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The Great American *Best American Essays* Potluck Party

A poet, a novelist, and an essayist walk into a bar. “What is this,” asks the bartender, “a joke?” I am only saying this to get “essayist” and “joke” into the same sentence in a serious way, because it’s about time that essayists were taken seriously outside of academic circles. This has been the mission of *Best American Essays* ever since the first volume appeared in 1986, edited by the then middle-aged, delightfully tweedy Bob Atwan.¹ His astute championship of the genre has moved the essay from its marginal status of “belletristic essay, a ‘lifeless’ form” (Atwan, in *Essay Daily*—henceforward *ED*—12/7/15) to a robust mainstream, many-faceted genre. *BAE*’s success, from stealth to smashing in 30 years, is reflected in the de facto acceptance of the annual volumes as what might be considered the industry standard (if indeed there were any agreed-upon standards). The twenty or so essays included in each volume have been augmented by an ever-expanding, ever more eclectic list of “Notable Essays,” from 66² in 1986 to 513 in 2015. This essay explosion reflects, among other things, an ever-widening range of publishing opportunities, which in turn has been fed since 1990 by the rise of creative nonfiction and memoir as major components of MFA programs, right up there with poetry and fiction.

Thus December 2015 was a propitious time for the *Essay Daily*—*Not Really So Daily*, a “space for conversation about essays & essayists, contemporary and not,” to devote its blog posts to commentary on

¹ I offer these personal details because in 1986 Atwan fit the venerable stereotype of essayists and essay fans, a stereotype that *BAE* has done much to change.

² In his *ED* post, “The *Best American Essays*: Some Notes on the Series, Its Background and Origins,” Atwan explains that the small number of essays published in 1985 and gathered for consideration in the first volume (*BAE* 1986) was due not to the quality and variety of available writing, but because of the constricted publishing timetable during that first year (*ED* 12/7/15).

each volume of the *BAE* series, “the longest-running and highest-profile filter for essays that aspire to art in the last century,” explains editor Ander Monson (*ED* 11/29/15). Monson invited the contributors, “a mixture of previous *Essay Daily* contributors, emerging essayists we wanted to collaborate with for the first time, and essayists who heard about the project and decided to volunteer.” Each was to choose a different volume, and after that, says Managing Editor Will Slattery, “they were totally turned loose—we like to give our contributors as much free rein as possible, largely because we value the aesthetic diversity that results, and because it’s always a fun surprise to see what different directions people jump off in” (Slattery).

Atwan, gracious host, provided the big round table for this repast, covered with a snowy white cloth—a tabula rasa for the feast that follows. It is these meta-commentaries, the dishes that each contributor brought to the potluck, on which my analysis here—the meta-meta commentary, if you will—will focus. So the discussion begins with the inevitable “What is an essay?” (as evidenced by Atwan’s Prefaces) extended to “What is a BEST essay?” and “Who decides?” “What has contributed to *BAE*’s stature and endurance over thirty years?” follows, as various bloggers examine either the entire series, their chosen volume, or individual favorites, in work and in play. On the basis of these blog entries, written independently of each other, can any consensus be reached on the status/nature of the essay in 2016, as *BAE* celebrates thirty years? Depending on the tastes of this herd of cool cats, the answers can be *Yes* (essays are alive and robust) and *No* (but just what is an essay, anyway?). An exemplary model serves as the climactic dessert.

What is an essay? Atwan’s thoughtful introduction to each volume—and who should know better than he who reads essays by the bushelful throughout the year—addresses the same question year after year, “What exactly was the literary production that this new series would showcase and celebrate?” he asks in 2015. In 1986 his answer was, “The modern American essay has adapted to a reading public’s imperious demand for information, while retaining the personal, fluid, and speculative manner that has long

characterized the form,” ever since Montaigne named the genre four centuries earlier. He observes, “Thought and expression, substance and style: the essayist shuttles between these fuzzy boundaries, now settling down with ideas and exposition, now searching for eloquence and charm” (*BAE* 1986, ix-x). “Thirty years later,” he continues, “and I’m still asking myself that question” because “a solid, tight definition of the genre . . . continues to elude me. . . . With so many different types of essays being published year after year, it seems impossible to identify a few essential features that characterize the genre and encompass all its form.” Perhaps, he says, we should ask “not what essays *are* but what essayists *do*,” and do differently “from what the generally more respected writers in other genres do?” (*BAE* 2015, ix).

Nicole Wallack brings to the table *boeuf bourguignon à la Montaigne*, a superb complement to her graceful, comprehensive analysis of “Robert Atwan’s Art of the Foreword,” which addresses Atwan’s “audible presence . . . as a thinker and essayist in each volume.” She demonstrates that “Atwan has found a ‘durable’ and capacious art, practice, map for a key trajectory of American literature, and corrective to what he sees as the strictures of writing and thinking in school.” The beating heart of Atwan’s concerns lies in his repeated return “to four qualities we can find in all essays that have lasted beyond their moment of composition: 1) they explore original ideas about specific topics; 2) they include the vivid presence of the writer . . . 3) they incorporate moments of both self-awareness and skepticism primarily through reflection; and 4) they resist what Atwan calls “standardization” in content or form.” Yet essays are a process as well as a product. They offer writers the opportunity to enact “the ever-shifting processes of our minds and moods,” which form “the basis for the essay’s qualification to be regarded seriously as imaginative literature and the essayist’s claim to be taken seriously as a creative writer” (*BAE* 2012, xiv), an issue César Diaz’s “Composing Smart” (*BAE* 2010) also raises. Wallack concludes that “Atwan enacts in his forewords, and in his dedication to *The Best American Essays* as an extended cultural inquiry, the ethics of both making our minds visible, and being brave in all ways when we reach the limits of what we know” (*ED*—12/25/15).

Mike Steinberg, whose Pinot Noir pairs well with the *boeuf*, also addresses the “exciting diversity of essay forms,” these in the 1991 *BAE*, “reflections and meditation, philosophical fragments, personal narratives and anecdotes, cultural critiques and passionate arguments.” He notes with pleasure, this “prophecy of things to come. . . . read like a description of the current landscape of creative/literary nonfiction” (ED 12/20/15). John Proctor brings a youthful red to the table along with Louis Menand’s guest-edited *BAE* 2004 guiding his efforts to understand—as an essayist-in-progress—“what an essay is, or can be.” The essay, he observes, “like a city is a composite of millions of voices, personalities, perspectives, imaginations, and intellects. Every volume of *The Best American Essays* is like an annual report on the state of the city, or a report from a fellow traveler, much like Calvino’s fictionalized Marco Polo in *Invisible Cities*, whose words here can be applied to the city or the essay.” Paramount qualities include *voice* (“Writing essays is more like singing than speaking”), *a sense of déjà vu* (essayists “are always thinking of the perfect riposte when the moment for saying it has already passed”), *lists* (“image, aphorism, and anecdote, when separated and listed, assume a new artistic depth”) and *power*: “*Polemics can be fun!*” (ED 12/4/15).

Who decides what the BEST essays are? David Foster Wallace’s hilariously astute introduction to *BAE* 2007 makes the process of selection clear: “Unless you are both a shut-in and independently wealthy, there is no way you can sit there and read all the contents of all the 2006 issues of all the hundreds of U.S. periodicals that publish literary nonfiction” (Wallace’s preferred term). “So, you subcontract this job,” first to Houghton Mifflin, who in turn “subcontract[s] the job to someone they trust . . . not to be insane or capricious or overtly ‘biased’ in his Decidering,” namely series editor Bob Atwan. Atwan, who right from the get-go understood that “working with a distinguished guest editor each year would be immensely enjoyable and keep the perspective of each volume fresh” (ED 12/7/15), winnows this “very large field of possibilities” down to 100 finalists, “essays of literary achievement that show an awareness of craft and forcefulness of thought”—reasonable looking criteria, says Wallace, “while at the same time being vague

and bland enough that we aren't induced to stop and think about what they might actually mean." Atwan then sub-sub contracts these to his choice of Guest Editor, the ultimate Decider, who "acting as an evaluative filter" selects the "twenty-odd so-called Best . . . for your delectation." Although the Guest Editor is free to lobby for essays off the list, Atwan, says Wallace, appears so "fair and balanced," his judgment formed over years "of hard experience on the front lines of Decidering," that Wallace ends up pretty much getting away from already putting in his own choices and sticking with Atwan's (*BAE* 2007xv-xvii).

Mary Clearman Blew's megabowl of guacamole accompanies her sage meta-commentary on *BAE* 2007, which addresses, among other things, Wallace's choice of "narrative essays," one of which, "Shakers," by short story writer Daniel Orozco, was originally published in *Story Quarterly*. Blew suspects this is really fiction. She speculates that this piece might have been Wallace's addition to the volume, rather than on Atwan's list, included because it breathtakingly limns "the resilience of the human spirit in awful circumstances" (*ED* 12/22/15). The ending is signaled by an earthquake that pelts an isolated injured hiker with stones and scree and—Orozco writes—"a cloud of desert dust." As night falls, "when the cold is all he can think about," a diamondback rattlesnake will

seek the warmth of his body against the chill evening, slicing through the sand and sweeping imperiously between his legs and turning into itself until coiled tight against his groin and draped along his belly with the offhand intimacy of a lover's arm. . . . He will shake, resolute in a belief in the exaltation of this moment, yet careful not to disturb the lethal snake on his chest. How cool is this! he will think" (*BAE* 2007, 168-9).

If true, this is clearly a zero-at-the-bone climax of a never-to-be-forgotten tale. But if it's fiction, a potent possibility raised by this sensual scene, should Atwan have lowered the Decider's boom?

Atwan's invigorating influence on the genre. Ned Stuckey-French's contribution to the potluck, a classic American Century Festive Bird, gloriously glazed, uses *BAE* 1987 as the platform for *Essay Daily's* most comprehensive historical discussion of the series and the genre, gracefully intertwined with a knockout personal essay that adds new dimensions to its *BAE* host. This ideal combination of creative and critical writing is hard to do (try it!) but delightful to read. Stuckey-French credits Atwan for both understanding and demonstrating that the personal essay is very much alive: "What died was only the old-fashioned familiar essay, that genteel and whimsical item—whose writers always sounded vaguely British—which used to be the staple of highbrow magazines and sleepy freshman English courses." Atwan's "steady, measured presence as editor and writer" understands the contemporary essay's target audience to be, as it was in Montaigne's time, *petit bourgeois* intellectuals, "urban and urbane," who get the writer's allusions, share his individualism, and even appreciate "the cross-pollination of nonfiction by fiction" evident in the 1987 *New Journalistic* picks by nostalgic (read outdated) guest editor Gay Talese, who can't get his own "Frank Sinatra Has a Cold" out of his head (*ED* 12/11/15). We have met these readers and they are us.

And so we delight in Stuckey-French's chocolate bombe at the end—yes, an extra dish!—a passionate personal reaction to one of the personal essays. John Barth's "Teacher," the story of a love affair intertwined with a love of teaching "spoke so directly to me. Elizabeth and I had met in 1986 at the 60th birthday party" of an English professor friend. "We'd fallen fast and hard, deciding a week later to get married. . . . The Barths' whirlwind romance, our re-embrace of fiction—it all felt familiar." Graduate school at Iowa led to Carl Klaus's program "that focused exclusively on literary nonfiction. . . . It felt like we were riding a wave that was about to crest" (*ED* 12/11/15).

The crescendo of Ned's (who could call him Stuckey-French after that?) essay spans the next thirty years, neatly summing up the essay's status as championed by the *BAE* series:

Then Lopate’s anthology came out. The Atwan and Oates anthology came out. The John D’Agata anthologies came out. *Fourth Genre*, *River Teeth*, and *Creative Nonfiction* were launched. The Digital Revolution arrived, bringing *Brevity* and *Assay* with it. Where once Iowa was one of just a few graduate programs in nonfiction in the country; now there are almost 200. Robin Hemley introduced the NonfictionNOW conference. . . . Elizabeth and I have (almost) raised our two daughters, *BAE* is in its thirtieth year, and the wave doesn’t seem to have crested” (*ED* 12/11/15).

Although Sarah Minor (2015) frets: “what happened to the essay as a place where the capabilities of the essayist’s *mind* weigh more than the essayist’s *life* and how they can retell it?” (*ED* 12/1/15) Ned’s essay—smart and graceful—should set her mind at rest. Or, as Sven Birkerts observes in his “Ramble” around *BAE* 1986, “The essays of 1986”—he singles out Gerald Early, William H. Gass, David Barthelme, and Joyce Carol Oates—“are on a direct continuum with work by John Jeremiah Sullivan, Eula Biss, Leslie Jamison, Charles D’Ambrosio. . . . What the collection does affirm for me. . . . is that the form remains a species as adaptable as the cockroach, and that it flourishes exactly to the extent that thinking and invention flourish in any given time. A gathering like this not only legitimizes and disseminates our flights of imagining and reportage, but it also heartens and inspires” (*ED* 11/29/15).

BAE’s ripple effect. Wallack credits *BAE* for “some of the essay’s current success in online and print journals; the exponential increase in courses and programs in creative nonfiction; a burgeoning interest in Essay Studies within departments of Literature and Composition; and, as Atwan notes (first with some reservations in 2007, then with many fewer in 2010), how could there be a blogosphere without writers creating as blog posts what Phillip Lopate has called elsewhere, “essays in disguise” (2010, xiv; *ED* 12/25/15)?

A kale salad (with cranberries, almonds, and goat cheese) accompanies my own research on “The Essay Canon” (published not by *Essay Daily* but seventeen years ago in *College English* (March 1999)), an insanely labor-intensive project that traced the migration and republication of thousands of major canonical essays (by George Orwell, E.B. White, Joan Didion, Virginia Woolf, Martin Luther King Jr., and 167 others) in hundreds of American college textbooks from 1946-96. This disclosed another influence of *BAE*, significant but slightly secret, the trickle down effect of Atwan’s editorial “Decidering” on other essay collections. Before *BAE*, textbook editors used to raid each others’ books in search of lively, teachable nonfiction to incorporate into their own anthologies. Now *BAE*’s annual pools³ of engaging essays refresh the supply and other editors dive right in, coming up with material for their own new editions that will keep these essays in annual circulation among America’s 4-5 million college freshmen⁴. For indeed, anthologies are—as a rule—the only places that, through reprints, give individual members of this genre a shot at longevity. In the process of trying to update an essay of his own that was a 1996 ‘Notable,’ Eric LeMay tells how to forecast which essays will survive the “Tests of Time”: “Some of the anecdotes [in *BAE* 1996] were dated, but they still had the staying power that narrative creates. Fact dates, story survives” (*ED* 12/1/15).

Other types of BAE blog commentaries. There’s ample room at this festive board for the sides and salads that accompany Wallack’s and Stuckey-French’s centerpiece contributions.

Overviews of the entire volume. I had originally anticipated that most of the individual *BAE* reviewers would provide hearty vegetable dishes for the meal —garlic mashed potatoes, onions baked with rosemary and cream, miso ginger asparagus—through an overview of their chosen volume, commenting on what they

³ And kindred *Best American* series in *Science and Nature Writing*, *Travel*, *Sports*, and *Short Stories*.

⁴ An influence diminished in recent years—and hard to trace—now that individual instructors can easily compile their own on-line choices.

liked best and analyzing why, incorporated into a graceful personal essay. Kyoko Mori's "Revisiting the Last Millennium: *BAE* 2000" does exactly that. She knows the volume intimately, having taught it at Harvard when it was first published. Rereading it fifteen years later she finds that the wide range of "essays chosen by these editors do not seem 'dated' because the problems the writers tackled haven't gone away (in fact, most are with us in a more serious way)"—an observation relevant to most of the essays in most of the *BAE* volumes—they rock! "All nonfiction inhabits the continuum between the self and the world, the private and the public," Mori observes, and the enduring topics include disappearing wilderness (Wendell Berry, Edward Hoagland, Terry Tempest Williams), disappearing culture (Mark Slouka on electronic noise, and William Gass, on disappearing hardcopy books), "elegies for lost parents" (Fred D'Aguiar and Cheryl Strayed), and "strong, even extreme stances on controversial public issues: Peter Singer's 'The Singer Solution to World Poverty' and Andrew Sullivan's 'What's So Bad About Hate?'" (ED 12/21/15). Ander Monson's "On Finding The *Best American Essays* 1999 at the Bear Canyon Goodwill" provides a more impressionistic overview of essays, which he regards as "conversations," "messages. We are speaking to one another . . . even if the one to whom we speak is no longer alive. We're not just publishing these essays into the void" (ED 12/2/8/15). Although Will Slattery dutifully lists the contents of *BAE* 1997, his passion is devoted to JoAnn Beard's "The Fourth State of Matter," "elegant and brutal in all the right ways" (ED 12/26/15).

Reading the past through the lens of the present. Various commentators, bearing side dishes of rediscovered grains du jour—quinoa, kamut, farro, freekah, bulgur, wheat berries—evaluated their chosen volumes from a contemporary perspective. Some react with hindsight's 20-20 clarity to sexism and to sexist style in their chosen volumes. Why couldn't the essayists and anthologists have been more feminist (Jill Talbot 1993, Marcia Aldrich 2013), more gender sensitive (I. Clutch Fleishmann 1992, Thomas Larson 1995); less

stuffy and stately and more “new and daring,” as Thomas Mira y Lopez (2012) credits Mark Doty, Sandra Tsing Lo, and Jonathan Franzen in their depictions of new worlds (*ED* 12/18/15).

Reflections on the terrorist attacks of 9/11/01 dominated many of the essays in *BAE* 2002 and 2003, and thus—as days of infamy—were addressed as well by the *BAE* bloggers. Nicole Walker (2002) asks why did—or do—we turn to white men in times of national crisis? Renee E. D’Aoust reads 2003 Guest Editor Anne Fadiman’s choices of “hefty personal essays that make personal and worldly collisions strikingly clear” as relevant to subsequent international terrorism, particularly the November 2015 attacks on Paris, an affinity limned by the essays of Francine du Plessix Gray, Judith Thurman, and Myra Jehlen in that volume (*ED* 12/5/15); and by Christy Wampole’s entire 2014 commentary which unpacks essays by Mary Gordon and Dave Eggers. “Like Eggers’ American,” says Wampole, “we want to push a reset button that doesn’t exist. We want to unravel the stereotypes of ourselves, to emphasize our singularity in a system that tries to uniformize us. . . . We just want to be. We are jarred that global politics—about which we know almost nothing—might loot us of life and limb” (*ED* 11/30/15).

Bloggers’ favorite authors. Distilling the essence of an anthology, any anthology, is really hard to do, especially in the compass of 2000-3000 words, and even tougher if the collection is composed of disparate essays, as *BAE* is. What I had initially regarded as authorial sloth—commenting on one or two or four favorite authors from the designated volume—may well be a survival mechanism for the authors of such expeditious blogs written under time pressure, the collection’s crunchy crudités—bell peppers, jicama, sugar snap peas. These are choices of passion, craft, and topic: Amy Leach on Charles Simich (1988); Joni Tevis (1990) and Craig Reinhold (1998), both on Annie Dillard; David L. Ulin (2011) on Susan Straight’s enactment of racial profiling in “Travels With My Ex.” Stephanie G’Schwind’s (2009) civil rights discussion centers on Gregory Orr’s complicated “Return to Haneyville,” which not only lays the ghost of his traumatic civil rights kidnapping in 1965 but is ultimately suffused with joy, “Joy is my body’s primal

response to the enormity of the gift it has been given—a whole life! A whole life was there waiting for me the day I left this town” (*ED* 12/17/15).

Free play. And why not? Because all the contributors to this feast are creative writers writing in this most latitudinarian genre, I was anticipating a great deal of experimentation and play. What I found, however, was lots of work, some of it impressive as we have seen, but only a few playful, free-ranging essays, the desserts of this celebratory meal⁵. Matthew Gavin Frank offers a perplexing rejoinder to *BAE* 2001, a Cool-Whip concoction “comprised of one line from each of the essays included . . . in order. The first sentence is from the first essay, the second from the second, and so on: “Prayer is personal [Ben Birnbaum]. Fuck the criminal codes [Charles Bowden]. Fanny recalled how they set out from Tahiti, where they had been living in contented isolation, and set their sails for Hawaii [James Campbell]. We get what we need [Anne Fadiman].” Frank calls this arbitrary sentence generator an “essay,” a big stretch even for this most capacious genre (*ED* 12/2/15).

In contrast, Michael Martone’s parfait of a commentary on *BAE* 2005 elegantly intertwines the evolution of the *BAE* series (tutti frutti) with the rise of creative nonfiction and programs that teach it (the vanilla) with an engaging reprise of the technology it’s written on (the mint chocolate chip), from the quaint (strawberry) to the contemporary (limoncello), ranging from “the Apple computer . . . invented in 1976,” to desktop publishing”: “Apple the company goes public this year [1980]. The share price is \$22.00. . . . Steve Jobs is convinced . . . that a graphical user interface would be the design of all future computing. I am typing this now, in 2015, on a 2012 iMac running OS X 10.8.5 with graphics NVIDIA GeForce GT 640M S12 MB. The machine creates the illusion on the screen in front of me that I am mechanically typing this “this” on a white, eight and a half by eleven piece of paper” (*ED* 12/14/15).

⁵ Perhaps because playful writing takes a lot of work and these blogs were commissioned on very short notice. This does not diminish their perspectives or voices of the series overall.

Brian Doyle's champagne essay on his first inclusion in *BAE* (1998) proclaims **I AM A GOLDEN ESSAY GOD!** "Wow," his wife says, reading the table of contents, "Saul Bellow, Joseph Epstein, Ian Frazier, Edward Hoagland, Jamaica Kincaid, William Maxwell, John McPhee, Mary Oliver, Oliver Sacks, John Updike.... Brian Doyle? Doesn't that sound funny? Bellow, Updike, *Doyle?*?" Says Doyle, "That's what I remember best, her absolute honest innocent question, and my instant urge to shout 'NO THAT DOES NOT SOUND FUNNY! THAT SOUNDS TOTALLY COOL AND RIGHT AND AWESOME AND I AM A GOLDEN ESSAY GOD!'" Although Doyle suppresses his urge—his wife, he thinks, is right (*ED* 12/8/15). We'll drink to that.

Love in the time of the bitter and the sweet. I have saved the very best until last, the aspirational post that moves, inspires, informs through a combination of story and commentary, Michele Morano's "Los Mejores Ensayos Americanos," *BAE* 2008, a generous, glorious bittersweet chocolate cake of an essay topped with chocolate ganache and a pint of fresh raspberries. This compelling narrative intertwines tales of two cities, two lovers, and a five-month-old baby, Morano's first, at 43. One lover, a troubled American visiting in Oviedo in 1993 (we previously met him in Morano's "Grammar Lessons: The Subjunctive Mood" (*BAE* 2006—she's a GOLDEN ESSAY GODDESS!), remains intermittently suicidal, a source of constant worry even fifteen years later, particularly after she discovers that his "phone has been disconnected. She fears the worst, as she always has." Morano is teaching in a study abroad program Madrid in 2008 with the other lover, the baby's father, also a writer, "the man who is solid and steady and never causes her to worry," even when she rebels "against the schedule dictated by the baby's needs, by his hunger, fatigue, desire for stimulation" (*ED* 12/13/15).

Through the exhausting highs and lows of this confluence of experiences, she clings, late at night, "to the lifeline of creative nonfiction, of the essay, of writers offering what Scott Russell Sanders calls 'a record of the mind at work and play': Patricia Brieschke's "Cracking Open" (about "the birth of her son .

. . . a scrawny baby with misshapen legs,” enduring excruciating “pain after each operation”); Atul Gawande’s “The Way We Age Now” (doctors paying thoughtful attention to the ordinary—examining factors involved in walking and swallowing for clues to survival), and Ander Monson’s “Solipsism” (“Me. Me. Me. Me. Me.” On and on, twenty-five columns across and twenty-three lines down”) (*ED* 12/13/15).

After watching Obama’s 2008 election on her computer’s twitter feed, “Look,” she tells the baby, tears streaming down her face. “Look at what has happened for you, my sweet boy,” Morano wraps it up: “Later she will think of these months in Madrid as very happy and, at the same time, very sad, a period when the future was daunting and, at the same time, filled with hope. In the face of all that contradiction, what else could she have done but continue to call that disconnected number, continue to rock and wipe and walk and dance [the baby], to wait and withstand, to take notes and to read, above all to read, as if every word on every page were a tiny yawp of prayer” (*ED* 12/13/15).

Same time, next year. The sumptuous contributions of Wallack, Stuckey-French, and Morano complement the original banquet of *BAE* Prefaces by astute Bob Atwan and the complex of Guest Deciders. Enhanced by other essayists’ piquant offerings, this holiday meal is enough to feed everyone gathered at this most welcoming table in 2015. But we essay enthusiasts (OK, fanatics) whose hunger for the genre can never be satiated, will save the party hats and horns; in 2016, New Year’s Day—the publication date of the nouveau *Best American Essays*, will be October 4, promises Houghton Mifflin. Who will be in it? If not on the A-list, will any of us be among the also-rans? Over the past thirty years the Notables has become both a useful credential and a source of aw-shucks bragging rights, even if we only find out from reading the end of the volume, since—in the typically modest, casual way that essays are treated—Atwan sends no letter of commendation, no certificate. Not a Pulitzer, but still . . . There are no artificial ingredients, and everything is made from scratch.