

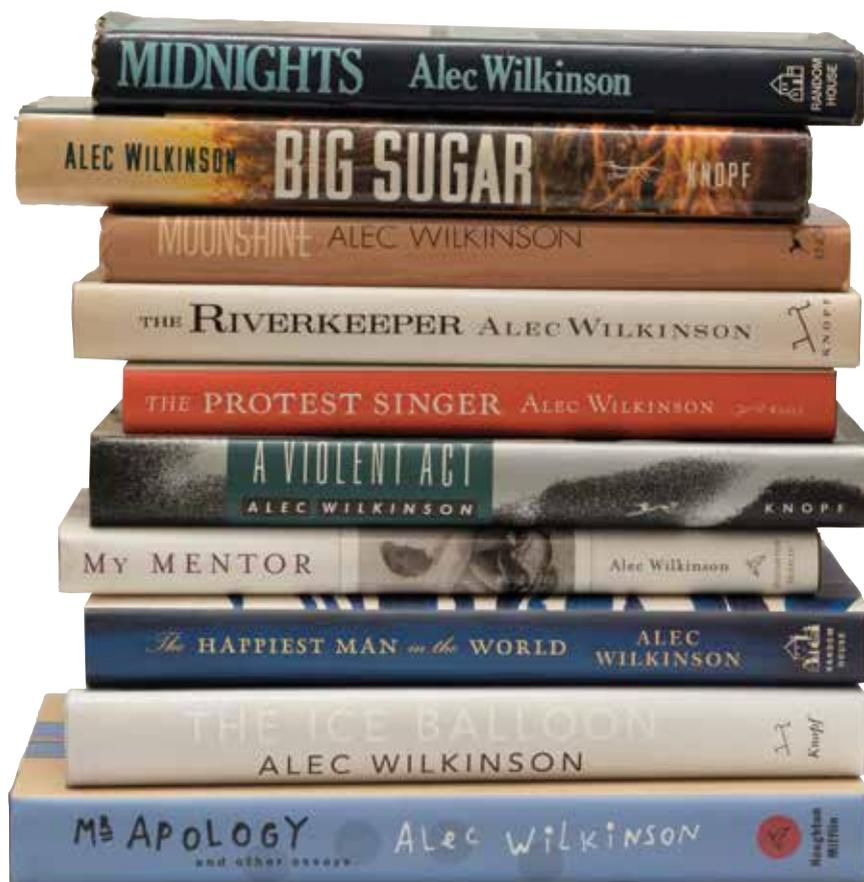
COVER FEATURE



# Alec Wilkinson and the Poetry of Witness

BY CHRISTOPHER BUSA

ALEC WILKINSON TOLD ME PLAINLY in a phone conversation this spring, “I think of myself as a descriptive writer, because I don’t think writing divides between fiction and nonfiction.” In this remark, Wilkinson—the author of ten books of nonfiction and numerous essays, and a staff writer at the *New Yorker* since 1980—opens up another dimension of understanding in the author’s evolution as an imaginative writer, and offers fresh ways to regard the depth of poetry possible in nonfiction writing. The poetic imagination is a mental structure with its own internal logic, “not truth,” Aristotle said, “but something like truth.”



(FACING PAGE) PHOTO BY SARA BARRETT



PHOTO BY SARA BARRETT

Wilkinson by the Hudson River in a shoot for *Vanity Fair* on the occasion of the publication of the *The Riverkeeper*, 1991

Wilkinson told me, “I define descriptive writing about the world in the way I would compare figurative painting to abstract painting. In that sense, I think of myself as a figurative writer. What Bruce Chatwin or Joseph Mitchell or Isak Dinesen or Rebecca West achieves, you don’t call that Non-Anything.”

I RECALL READING a passage in Wilkinson’s chronicle of men who live by rivers or venture onto oceans, *The Riverkeeper*, when it was first published in 1991. Here, I found a perfect intersection between fact and fiction; I was entranced by the rough music in the voice of a veteran Provincetown fisherman, Raymond Duarte, whose legendary family I had known of when I went to Provincetown High School, way back. The monologue extended for two thousand words, in compelling, measured paragraphs, offering dramatic glimpses of the migrations of Portuguese and Azorean fishermen to the port of Provincetown. In this passage, Duarte describes working with his father:

“I’ve worked with him in a hundred-and-ten-mile-an-hour breeze. The wind was off the land,

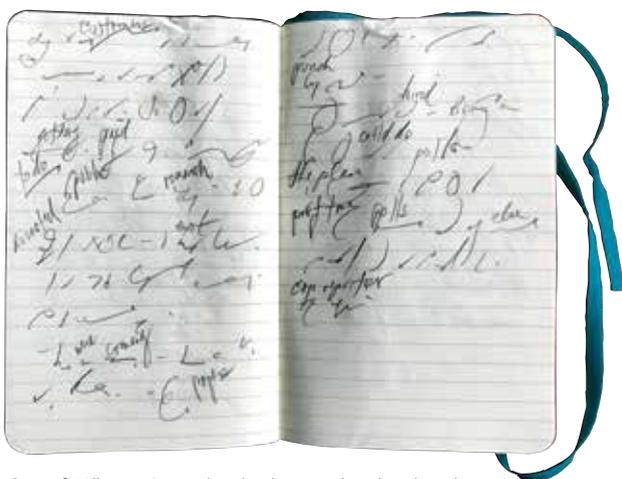
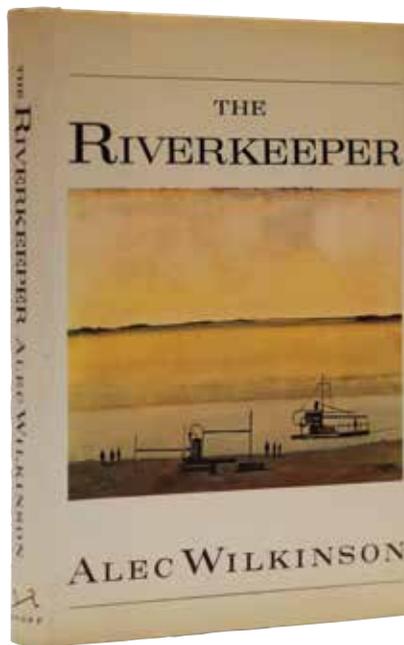
and we went in close to the beach to anchor. We put out two anchors and they didn’t hold, so he decided to let out the nets—if we couldn’t anchor up, then we’d fish. The sand was blowing off the beach and it felt like nails. We had a helicopter from the Coast Guard come over the top of us and they opened up their door and held out a big sign and it said ‘Hurricane,’ clear as a bell you could read it, and my father said, ‘What do they want?’ and I said, ‘They said it’s a hurricane,’ and he said, ‘Well, I know that.’”

The sinewy strength in the voice of a seasoned Provincetown fisherman, so vivid, so fully present, jolted my recollection that the British artist J. M. W. Turner—who believed that to paint a storm, the artist had to experience the storm—had himself strapped to the mast of a sturdy ship, discovering how to paint the inner turbulence of the storm itself, rather than view it, safely from shore, as an impersonal witness. This is a reporter’s impulse—not the hearing about, but the sharing of embedded experience. Wilkinson gets to the core of a story, often traveling to various regions of the earth and experiencing the world of his subjects firsthand.

There is the further fact that Wilkinson captures, routinely, such long swatches of speech *without* the use of a tape recorder. Instead, he has developed a type of shorthand, recording at the speed of rapid banter, perhaps 160 words a minute. Rather than distracting him, notetaking seems to amplify his attention.

Wilkinson paraphrases the point of view of his subject, faithfully echoing the idiom and cadence of the person being interviewed. As I read the early sections of his books, I found myself searching for the quotation marks indicating who was speaking. Concern about my confusion would abate as I began to see patterns weaving sinuously throughout the narrative, and I would feel an Orwellian transparency and seamlessness of empathy between author and interrogee. Wilkinson picks up telltale vocabulary, rhythms, idiosyncratic locutions, and technical terms, infusing into the mind of the reader a fully realized local habitation. Wilkinson employs only a light use of the “I,” enough to be useful in orienting the reader as to who is telling the story.

His narratives unfold with interweaving plot connections. His writing melds authenticity of detail with the poetic aptness of personal witness. He often offers telling first impressions, which are later illuminated with a dazzle of expertise and startling insights. His ten books to date cover an impressive and eclectic array of topics, including police and detective work, the manufacture of illegal whiskey, how to cut sugarcane, sailing across the Atlantic Ocean, traveling among the islands of Alaska’s southwestern peninsula, and a fascinating attempt to reach the North Pole in a hot-air balloon. A former rock-and-roll musician, Wilkinson also wrote a book about a musical legend, Pete Seeger. For the most part, however, he prefers to practice an intellectual “spelunking,” exploring deep in the psyches of less celebrated subjects, discovering the character of people on the periphery of society. Though I would not call them ordinary people, since Wilkinson, by virtue of his attention, makes the worlds of everyone he profiles seem extraordinary.



One of Wilkinson’s notebooks showing his shorthand

IF THE FIRST TASK of a writer is to create the person who will do the writing, Wilkinson came of age after he graduated from Bennington College in 1975. “Bennington,” Wilkinson has said, “is essentially an art school.” His senior thesis was an evening-long concert in ten parts. Wilkinson, as

presenter, played the guitar and mandolin, and performed with about twenty other vocalists and musicians. Following graduation, he spent time at his family's summer home in Wellfleet, where his family had roots in the town that extended beyond summer holidays. Following his retirement at age sixty-two, Wilkinson's father purchased the Kendall Art Gallery in Wellfleet. Utilizing his experience as the art director of *Woman's Day* magazine, he persuaded all the galleries in Wellfleet to band together and place ads in the Wellfleet Chamber of Commerce—and elsewhere, including *Provincetown Arts*—coming up with the advertising slogan used today: “Wellfleet: The Art Gallery Town.”

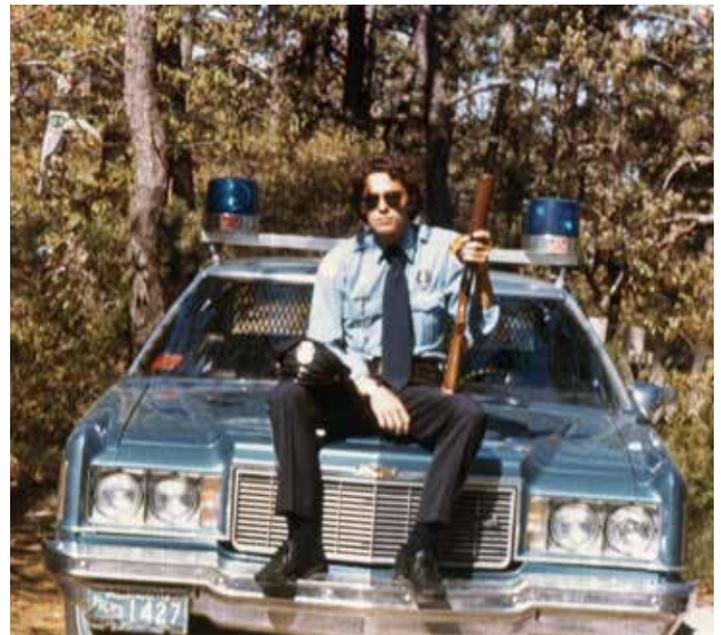
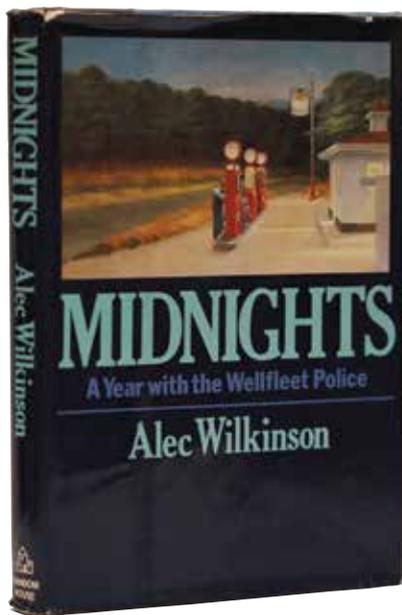
After that summer idyll, Wilkinson sought gainful employment and was invited to join the Wellfleet Police Department, the rookie among nine officers. Wilkinson had never before lived in Wellfleet during the “off-season,” when two thousand people sparsely dwell in scattered pockets, many of them affected financially and emotionally by living in such isolation. He kept daily notes, investigating how to investigate, making many rookie errors, which, sometimes comically, led to portals of discovery. The book he eventually published,

*Midnights: A Year with the Wellfleet Police* (1982), took its title from his most frequent shift: eight in the evening to four in the morning, a nocturnal period when most people are asleep, dreaming. Half the time he patrolled in the cruiser, the other half on foot along Main Street, failing to make friends with the teenagers who taunted him when questioned about drinking alcohol. He carried a .38 Smith and Wesson. Never used.

To save money, the police department opted not to send Wilkinson to



(above and below) Wilkinson as a policeman in Wellfleet, 1976

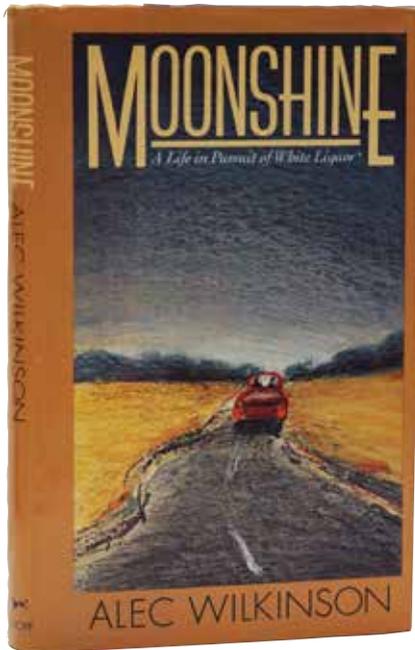


*What I like best* about writing and reading fiction is that the best fiction draws me into intimacy with characters and situations I'm inclined to avoid, or to assume I have no interest in. Alec Wilkinson's nonfiction similarly draws me into intimacy with such characters and situations; his *New Yorker* profiles of Yitang “Tom” Zhang, the Chinese-born American mathematician, and of the poet Edward Hirsch—who wrote a book-length, elegiac poem about the loss of his son—are two such cases. I spent five years in a four-year boarding school because of what a struggle math was for me—I truly hate math—yet I was drawn to Zhang's patience, even his contentment, with the long haul. I was already a fiction writer and a father in my early twenties; the death of children is an obsession of mine—one I am compelled to write about, one I never read about; yet Wilkinson made the agony of Edward Hirsch's elegy for his son (what Hirsch calls “the work of mourning”) unpreventable reading.

—John Irving

*It is a special pleasure* to celebrate the work of my friend Alec Wilkinson, who is one of our finest literary journalists, a nonfiction writer with a spare, subtle, lucid, and incisive style. He has a tremendous eye for the poetry of fact—the luminous detail, the revealing moment—and a novelist’s gift for telling a riveting story. His artistry is all the more amazing since it so often seems to be invisible. I love all ten of his books, but I believe he has written at least two masterpieces, one of sorrow, one of joy. He should enter the canon of American literature with *A Violent Act*, a stunning documentary about the madness and consequences of violence, and *The Happiest Man in the World*, a gleeful portrait of a seventy-four-year-old migratory soul. He is a writer of scrupulous accuracy, understated eloquence, and deep compassion.

—Edward Hirsch



the police academy; he was trained on the job, with some disastrous mishaps, such as shearing the lights and sirens from the roof of the cruiser by driving in the woods on a dirt road pocked with tire-swallowing potholes. Another humorous anecdote involves a boat from South America, *The Mischief*, that had slipped into the harbor with a cargo of marijuana. Wilkinson’s quick ludicrous glimpses of the chase that results and the smugglers’ capture is reminiscent of a scene

from the Keystone Cops.

There are many quick sketches of characters, especially fellow officers. Occasionally, Wilkinson attended training workshops, and he was captivated by one state trooper, an expert on domestic calls, who described the particularly colorful language used by a woman he arrested: “She used such bitter profanity I thought it would leave cavities in her teeth.”

Charlie Valli, heavily muscled, “wore [his hair] cropped on the sides and a little longer on top, and parted it precisely. He had a cowlick he disciplined with a tonic that left his hair stiff. Most of the time his hair looked like that of a child just returned from the barber. That and the asperity of his face made a startling combination, like an old man wearing a wig.” This is typical of a Wilkinson paragraph, in which every fact has a metaphoric likeness, animating facts with the feelings of the experiencer, revealed in the very telling. Facts: hair, short on sides, long on top, cowlick, stiff, startling combination. Metaphor: wig.

WHILE *MIDNIGHTS* WAS the first-person account of a novice policeman, Wilkinson’s second book, *Moonshine: A Life in Pursuit of White Liquor* (1985), expands on the theme of law enforcement by focusing on the work of Garland Bunting, an Alcoholic Beverage Control officer for

Halifax County, on the coastal plain of North Carolina, and a key consultant with the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms. Illegal liquor is not taxed, so all makers of moonshine are guilty of tax evasion.

As in his first book, Wilkinson mesmerizes us with a combination of colorful language and factual detail. While describing his travels with Garland, Wilkinson also offers useful historical snippets about how moonshine first came to be made by Irish and Scottish immigrants, the types of white liquor, the methods of distilling, bottling, selling, and pricing, and a simple test for alcohol content.

Garland Bunting finds ingenious ways to catch criminals, sometimes adopting unique disguises, which are accompanied by his colorful patter. This “confusion technique” seems to place his interrogees into an almost trance-like state:

In the company of a bootlegger, Garland talks constantly because he feels that it distracts the other man from thinking about who he is, and what he’s up to. “I let him think when I’m gone,” he says. He has developed a kind of split attention that allows one part of his mind to improvise a monologue, while another carries forth his intention. When he doesn’t have anything to say that pertains to the transaction at hand, he talks a random streak of nonsensical, scurrilous, imaginative, blustery, and occasionally poetic patter he calls “trash.” . . . An example of trash is,

“I asked my girl just the week before last  
Don’t you shim-sham-shimmy just a little too fast?”



Wilkinson with Garland Bunting, the subject of *Moonshine*, and Colleen Bunting, 1985

PHOTO BY SAFA BARRETT



In Florida, 1988, Wilkinson gathering information for his book *Big Sugar*



Wilkinson with Nathan Nelson, a sugarcane cutter

PHOTOS BY SARA BARRETT

To trail a suspect by car, Garland typically wears a disguise, a mustache or a blond wig with sunglasses. Here are Garland's thoughts about working undercover:

"I'd wear overalls in some sections and drive my old beat-up piece of pickup truck that the average person wouldn't drive. If it was a rural town, I'd make like a farmer, or a fox hunter, or a coon hunter, whatever was around. If a man was selling from his house, I'd try to meet him first at a store. If it was at a garage, I'd borrow some tools. I *never* went into a place cold-turkey and said, 'Hey, man, where can I buy a drink?'"

In court, Garland wins most of his cases, and wins the praise of many attorneys:

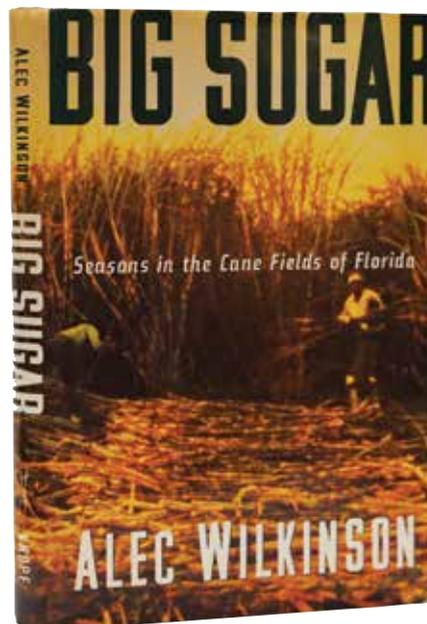
"Garland's always one step ahead, and it makes it pretty difficult to fight him."

"I'd rather sit back and listen to Garland talk than go to the bank."

"Garland can change from one kind of person to the other like you can snap your fingers."

At the end of long days spent side by side with Garland, Wilkinson said, "By the time I left him at night my head would be swimming with stories. I'd be drunk on stories."

IF YOU WANT TO LEARN how to make liquor, *Moonshine* is a primer. If you want to learn how to survive a season of cutting sugarcane, *Big Sugar: Seasons in the Cane Fields of Florida* (1989) is your bible. Here, Wilkinson continues to show an inclination to seek out situations that are extreme, places that would not be visited, or even thought about, by a typical *New Yorker* reader. He resisted the collusion between the publishing and entertainment worlds that a previous *New Yorker* editor, Tina Brown, believed would contribute synergetic buzz for her pages. Rather than interview traditional celebrities for conventional profiles, he likes to explore the crevices and chinks and wrinkles in the ordinary social fabric. He seeks out people



with unusual character and specific expertise and examines their cultural context, artifacts, and customs as professionally as a trained ethnologist, taking notes, assembling data, and interpreting his findings in the light of expert research. His credentials as a *New Yorker* journalist have afforded him the opportunity to access official channels, and his own past fair dealings with the sensitive stories of others show in the confident and respectful way he approaches the people he profiles.

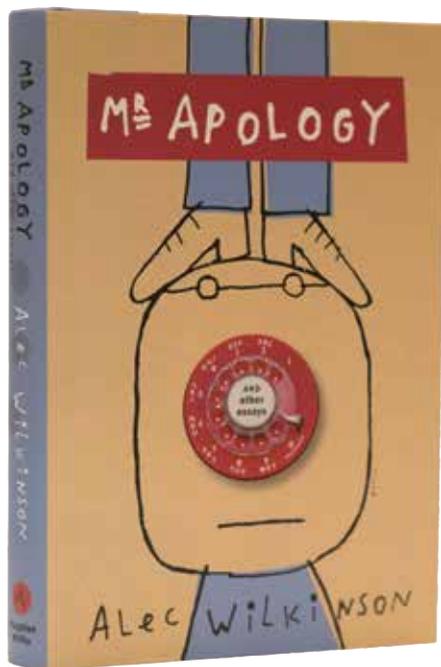
Huge, flat fields rim the shores of Lake Okeechobee, whose rich soil recedes landward into the dry and sandy soil necessary to grow the different varieties of cane. Wilkinson writes of the region, "The skies are so large that several kinds of weather sometimes take place in them at once."

The cutters, largely seasonal workers from the West Indies, the majority Jamaican, live in camps maintained by the growers; the big growers, such as US Sugar Corporation and Sugar Cane Growers Cooperative of Florida, shelter and feed thousands of cutters, who work from dawn to dusk. Wilkinson observes the physiques of the cutters: "As a rule they are tall and long-limbed. They walk like dancers, and they have a taut, steely look to their arms and backs and shoulders and legs, as if they were made from wires and pulleys, as if they were designed for the task." The vigor of working all day seems to induce an automatist trance of concentrated rhythm: "He must put his mind on speed and a rhythm that consumes the least of his energy.

Letting his mind drift to the question of whether the man who sells him bottled gas for his stove is knocking at his door with a gift may mean experiencing the sudden sight of his blood."

Wilkinson obtained an introduction to a man known simply as Caveman. He was a tractor driver for one of the growers and agreed to take Wilkinson out into the fields and introduce him to some of the cutters, plus drive him around to some of the after-hours gathering spots so he could meet cutters away from work. Wilkinson's artful narration looks at each scene from many angles and through a variety of lenses, from distant statistics to up-close-and-personal encounters. This is an example of the techniques employed by contemporary journalists who use original sources and eyewitness accounts to write about lived experience.

Here it is worth noting a similarity in the research techniques of Wilkinson and of Sebastian Junger, best-selling author of *The Perfect Storm*, an account of a New England fishing vessel that was



swallowed up by the sea. Junger was not on the boat when the fishermen drowned, but he is still able to evoke the drama of the scene in an unforgettable way. Regarding research, Wilkinson remarked, “Records created for one purpose, such as documenting the testimony of people who had survived a suicide attempt, can be used for an imaginative purpose they were not intended to convey. It’s almost a technique of collage, and it’s something I learned from Junger.”

Wilkinson does not so much “go undercover” on assignment as insert himself, in the manner of a civilian war correspondent in a non-combative role at the front of the action. He is a participant who is able to give a firsthand description of events. Sometimes, when a fire is set to burn a field of sugarcane—consuming the leaves and tops, in preparation for harvest—there is the appearance of a natural catastrophe. Wilkinson describes the scene: “In the distance they look like disasters, like air strikes, like war.”

IN *A VIOLENT ACT* (1993), Wilkinson explores a dark and tragic scenario, writing with spare, surgical precision about a killer who shot his parole officer in Indianapolis outside a derelict house on September 22, 1986. For one month, following his release from prison, Mike Wayne Jackson lived in a house with no running water or electricity, sleeping on straw in an upstairs room. Then early one morning, as his parole officer, Tom Gahl, approached the house, Jackson fired his shotgun and killed the man. While driving away from the scene, Jackson sprayed his face and beard with silver paint.

This single detail resonates throughout the book. For ten days, as he was hunted by the FBI, Jackson became like a ghost, leaving no traces. After a futile week of searching, officials called in a quasi-mystical tracker, who had the ability to see the smallest evidence of an animal: “Perhaps it will turn over a dry leaf, which will be darker on the side that had been facing the ground, or bend a blade of grass, or leave behind a broken twig.” They finally found Jackson in the hayloft of an isolated barn. Surrounded, Jackson shot himself in the mouth, just as agents stormed the doors. Thinking Jackson was shooting at them, they ran out, regrouped, and devised a periscope by attaching mirrors to the ends of long pipes. One man noticed blood seeping through the floorboards of the loft, and in the mirror held above him he saw Jackson’s bloodied face, gaunt with weight loss, the silver paint gone.

This beautifully orchestrated presentation of the centripetal power of a violent act opens outward through the voices of the loved

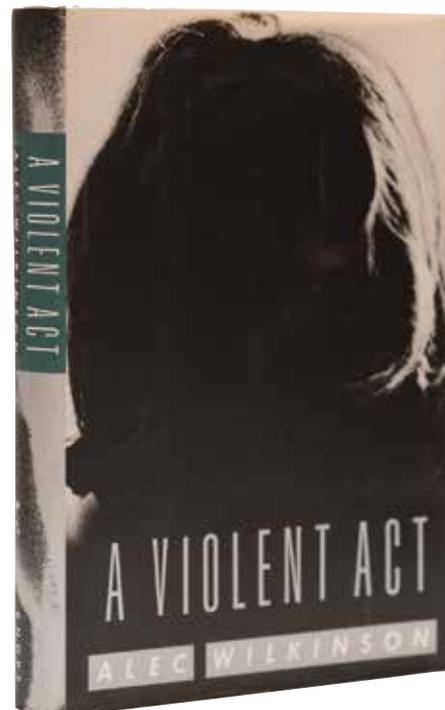
ones of both murderer and victim. In one scene, the mother of the murderer comes to visit the wife of the victim, showing pictures of her son to the sons of the murdered man. Wilkinson consistently sees the subject of his story through the eyes and perspectives of his subjects, his witnesses. In doing so, he makes his words shine with an economy of extremity, a documentary “poetry of witness,” to use the term Carolyn Forché offers as the authentic alternative to personal and political poetry.

Wilkinson chooses not to enter the mind of the psychopath who is the focus of his report, but every line on every page is drawing a vivid picture. The effects of the violent act resonate and radiate throughout the book, touching everyone, leaving an indelible stain. A woman who lives in the town where the murder took place describes this feeling: “When you live in a small town and you know the policeman, and the mortician, and the man who picked up the body, you keep having associations in your mind. You see the location. And after, I don’t think you ever feel the same way about things again.”

OF THE TWENTY-ONE short pieces collected in *Mr. Apology and Other Essays* (2003), most were previously published in the *New Yorker*. I’ll discuss three. The first is a stellar in-depth profile of singer and songwriter Paul Simon, “The Gift,” rich with insights about the man and his work. The author was a long-haired, guitar-playing rock musician before determining that he would be better challenged learning how to be a writer. Again, Wilkinson takes us into a new world, one that he can describe with a depth and clarity that comes with his firsthand understanding.

Wilkinson traveled with Simon to Memphis to meet Joseph Shabalala, the leader of Ladysmith Black Mambazo, the Zulu singing group that appears on Simon’s 1986 album *Graceland*. Wilkinson writes:

Shabalala had brought a tape of South African women singing traditional farm music, without accompaniment. . . . Instead of progressing in the stately manner of a Protestant hymn, it advanced like a spiritual, with hesitations in the phrasing and silences between the verses. Six or eight women took part. Their voices were pure and unadorned, and the singing was deeply felt. The men’s voices entered unexpectedly after what I took to be the first verse, answering the women’s, and the contrast between the two registers and textures was thrilling.



Wilkinson witnessed several rehearsals, reporting:

[H]e would address one of the horn players: “You don’t have to play the whole phrase. Leave out notes. It’s that thing of tricking the ear into hearing what’s not there.” Or say to a keyboard player, “Drop two notes now and then. Play the shadow of it, so that we don’t get too accustomed to it.” Or tell the saxophone player, “Growl it, but stick it into the blend. Let’s see if it works,” and when the horn player did what Simon wanted Simon shrugged and said, “Too staccato. Lazy it up.”



THE TITLE ESSAY, “Mr. Apology,” focuses on an “apology line” set up in 1980 via posters that were placed on buildings in Manhattan:

ATTENTION  
AMATEURS, PROFESSIONALS,  
CRIMINALS . . .  
GET YOUR MISDEEDS OFF YOUR CHEST!  
CALL APOLOGY (212) 255-2748

Mr. Apology’s plan was to collect confessions until he had enough to present them as a performance art piece—which he did at the New Museum in SoHo in 1981. He came to an understanding that a person, in apologizing, is “making an attempt to turn his life into a moral tale . . . a beginning, a middle, and an end; I did this, I learned this, and the moral is this. A confession becomes a story.”

One caller, “Jumpin’ Jim,” a nervous twenty-three-year-old living with his nagging mother, gives a convoluted confession, claiming he had smothered his mother with a pillow. Though Mr. Apology actually speaks on the phone with Jim’s mother, the man keeps insisting she is dead:

“You can doubt it, whatever you want. I’m going to show you proof, and that’s it. You’re *assuming* she’s my mother. You’re assuming from what somebody told you.” . . .

“I’m assuming from my conversation with her.”

“Well, you had a very *short* and brief conversation with the woman. You had a very *long* conversation with me. She tells you one thing, and suddenly it’s the truth?”

“Well, why don’t you put her on the line and I’ll ask her.”

“What’s the *point*? You’re calling to talk to *me*.” . . .

“Well, last night I was transcribing some of our second conversation, and I was totally convinced that what you were telling me was true, so I think there is an *emotional* truth there. There’s something really true about it, but it might be a very strong fantasy.” . . .

“To me a fantasy is something nice. . . . You’re saying this is my *fantasy*? To kill my mother? That’s not a fantasy, that’s a *nightmare*.”



A THIRD, UTTERLY DIFFERENT, equally remarkable profile, “Conversations with a Killer,” focuses on John Wayne Gacy, who was convicted in 1980 of killing thirty-three boys in Chicago and burying many of them in a crawl space under his house. Wilkinson and Gacy engaged in a week of conversations, several lasting five or six hours, in a guarded room in a prison in Illinois. Seasoned by working with subjects both hostile and cooperative, gaining trust following scrutiny, Wilkinson was conscious not to trespass on the dignity of a killer when he was in a cage with him. He simply tried to shine some understanding onto Gacy’s pathological obsession with defending his innocence.

In entering this conversation with a person possessing a sociopathic lack of guilt, Wilkinson had to make adjustments in how he listened to the long, rambling thinking of a polished liar. The safety of the cell

**Alec Wilkinson** is one of the best writers of nonfiction working today and his books will be read for a long time. He writes about subjects no one else sees—a revenue officer in North Carolina, sugarcane cutters in Florida, a man who crosses the Atlantic in a boat made of trash—and shows the beauty and excitement in them. Wilkinson’s mentor, William Maxwell, once said that there is great meaning to be found in what actually happened, if you look hard enough. Wilkinson has an ineffable ability to get at that meaning, which, when expressed, often approaches poetry. I am a great admirer of the simplicity of his sentences. They expand and echo in the mind.

Because these assertions seem to call for examples, I’ll quote a short paragraph taken almost at random from *Moonshine: A Life in Pursuit of White Liquor*, his book about the revenue officer. The paragraph describes the town where the book’s subject, Garland Bunting, lives:

I visited Garland several times and came to feel an attachment for Scotland Neck. It is a town of three thousand inhabitants. It has two weekly newspapers and two grass-strip airports. All its neon signs work. Highway 258 runs through the center, is the main street, and is very soon running through farmland again. The fields are flat and edged by swamps and woods and windrow stands of trees. The woods are sometimes so distant that they have the remote, secret-keeping look of a coastline. When you drive by them at speed, the crop rows in between spin like spokes on a turning wheel.

Note how the town’s signs somehow light up simultaneously in the sentence, “All its neon signs work.” In the phrase “the remote, secret-keeping look of a coastline” we hear a sinister note of crime, of piracy. And the turning wheel sets the whole description spinning in the mind. The magic in this paragraph is amazing and abundant; writing of this quality appears everywhere in Wilkinson’s work.

—Ian Frazier

*To my mind*, reading a certain kind of clear, trenchant, humane prose is inextricably linked to thoughts about Alec Wilkinson, and his long career as perhaps the finest writer of nonfiction prose we have. Alec is a writer's writer. By that I mean a writer whose mastery goes without saying, and indeed, it goes without saying by him—his sentences never show off. Their quiet effects are beyond virtuosity. He is interested in the offbeat, the quixotic, the marginal, and the lost cause, all of which are imbued by his careful attention with wry, Chekhovian grace.

For me, too, Alec and his work are inextricable from the Cape. His first book, *Midnights*, published in 1982, was about a year working for the Wellfleet Police Department. It's a marvelous, funny book. And there's something there, at the start, of the writer who likes a good story, is on the lookout for detail, alert to atmosphere—moonlit nights, pine needles underfoot, the smell of low tide—and to people, who, from first to last, are the subject of tenderness and care.

One of my favorite passages of Alec's is from his piece "The Crossing," which later came out as a book, *The Happiest Man in the World* (2007). A good deal of it—more than the protagonists may have liked—takes place in Provincetown, where Poppa Neutrino, whom readers of this magazine may remember, set off on a homemade raft with the aim of crossing the Atlantic. He writes:

Boats float because water can't get into them. Water invading a raft built with foam is a matter of indifference. Foam floats whether it is wet or dry. Water can come and go, except your feet get wet. "If a raft is unable to sink," Neutrino says, "I only had to make sure that it stayed right side up and did not come apart." A heavy sea can batter a boat or a raft to pieces—the wood splinters, the screws and nails are torn from their shafts. Neutrino drilled holes every two feet in the hull and the cabins of his raft. He fed rope through each hole, then knotted it and ran it through the next hole, so that when he was finished the raft was woven together like a basket. A structure held together by screws and glue and nails is rigid. A basket is supple. Even if all the carpentry failed, he believed that the raft would remain intact.

"Where did I get this notion? I have no idea," Neutrino says. "From the cornucopia of my mind. Somebody put it in there a long time ago, and it came out in this way."

Writing about how something is made is one of the hardest things to do. In this passage, the prose is itself the basket that floats the reader along with Neutrino. It suspends our disbelief. A review in the *Guardian*, which cites "the astonishing acuity and elegance" of Wilkinson's writing, goes on to quote from the book:

"I wouldn't suggest that anyone regard Neutrino as a model. It wouldn't be sensible," Wilkinson writes with characteristic understatement. "But he has a seeker's belief that deprivation can bring about a state of receptivity, an awareness, in which a person obtains access to territory that lies at the outermost boundaries of what we are familiar with, with what we accept as ourselves."

That territory at the outermost boundaries is what I think has interested Wilkinson; that place of the unsaid, Auden's "Land of Unlikeness." One of the things he likes to do is to bodysurf on the back shore, waiting for and catching the wave. He's good at it, and he taught my children how to do it. Since I began writing prose, Alec has always been a model for me of consummate intelligence, a writer who by getting to the heart of the matter defines what the matter is.

—Cynthia Zarin

allowed an up-close-and-personal encounter with the mind of a killer. Psychologically, this was dangerous territory:

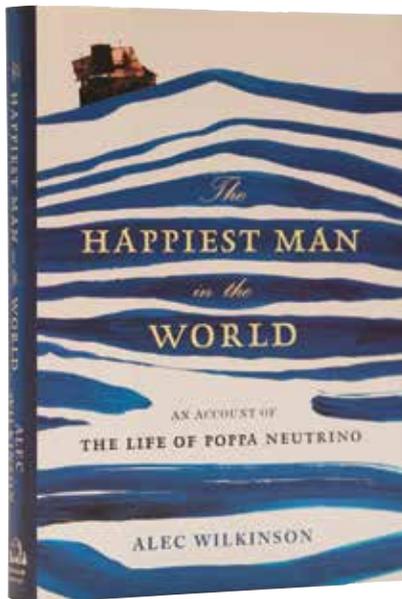
Visiting Gacy is like spending time with a person who is pretending to like you in order to separate you, violently, if necessary, from something you possess. . . . I often had the feeling that he was like an actor who had created a role and polished it so carefully that he had become the role and the role had become him. . . . In support of his innocence, he often says things that are deranged in their logic, but he says them so calmly that he appears to be rational and reasonable.

Gacy wrote a manuscript in which he described others as the murderers. In the same vein, when Gacy and Wilkinson spoke, Gacy would begin speaking of himself in the third person: “Gacy went out of town,” he said. “When did Gacy leave? Gacy generally went out of town on a Sunday.”

Wilkinson, near the end, asked Gacy a question:

“What do you think of the people who committed these murders?”  
 “I can’t even begin to fathom how they thought,” he said. “Even to try to think about how they could do something like this is completely foreign to me.”

WILKINSON’S EIGHTH book, *The Happiest Man in the World: An Account of the Life of Poppa Neutrino* (2007), functions as a deeply researched biography of



a singular man, and has an added authority because the author is a firsthand witness of the events, not for a week, but for many months. He details with remarkable sympathy the story of a man who, along with his willing family, accepted voluntary poverty because it offered the gift of freedom of travel, fresh encounters, challenging adventures. All of Poppa’s resources are used to build and sail a raft made of timbers salvaged from the New York waterfront and Styrofoam floats banded together with ropes and wire. With parachutes functioning as sails, the outlandish

contraption could be swamped but would not sink.

Poppa Neutrino, his wife, and an extended family group that included five children formed a family band, singing and playing music on sunny, calm days in transit, as they sailed during hurricane season across the world’s most treacherous ocean. Wilkinson’s observations about the captain’s character are astute:

Picaresque feebly describes his exploits. For companions in literature I think of Tom Jones, Don Quixote, and a few of the figures who wander the desert in the Old Testament. I am aware that some readers will feel superior to him, or look down occasionally on how he has behaved; surely that is easy to do, but I do not believe that someone is a proper subject, or a laudable figure, only if he has made a lot of money or been a politician, an actor, a freakish public figure, or a criminal. The eccentrics, the odds beaters, the benign connivers, the showmen, the pilgrims, and the raffish self-glorifiers also have their place in the pageant. Nor is it along the periphery.



Wilkinson with David Pearlman, who called himself Poppa Neutrino and is the subject of *The Happiest Man in the World*, in Riverside Park in Manhattan

PHOTO BY SARA BARRETT

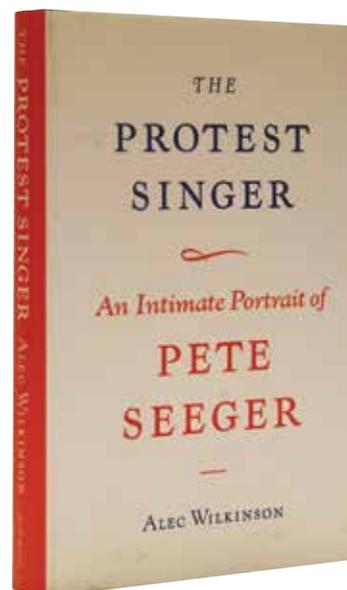
For a period of time, the Floating Neutrinos sojourned in Provincetown, building their raft *Town Hall* by the pier and singing for money in front of Town Hall. Poppa’s wife, Betsy Terrell, contributed an article, “Great Moments in Neutrino History,” for the 2000 annual issue of *Provincetown Arts*. The piece opens with a description of the busking routine of the family band:

It’s a rag tag band—acoustic guitar, horns, a set of drums in a shopping cart—but we’re a family. The two oldest children are dancing out front, a simple, old-fashioned dance to the tune of “Tea for Two.” Suddenly the band breaks into an enthusiastic “Five Foot Two,” and Todd tosses his hat in the air, letting out a war-whoop cheer as he and Ingrid launch into a wild Charleston. It’s the show stopper, reserved for the climax of the set.

LIKE HIS PORTRAIT of Paul Simon, *The Protest Singer: An Intimate Portrait of Pete Seeger* (2009) is an opportunity for Wilkinson to examine the experiences and contributions of another musician, one schooled in employing singing to activate social change. His book follows Seeger’s life, from his childhood to his years as an activist, supporting workers’ rights, civil rights, the movement against the Vietnam War, and environmental protection. Despite being harassed by the government, Seeger shows tenacity in his political beliefs: “Seeger’s politics are of the most extravagantly

conservative kind. He believes ardently in the Constitution and the Bill of Rights.”

He is also guided by his profound love of music and his belief in the power of music to transform individuals and create a better world. His endearing modesty as a performer is evoked by Wilkinson:



When Seeger was younger, his singing voice fell between the range of an alto and a tenor, what is called a split tenor. It was robust—it sounded like the voice that comes from a few rows behind you in church and that everyone follows—and



PHOTO BY SARA BARRETT

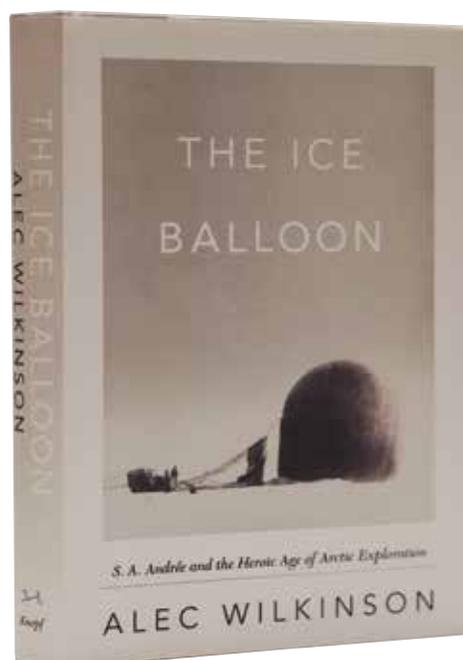
Wilkinson with Pete Seeger, the subject of *The Protest Singer*, at Seeger's house in Beacon, New York, 2009

even in complicated passages his pitch was precise. He had a dramatic falsetto which he could deliver as a moan or a shout. He sang without vibrato or with only an occasional trace of it. His phrasing was subtle but resourceful enough to inflect meaning and character and to enliven a narrative, but not so much as to divert the listener toward the singer's personality. His presence onstage was confident, offhand, and compelling, but he regarded any attention paid to him as a performer to be misplaced. An implement for delivering a song is more how he saw himself.

I don't think he left because he was afraid not to. I think he left because he could no longer imagine not leaving. I think the desire to see if the balloon could do all that he was convinced that it could, plus the urge to discover the pole and settle the mystery of what was actually there, overpowered him. . . . Whereas he had first approached the task as a scientist, a disengaged engineer, aloof from the romance of the pole, he had become as zealous and wild-eyed as any fanatic who went off toward the unfound places.

PERHAPS WILKINSON was affected by the depictions of polar iciness, the audible silence, the vast fields of blinding whiteness, plus extreme danger: his most recent book, *The Ice Balloon: S. A. Andrée and the Heroic Age of Arctic Exploration* (2012), possesses no page where anyone smiles. The expedition is doomed but they don't know it. Their hydrogen balloon, the *Eagle*, after traveling a thousand miles at low altitude, skipping over the tundra below, finally crashes close to its destination. At the time, no one knew if the actual location of the North Pole was on land or on open water.

While Wilkinson is writing the story of Andrée's journey without his usual frame of reference or firsthand testimony from his subject, he is still able to give us an in-depth look into the man's psyche and an understanding of why he would take on such a dangerous venture:



After the crash, the explorers hauled three-hundred-pound sledges for nearly three months. The crew wore themselves out, "like watch-springs," Wilkinson mentions casually, then takes us to the Andrée Museum in Gränna, Sweden, where artifacts from the expedition, including the crew's actual wrist-watches with their dials stopped at specific moments of expiration, are displayed. Equally haunting is a photograph of the men by the balloon: "The black and white and the shades of gray within the photographs are weak and watery, and the figures insubstantial, leading everyone who sees them to think, They already look like ghosts."

IT IS WORTH NOTING that Wilkinson's last three books have striking similarities—though this question may also be raised: What do an American musical icon, a ragtag optimist, and an Arctic explorer have in common? They all, in their different ways, exemplify a rebellious spirit, the spirit of exploration—they are trail-

blazers. All three men engaged in a “peaceful protest,” living their lives on their own terms and following their dreams. Perhaps Wilkinson describes them best as he talks about Seeger: “His vitality sometimes seems boundless, and his nature is almost unflaggingly hopeful, but a line of melancholy runs through it.” Their journeys are filled with travails, but they are followed willingly nonetheless.

Wilkinson told me: “I’m drawn to people who respond to challenges. I find that inspiring. You spend time in the company of these people and you feel yourself enlarged.”

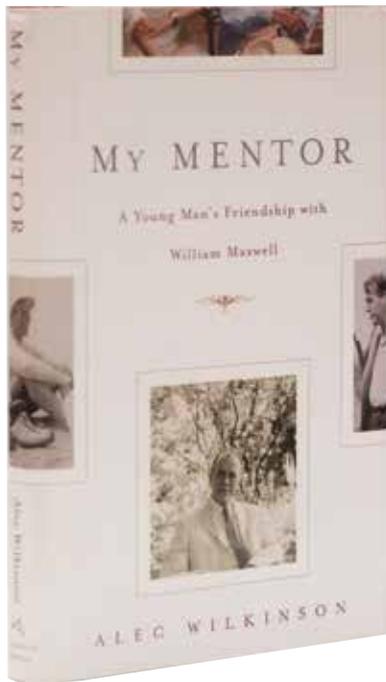
WILLIAM MAXWELL, novelist and fiction editor of the *New Yorker*, befriended the young Alec Wilkinson, helping him learn to write by becoming the man who would do the writing. Maxwell shared his decades of experience with Wilkinson and provided insider advice: “Here is another trick: ‘Call me Ishmael . . .’ A pair of eyes looking into your eyes. A face. A voice. You have entered into a personal relationship with a stranger, who will perhaps

make demands on you, extraordinary demands; who will perhaps insist that you love him; who will perhaps love you in a way that is upsetting or uncomfortable.”

Wilkinson’s sixth book, *My Mentor: A Young Man’s Friendship with William Maxwell*, describes their friendship, blending biography, memoir, and essay. With his usual keen eye, Wilkinson profiles the life of an extraordinary man, but in this instance his own life story is deeply intertwined in the telling. It is extraordinary to be able to showcase others’ voices; it is courageous to tell one’s own story with

such candor and insight. In the

following passages, Wilkinson shares his thoughts on editing, writing, and friendship:



Wilkinson with his wife, Sara Barrett, and their son, Sam, and William Maxwell at Maxwell’s house in Yorktown, New York, 1995

There is no other way to begin as a writer or anything else than by imitation. You find, by chance or design, the works or the philosophies that appeal to you and begin to make use of them. At first it appears that you are no writer (or musician or painter or lawyer) at all, but only a collection of gestures and observations other people have already made and of references to them. Gradually, the influences recede, they become absorbed, they settle into you, so that instead of being the patterns that determine how your own work sounds or looks or proceeds, they become the technical means you might make use of to describe another person’s face, the workings on each other of conflicting emotions, the weather, the impression of a landscape, or the design of a strategy for solving a problem. Jimmy Garrison, who had been a member of the John Coltrane Quartet, must have found himself in need of money during the early nineteen-seventies, because he took a semester’s teaching position at the college I went to, and was my faculty advisor, so I once heard him say, “First you have to learn all about your instrument, then you have to learn all about music, then you have to forget it all and learn how to play.” In the forgetting one makes use of one’s influences. It is important to have the best influences possible, to read the best books, listen to the best music, study the best paintings. How widely your interest spreads, how deeply, how long it continues are individual matters.

Surely the character and the abilities of the person who helps you matter also. I am as aware as anyone, I think, of how fortunate I was to have Maxwell’s attention. I do not believe in false modesty—it is a

*I first became aware* of Alec when I read his *New Yorker* piece on Mr. Apology in 1993.

The article was called “The Confession,” and I thought that it was extraordinary.

I was introduced to Alec at a book party by my friend Annabel. He was dressed, as always, in a well-cut dark suit and white shirt, no tie. He was alone. A few weeks later, when Annabel was giving a dinner party, she asked if there was anyone I wanted to see. I said, Perhaps that man you introduced me to at the reading. He and his remarkable wife, Sara, have been my devoted and loyal friends ever since.

In all of Alec’s work, his compassion, his humor, his perception, his understanding of the dispossessed and the eccentric go very deep. His ability to see that which is particular and unique in each of his often unexpected subjects gives to his writing a point of view that is always illuminating. When I read anything that Alec has written, I come away thinking, Oh, I see now.

—Susanna Moore

*When I read* literary nonfiction, I want to be taken somewhere I have never been, to imagine lives and times outside my own experience. I want to learn something, and while I learn it I want to enjoy elegant prose that has been hardened and sharpened by precise fact.

Alec Wilkinson has a terrific range. *Big Sugar* describes the lives of sugarcane cutters in Belle Glade: it is an elegantly written and politically important book about immigrant labor that, though written in 1989, is as pertinent now as it was then. I think of the Arctic in the way that Alec describes it in *The Ice Balloon*, his impression of an extraordinary and alien terrain, and I am fascinated by his insights into the ambitions and sufferings of the nineteenth-century explorers. From Alec's books and *New Yorker* stories, I have learned about ice hockey, Elmore Leonard's researcher, illicit car photography, and the eccentricities and surprising choices of my fellow humans. In each instance, I have also learned quite a lot about the art of writing. Graceful and simple as his writing appears, I can never see just how he does it.

—Annabel Davis-Goff

form of arrogance—but I also have no idea whether the work I have done has lasting merit. There are so many other ways to have done it, so many other choices I might have made. And someone else might have handled the same material more gracefully or with more ingenuity or insight or with greater objectivity. All I could manage was what I did at the time. I know that it is much better than it would have been had I not had Maxwell read it. Even on those occasions when he had no active hand in something I wrote, the choices I made, the way I approached a subject, the order in which I told what I knew, the attitude I adopted, were determined by his example and influence. Not that I was conscious of it, any more than a tennis player has in mind as he swings his racket the person who taught him his strokes. As I was writing about the Maxwells for their memorial, I realized that my sentences sounded like his. If I were younger and he was still living, I might have been concerned that I was overtaken by his influence when I should perhaps have resisted it. Instead, I felt elated at being able to summon him, obliquely, by surrendering to the words as they came through my hands onto the page.

In writing about him, I find myself again and again using the present tense.

We worked side by side for fifteen years; it took me that long to have sufficient confidence in my own judgment not to depend on his. A different sort of man might have given me reason to doubt myself, felt competitive, lost patience.

One afternoon following another, one piece or one book succeeding another, we sat beside each other at a table—sometimes at Maxwell's apartment in New York, sometimes at the house in Westchester, and sometimes in the woods surrounding a rented house in Wellfleet—and he suggested cuts or changed a word I had learned recently to plain English, and otherwise taught me what a writer needs to know. Not that much, it turns out: when to compress and when to handle a subject at length; the order in which to present things; how to arrive at a companionable style; the benefit of the surprising juxtaposition; an awareness of what is and what isn't sensible to ask a reader to be a witness to. "Write as if you wish to be understood by an unusually bright ten-year-old," he said, or, "Henry James said 'Dramatize, dramatize, dramatize,' not 'Generalize, generalize, generalize.'" Or he took out scissors and cut up my sentences and rearranged them and pasted them back on the page. Or he leaned back from the table and asked, "Isn't there a simpler way to say that?" and I explained what I had been trying to convey, and he wrote my explanation in the margin and said, "That's it," and I was surprised to see that words I had just spoken could be writing. . . .

What I felt as I sat beside him as he read was calm. I had done all the work that I knew how to do, and now, through his asking me what I really meant to say, or what had been the resolution of the difficulty I had left off describing before I should have, or whether I hadn't gone on too much in my reaction to something, the piece would be made better than I knew how to make it. When he was finished, I would appear to be smarter than I was and more capable. Maxwell taught me to write the way primitive fathers taught their sons to stalk, to study tracks, to observe the behavior of their prey, to watch the sky for weather, to note the bloom of the bush that signifies that the fish in their migrations have returned to the river. A cobbler teaching a young man to make shoes is what I also sometimes thought of, I suppose because the things I needed to know were so practical and primary: how to write dialogue that sounded like someone actually speaking, how to make the reader forget there was someone between him and the landscape he was reading about, how to convey the impression of a scene with some directness of effect. Vladimir Horowitz once said that he imagined himself when he played the piano as being on the other side of the notes on the page, looking out. . . .

His advice was erudite and penetrating and completely reliable and uncontaminated by competition. He was known to see in stories writers had given up on the possibilities for development of a character or a line of narrative or for compressing a scene or combining one scene with another or for moving several sentences or a paragraph from the beginning of a piece to nearer the end so that the emotional tone of the story was changed, and the story brought to life and made resonant in a way that it hadn't been. Partly this is a matter of imagination, of receptivity, a capacity for seeing others the way they would like to be seen, of a selfless interest in encouraging talent, and an intimacy with the catalog of technical possibility. What suggestions he made he offered unobtrusively, and he qualified them by saying that if the writer didn't agree with them, he should overlook them. As to how other writers regarded his opinion, when J. D. Salinger finished *The Catcher in the Rye*, he drove to the Maxwells' house and over the course of an afternoon read it to them on their porch.

CHRISTOPHER BUSA is founder and editorial director of Provincetown Arts Press.