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# **FAMOUS AMERICANS**

Loren Goodman

FOREWORD BY W. S. MERWIN

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## FOREWORD

The imagery of poetry has been marked at times by a vital tension between basic convention and the unexpected. The polar relation between them began to produce radically new effects during the nineteenth century in France, with the precursors of surrealism and the ironies of the poems of Tristan Corbière, and then in the twentieth century with the beginning of the age of modernism. In the writing of Apollinaire and Max Jacob and others of their generation, irony opens the door to an element that had been absent from poetry for ages at a time, as though it had been banned: comedy. Max Jacob would be my own favorite example, and I hope, when I reread him, that the note of grace and freedom and mystery that he brought into poetry may never be lost again.

In our time some echo of it is there in the trapeze artistry of Frank O'Hara's poems and in the recurrent zaniness of John Ashbery's, and I think Loren Goodman's *Famous Americans*, at its best, belongs in that lineage. The collection includes a repertoire of slips and slides, irreverent improvisations, satiric contortions, occasionally obvious and at other times surprising in the way of funhouse-mirror distortions. His mode can amount to little more than blacking out the teeth of smiles in advertisements or drawing moustaches on the Mona Lisa, but even then the black teeth may turn out to be startling doorways and the moustaches animated. He is fond of mimicry, occasionally heightened with odd repetition, and of parody. His aim is not satire itself, with its relatively definite moral position, but plain ridicule: the revelation of nonsense thinly masked in the familiarities of persuasion and self-presentation all around us. Some of his pieces, such as "Film Retrospective," with its fantasy listing of titles, producers, directors, characters, and cast (starring Max Von Sydow as everyone from Fidel Castro to the voice of Ramades in *Aida*), are pure goofy invention. His writing also differs from much satire in that there is little real bite or sting in it. He clearly loves nonsense for its own sake. It appears to be the source and guide, the heart, of many of the writings in this collection, including several of the more ambitious and successful ones, so that in the course of the book it appears to be nonsense itself, as it occurs to him, that Mr. Goodman is exploring.

Nonsense becomes a kind of thread of vitality running through the clichés and assumptions of the recognizable world. The thread of nonsense becomes the central nerve of an aesthetic, the directive in one after another of these writings.

For example, the short poem “Yeast”:

I am Yeast, a great poet  
I live in Ireland  
Some say I am the greatest  
Poet ever  
  
My poetry makes bread grow  
All over Ireland and the world  
In glens and valleys, bread rising  
In huts, clover paths, and fire wood  
  
There will always be critics  
Who deny Yeast  
But you can see  
The effect of my poetry  
Through the potato fields  
And the swell of the Liffey.  
The amber coins and foaming black ale

The nonsense aesthetic has a great part in determining the tone, and through the tone the play and aptness of the language. It is relied upon also to supply the momentum, the sequence, the linear development of many of the pieces. The final entry in the book, and one of the oddest, is simply a list, an “Index of First Lines,” their sequence determined alphabetically, and some of their sense and nonsense arising from their close succession. The section beginning with “I” includes these entries:

I line a funnel with velvet  
I love the imagined brick layers of existence  
I only speak German  
I rejoice in your pleasant trees  
I said, “Bartender, Bartender, do you know who I am?”  
I see nothing from my window  
I sit here, a socialite

Some of the most successful nonsense, which sets the tone for the variations that follow and perhaps led to the book's title is in the first section, *Founding Fathers*. "Babe Ruth," for instance:

Babe Ruth . . . He was the player who set the standards for excellence in baseball—hitting 25,000 homeruns in a single season and taking the life of his only son during the world series. Now, countless believers make pilgrimages to a grotto near Lourdes to pray to the immortal Babe Ruth.

Equally at home hauling grain across America's rolling wheat fields, bringing the family into town on Saturday night or silhouetted against the skyline of a great city, this legendary player is suspended on poles of gleaming brass, alert to every sound, every movement . . .

Comic writing is particularly exacting, and the nature of comedy is a vast subject, and one perpetually open for consideration. Sometimes the laughter it summons up is a little uneasy, uncertain as to just what is really being laughed at. And it is always required to seem new. Mr. Goodman, with his talent for it, has set out across unmapped ground.

*W. S. Merwin*

