

I worked with such a man for a couple of days and concluded that the job had room for a multiplicity of temperaments and personalities. He charged a lot of money and worked quickly, if haphazardly. I had to keep him on track, not by means of orders and commands - which are beyond me - but by means of action verbs that escalated the attack and pulled the job along. He saw the Big Picture; I got him to root among the Smaller Things big picture guys leave out. And since he was the one being paid for the job and not I, it seemed reasonable to make sure that he did it. He wasn't a lazy man. His wiry

frame and quick-to-move approach had "hard-working guy" written all over it. He just wasn't detail-oriented. After he slammed around the place and got the heavy stuff settled in his truck, his mind started to wander. It was a good mind, just not a conventional one. He is why one should not generalize about working-people. He had the austere intelligent look of an old preacher: the sort of guy who can move a moral conundrum to higher ground. The sort of guy who exudes confidence and mystery. The sort of guy who can bury you not only by the book, but with his bare hands.

The only time I was ever in a Wal-Mart was in Amesbury. I went there because the specialty store that was my first choice was closed. After realizing that I would never find anything on my own, I asked a skinny lady to find me the carrier I had decided I needed for a stray-cat project. She considered my question with a peculiar gravity, as if it had suddenly taken precedence over all other thoughts. I was impressed with her approach to problem-solving. She saw something that needed to be done and rushed, with a keen sense of service, to an area that had contained cat carriers at one time, but had been re-stocked with other things. When she concluded that there were no cat-carriers in sight, she ran over to a fellow worker and asked him where we might find one.

He gave her a specific location and she went right to it. “Here’s your carrier,” she said. “I’m sorry it took so long to find it.” Then she went back to what she was doing, somewhere in the next county, where I had originally found her.

I thought I would write Wal-Mart and tell its managers what gemlike service I had been rendered. But, as I walked my purchase to the cashier-station, I decided not to. Something in the woman’s sense of purpose deflected me. Or maybe it was the embarrassed head-turn with which she might acknowledge my attempt to single her out. Wal-Mart workers do not make a living wage. And yet she had done everything in her power to find the item I needed and not make me wait. Why such devotion to a job women who conduct energy workshops would not deign to take? Did she know what an ordinary/extraordinary thing she had done? Here in Washington, service-people are so surreally rude that I derive a morbid satisfaction from watching them. As they crash through previously unbreached barriers of incivility, they achieve a kind of negative stature – a heroism based on orneriness alone. Yet this Wal-Mart lady had nothing but her integrity and I had a feeling that she didn’t want that disturbed.

Or perhaps I was over-thinking it. Why wouldn’t

she be pleased with a commendation that might lead to a small raise? Or a bump in status? Or just a good little feeling for a while?

I thought of going back in, but was already in my car. I’m clearly not the all-out humanitarian I tell myself I ought to be. Or wish I could be as I opt into a daily neutrality that is often too habitual to challenge.

I would like to think that John Greenleaf Whittier would have told management about this lady’s prowess. And insist that it honor the public service she had rendered without any thought of glory. Whittier would have adjusted his beard, spoken, with a strangely fluty voice, and Wal-Mart, like all Whittier opponents, would have caved in and done the right thing. Here in a place that is now divided, the Great Man would have, through a symbolic gesture, united past and present; rich and poor; silkily indifferent and privately pissed-off. It’s why every town needs an icon. He or she raises the bar, adds luster, and gives everybody a sense of being special.