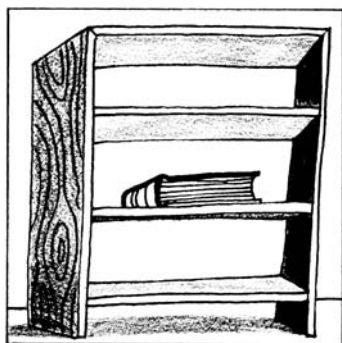


# States of the Union

## A DIARIST'S BLUE PERIOD

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS



I HAVE rented a small apartment in Washington, on 17th between P Street and O Street, and am commuting there on alternate weeks from my home in Georgetown, Connecticut. It is the first time in 17 years that I have spent any appreciable time in a city—in a place, that is, where one depends on the kindness of strangers. Here are some early impressions.

**Monday.** I bought a sofa bed today at a place called Little John's, and with the help of a friend and his pickup truck carted it to my apartment. At the same time we installed some miscellaneous items: a large black leather chair and stool; a wooden bookcase; a table lamp that

turns on with a twist of its metal stem (the harder the twist, the brighter the light); a desk without a chair; a typewriter table without a typewriter; a jar of instant coffee without a pot; and a bottle of Mexican beer without an opener. Several cockroaches crawled out of the woodwork to have a look at the new, temporary tenant of their permanent digs. My friend advised me to sprinkle the insects with boric acid. "It'll drive them into other people's apartments," he helpfully explained.

Surveying the scene now from my leather chair, I see that I have something new, something old, much that is borrowed, and one thing that is blue—a lovely batik of two rural mailboxes standing crookedly amid tall grass. It was given to me by the artist, perhaps to remind me of Connecticut, and it lies on the floor awaiting a hook. For want of a nail a batik was lost?

**Tuesday.** The bookcase has three shelves, all of them empty. "A room without a book," said Cicero, "is as a body without a soul." Applauding his thought if not his orotundity, I go out to buy a book.

But first I stop at the Trio for a cup

of coffee. At the table next to mine sit six bearded youths with peace signs and astrological pendants bouncing beneath their adam's apples. There's a silent girl, too; she wears a blue bandanna—the color of my batik.

The young men are drinking beer and talking at cross-purposes.

"Trotsky is dead," says one.

"Socialist meetings are really a drag," says another.

"Let's face it," says a third, "sooner or later Baltimore has got to go Communist."

I pay for my coffee and ask the waitress if I may steal the plastic Trio ashtray for my apartment. "Don't ask," she replies. "Just take."

At the Discount Bookstore on Connecticut Avenue I buy a slim paperback volume of Karl Shapiro's poetry. Its cover is blue, of course. Back to my apartment, where I read Shapiro's "Travelogue for Exiles," a short, sad apostrophe to the uprooted. "Look and remember," the last stanza begins,

... *Look upon this land,  
Far, far across the factories and  
the grass.*

*Surely, there, surely, they will let  
you pass.*

*Speak then and ask the forest and  
the loam.*

*What do you hear? What does the  
land command?*

The earth is taken: this is not your  
home.

I place Karl Shapiro in the exact middle of the gaping bookshelf. Birth of a library.

**Wednesday.** Walking across Dupont Circle early this morning, feeling the urban sun melt the night mist, I heard a really stunning example of black blarney. Black blarney I define as what black men say to women they are courting. It is a teasing, tripping language, full of joyful confidence and as sweetly poetic as anything one is likely to hear at the Abbey Theater in Dublin. (See in *Native Son* how Bigger Thomas gently teases his girl.)

The blarney in this case was di-

rected at a pretty blonde who was walking ahead of me. As she passed by a little knot of young black men, one of them detached himself and started following. "Lord have mercy," he called to her. "Heaven must have taken a recess this morning to have sent such an angel down here." In a moment he had caught up with her and taken her arm. They were walking stride for stride now—and as I turned down another path and threw them a last, backward look, she was *smiling*.

**Thursday.** My neighborhood seems predominantly black, with a generous sprinkling of Puerto Ricans, Vietnamese, Koreans, and whites. Living in a mixed neighborhood is pleasant after spending nearly two decades in the monochromatic exurbs, but it has some disadvantages too. Shopping, for example, can be a puzzlement. I tried to buy a comb today in a little general store, only to be told by the black woman behind the counter that I'd made a mistake. "That comb's for black-type hair," she explained. "You want a *white* comb."

"OK," I said, "then give me a white comb."

"We don't have any."

I found one later at the Safeway on R Street. This store may be the shoddiest link in Safeway's lengthy chain; it confirms all that one hears about ghetto groceries. In the first place, it is very small; in the second place, it is very dirty; in the third place, it is shockingly expensive. A dozen eggs go for just under \$2, and a medium-size jar of Taster's Choice costs \$4.99, a dollar more than what I pay at my capacious A&P in Connecticut.

Much of the food displayed here was apparently tossed into the bins weeks ago and then forgotten. The bacon is turning senescently gray and some of the thin steaks are curling at the edges. Cans and cartons are coated with dust. The lettuce is brown, the tomatoes wrinkled. After a quick browse through this sub-market I could understand why all the neighborhood restaurants are so well

patronized. It is probably cheaper to eat out, and certainly more appetizing.

**Friday.** This morning I found an "Eviction Notice" lying at my door. It turned out to be a leaflet warning me and other tenants in the city that we'd all be evicted if we didn't make a lot of noise protesting the City Council's plan to lift rent controls. Later I read in the *Post* that several thousand tenants had rallied the previous day, and that the Washington City Council—true to the tradition of governing bodies since time immemorial—had decided to postpone action on the controversial question.

At noon I attended a luncheon at the Women's Democratic Club, where I met a young woman—a Mrs. McGrath—who said she was active in city government. "What do you think of rent control?" I asked.

"I hate to say this," she answered, "but it's created a terrible housing shortage in Washington. The only way we're going to get more apartments is by abandoning controls."

It was a sensible argument, but being a tenant, I didn't like it. "The Lord giveth and the landlord taketh away," I said lamely. That ended the dialogue.

Tonight, after dining with three friends in Chevy Chase, I brought two of them back so they could pass judgment on my apartment. Tom said it was "pretty nifty, considering ..." He didn't say considering what. Dolly thought the place had "potential." The only thing was, I'd arranged the furniture all wrong. The sofa bed should be moved inward so that people sitting on it wouldn't have to look at the kitchen. The desk could go where the bed had been, the leather chair could face the bed. In any case, I needed a rug. As they were leaving they presented me with a house gift: a box of picture hooks, the better to hang my supine batik.

**Saturday.** With time on my hands before the noon Metroliner leaves for New York, I walk to the Capital Of-

fice Furniture Store on K Street to see if I can pick up a table like the one a friend bought there recently. The table I want is large and round; it will serve less for meals than for poker.

No, the proprietor of the store tells me, he's out of that model, but he's expecting another shipment in next month. On my way out I stop to admire an antique Spanish desk with heavy mahogany carvings; the storekeeper is auctioning it to the highest bidder. "That once belonged to the Cuban ambassador," he informs me, "but of course they shut down the embassy 17 years ago. Now the Cubans are opening up some sort of office again, but they're going modern in their furniture. They've got no use for that desk any more, which is all right with me. Beautiful, isn't it?"

A placard on top of the desk lists the bids made thus far, with every one but the sixth and latest bid having been crossed out. They go from \$4,000 to \$7,500, and there's plenty of room left on the cardboard. So the canny furniture dealer will turn a fancy profit, all because of the thaw between Carter and Castro.

The retailers in this strange city have to pay close attention to shifts in national policy. When Nixon went to China, the chic hostesses in Georgetown vied with one another in serving their guests sumptuous, 16-course Chinese dinners. Every gourmet shopkeeper in possession of a case of oolong was hoping to make a killing. Conversely, I am told that several Korean restaurants have had to close down in the wake of the Tongsun Park scandal: No politician in his right mind would be caught dead these days eating a South Korean egg roll in public.

Well, I have been in Washington too long. I return to my apartment, double-lock the door (a burglar with taste may covet my batik), and head for a taxi that will take me to Union Station. It will be good to get back to the wide open spaces of Connecticut, where seldom is heard a discouraging word, and the telephone's ringing all day.