

JAMAICA KINCAID (b. 1949) was born and educated in St. Johns, Antigua, in the West Indies. Her father was a carpenter, and her family doted upon her, the only child. Kincaid remembers:

*My mother did keep everything I ever wore, and basically until I was quite grown up my past was sort of a museum to me. Clearly, the way I became a writer was that my mother wrote my life for me and told it to me. I can't help but think that it made me interested in the idea of myself as an object. I can't account for the reason I became a writer any other way, because I certainly didn't know writers. And not only that. I thought writing was something that people just didn't do anymore, that went out of fashion, like the bustle. I really didn't read a book that was written in the twentieth century until I was about seventeen and away from home.*

Kincaid left Antigua to study in the United States, but she found college "a dismal failure," so she educated herself. She began writing and published her stories in *Rolling Stone*, the *Paris Review*, and *The New Yorker*, where she became a staff writer in 1978. Six years later she published her first book, *At the Bottom of the River*, a collection of stories, which won the Morton Dauwen Zabel Award of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. In 1985 her book of interrelated stories *Annie John*, about a girl's coming of age in the West Indies, was also much praised. In her autobiographical writing, Kincaid often explores the idea that her deep affection for her family and her native country developed into a conflicting need for separation and independence as she grew up.

Typically Kincaid writes in a deliberately precise rhythmic style about intense emotions, as in her story "Girl" (1984). Her fiction is free from conventional plots, characters, and dialogue. The critic Suzanne Freeman has recognized that "what Kincaid has to tell me, she tells, with her singsong style, in a series of images that are as sweet and mysterious as the secrets that children whisper in your ear." Although Kincaid is married to an American and lives in New York City, she feels that the British West Indies will continue to be the source for her fiction. "What I really feel about America is that it's given me a place to be myself — but myself as I was formed somewhere else." *A Small Place* (1989), another book about the West Indies, was described by the novelist Salman Rushdie as "a jeremiad of great clarity and a force that one might have called torrential were the language not so finely controlled." Her latest book, *Lucy*, was published in 1990.

## JAMAICA KINCAID

### Girl

Wash the white clothes on Monday and put them on the stone heap; wash the color clothes on Tuesday and put them on the clothesline to dry; don't walk barehead in the hot sun; cook pumpkin fritters in very hot sweet oil; soak your little cloths right after you take them off; when buying cotton to make yourself a nice blouse, be sure that it doesn't have gum on it, because that way it won't hold up well after a wash; soak salt fish overnight before you cook it; is it true that you sing benna<sup>1</sup> in Sunday school?; always eat your food in such a way that it won't turn someone else's stomach; on Sundays try to walk like a lady and not like the slut you are so bent on becoming; don't sing benna in Sunday school; you mustn't speak to wharf-rat boys, not even to give directions; don't eat fruits on the street — flies will follow you; *but I don't sing benna on Sundays at all and never in Sunday school*; this is how to sew on a button; this is how to hem a dress when you see the hem coming down and so to prevent yourself from looking like the slut I know you are so bent on becoming; this is how you iron your father's khaki shirt so that it doesn't have a crease; this is how you iron your father's khaki pants so that they don't have a crease; this is how you grow okra — far from the house, because okra tree harbors red ants; when you are growing dasheen, make sure it gets plenty of water or else it makes your throat itch when you are eating it; this is how you sweep a corner; this is how you sweep a whole house; this is how you sweep a yard; this is how you smile to someone you don't like too much; this is how you smile to someone you don't like at all; this is how you smile to someone you like completely; this is how you set a table for tea; this is how you set a table for dinner; this is how you set a table for dinner with an important guest; this is how you set a table for lunch; this is how you set a table for breakfast; this is how to behave in the presence of men who don't know you very well, and this way they won't recognize immediately the slut. I have warned you against becoming; be sure to wash every day, even if it is with your own spit; don't squat down to play marbles — you are not a boy, you know; don't pick people's flowers — you might catch something; don't throw stones at blackbirds, because it might not be a blackbird at all; this is how to make a bread pudding; this is how to make doukona;<sup>2</sup> this is how to make pepper pot; this is how to make a good medicine for a cold; this is how to make a good medicine to throw away a child before it even becomes a child; this is how to catch a fish; this is how to throw back a fish you don't

<sup>1</sup> Calypso music.

<sup>2</sup> A spicy plantain pudding.

like, and that way something bad won't fall on you; this is how to bully a man; this is how a man bullies you; this is how to love a man, and if this doesn't work there are other ways, and if they don't work don't feel too bad about giving up; this is how to spit up in the air if you feel like it, and this is how to move quick so that it doesn't fall on you; this is how to make ends meet; always squeeze bread to make sure it's fresh; *but what if the baker won't let me feel the bread?*; you mean to say that after all you are really going to be the kind of woman who the baker won't let near the bread? [1984]

**MILAN KUNDERA** (b. 1929) was born in Brno, Czechoslovakia. As a child he intended to become a musician, following the example of his father, Ludovik Kundera, a pianist and pupil of the great Czech composer, Leoš Janáček, but in 1948 Kundera decided this was not his true vocation. Instead he studied scriptwriting and directing at the Prague Academy of Music and Dramatic Arts. After publishing three poetry collections and a play, he felt he discovered his voice as a writer when, at nearly thirty, he wrote the first short stories of the cycle *Laughable Loves*. "The Hitchhiking Game" is from the second of the three volumes of that cycle, published in 1969.

Like other Czech students of his generation, Kundera had joined the Communist Party — when he was eighteen — but he was expelled from it in 1950, reinstated in 1956, and expelled yet again, after he made a speech to the congress of Czech writers in 1967 advocating greater artistic freedom. When the Soviets invaded the country in 1968, Kundera was charged with being a "counterrevolutionary" and forced to leave his teaching job. In 1975, the Czech government gave him an extended travel visa so that he could live in Paris while retaining his Czech citizenship. Kundera's novels include *The Joke* (1969), *Life Is Elsewhere* (1974), and *The Farewell Party* (1976). *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1980) is a collection of interrelated stories, mixing fantasy and nostalgia with brutal realism. In 1985 he published the popular novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*; he followed it with *The Art of the Novel* (1989) and *Immortality* (1991).

Kundera feels that although the drama of politics is often present in his books, his fictional characters are not taking part in any particular politics but acting in more general realms of humor, irony, and imagination. Philip Roth's introduction to the English edition of *Laughable Loves* discusses Kundera as a writer finely tuned to the harsh realities of contemporary political power struggles. In "The Hitchhiking Game," Roth noted,

*Simply by fooling around and indulging their curiosity, the lovers find they have managed to deepen responsibility as well as passion. . . . What is so often laughable, in the stories of Kundera's Czechoslovakia, is how grimly serious just about everything turns out to be, jokes and games and pleasure included; what's laughable is how terribly little there is to laugh at with any joy.*

RELATED COMMENTARY: Milan Kundera, "Kafka and Modern History," page 1444.