Democracy in America began with a four-month journey across the United States during 1983–84, evoking the nineteenth-century travels that gave rise to the classic book by Alexis de Tocqueville from which Miller took his project’s title. On his journey Miller conducted video interviews with a diversity of Americans and also recorded his own reactions. He was frequently accompanied by Dona Ann McAdams, who made her own photographic record of people and places. Back in New York, Miller created the epic multimedia ensemble performance that premiered at the Brooklyn Academy of Music’s Next Wave Festival in October 1984. Democracy in America also generated two complementary works: a twenty-minute video (featuring clips from the movie Mr. Smith Goes to Washington) and a short book written in collaboration with McAdams. The Democracy in America book interplays “stories” by Miller with McAdams’s photos on facing pages. Except for the gay rights demonstration and the Miller family’s wishing well, the texts do not comment directly on the photographs but, rather, share with them the theme of looking for America. Miller’s stories, of which fourteen are printed here, show how the project was grounded in direct observation and the personal history of Miller and his family. They also illustrate the naïf persona that Miller adopted in
addressing political issues during these years before the AIDS crisis and ACT UP.

Ever since I was a little kid I was always trying to figure out all this America stuff. How it all works. What it all means. How I fit in. What I’m supposed to do. I guess a lot of people think about this stuff. My mom says to me, “Tim, be proud. You come from good farmer stock.” The other thing she says to me is, “Tim, just because you have a common last name you don’t have to be common.” This seems like good advice. But then I read the newspapers and read the books and it does seem like something has gotten fucked up somewhere. A little wrong turn. Half a shortcut. The middle of nowhere. And the strong feeling that I gotta figure it out. How it all works. What it all means. How I fit in. What I’m supposed to do. So I decided to really look into it all. Talk to some people. Ask questions. Go for a ride. A little ride. And when I was a little boy I really did want to be president. Which is no big deal. Which is nothing strange. Which is something you leave behind. With a pinch to grow on.

When I first moved to New York City I found a big American flag in the garage on Canal Street. It was all torn up and it made me kind of sad cause it was so screwed up. I took it home and washed it and hung it on my wall wherever I was living just to keep things in mind. I would look at that flag and really want to fix it up. Sew the stripes back together. The red. The white. The blue. Some people thought I was crazy having this fucked up flag over my bed. I guess I liked it there cause it made me remember where I was. It made me remember what I should be doing. And mainly it made me feel like there was something to be fixed up. This seemed like a good thing. I lost this flag a coupla years ago. I don’t know where. It just disappeared from a box or fell off a truck or flew out a window. It went somewhere. I can really remember what it looked like though. The way I nailed it to my wall. I’d still like to fix it up.
For a while I really thought I wanted to be a normal person. What would that be? What do normal people do? Where do they gather? What are their customs? Can you join? Be chosen? I felt like a normal person recently at the beach: time with friends, eating and laughing. I felt like a normal person in a long line at the bank on Friday afternoon. Or when I went out with my honey on Saturday night—that’s when I felt most like a normal person. If I got a dog I would feel almost completely like a normal person. I wonder if this isn’t really stupid though. Does everybody want to be a normal person? Maybe it’s foolish to even think that the world can be divided into the normal and the un- or the ab-. That me doing what I do is any more or less normal than that person doing what he/she does? Maybe I should move away from New York City. That sounds pretty normal. Then I can go live in Normal Heights near the Mexican border in Southern California. And live out my normal days in a normal manner. Away from all this.

When I was a kid I remember making a trip into downtown Los Angeles for the first time. I was maybe three or four years old. Me and my family were going to this big movie theater downtown to see this big movie How the West Was Won. I think it was about 1962. This was a movie with about a million actors in it and told the story of this family over lots of years as they moved west. It had buffalo and wars and river rapids and a train robbery and all kinds of exciting stuff. It was a Cinerama movie and they showed it on this monster screen and I remember hiding my eyes when this guy gets killed in the Civil War. My Mom and Dad got the record for the family at Christmas and I listened to it all the time, especially the big chorus part where they sing about the promised land and chant the names of the states where my great great grandparents started farms and lived and made it work. This kind of stuff always can make me cry, it’s so fucking beautiful.

I grew up hating the Russians because I thought they were going to blow up my house and kill me and my dog. Later, when I became a
communist for a while in seventh grade, I got real interested in this other experience and history that is such a big deal in our duplex century. Us. Them. The American way. The other way. Somehow these two big weird civilizations both excited me so much, full of gestures and ideals and the big time. And now everybody is supposed to sit tight and hope we don’t destroy the world. Us or them. The big joke. Here living in mondo cosmo Nuevo York I have never even met a Russian, except for the guys in the cabs that drive like nuts. Do they count? Maybe someday we in the U.S. (that means us) will cool it with the big rip-off around the world and they’ll get off the can, those Politburo insurance salesmen, and we can all have a big party on a wheat field in Nebraska, and I’ll get to swap Thomas Wolfe for Vladimir Mayakovsky and make out with some Russian in a missile silo. Hurrah for Karamazov.
Recently I had a dream I was having lunch with Lyndon Baines Johnson at his ranch in Texas. We were eating like pigs by the B.B.Q., licking our fingers. He was talking to me like I was really one of the boys and was telling me all the tricks about how you shape a power base in America. This was a really clear dream, sort of like being in school. I think I might have been taking notes. He told me the secret is to make people think you are really one of them. And you make them believe this but really all the time you just keep pulling, wrapping and carving a position of power beyond them to be “revealed at some strategic point,” he said to me. This dream really creeped me out. I was hearing this awful shit and my hands were covered with B.B.Q. sauce that you just couldn’t lick off. I wondered why he was telling me this stuff. There’s gotta be a reason why LBJ was in my dreams. I got really creeped out.

My best friend when I was a kid was named Dana Turman. I always sort of bossed Dana around. I was kind of a jerk then. It gave my friend Dana the moral superiority that is due to oppressed friends. He always seemed mysterious and subject to revelations in the way he could stoic-out on me when I’d start being pushy. Dana went on a trip with his family. They went to the Mesa Verde National Monument in New Mexico. I think he was about ten then. Me too. At Mesa Verde they have those great cliff cities that the Hopi Indians built. The Hopis of course are the spiritual guardians of the North American continent. Their most sacred place is called a kiva. It’s a big hole in the ground where the wise men would sit and pray and stuff. The moment my friend Dana peeked over the edge of the kiva he blacked out and fell about fifteen feet to the bottom. He lay there sprawled in the most holy of holy places while the National Park Service rescued him. He even got to be carried out on a stretcher. I think Dana’s going to be an environmental scientist, or maybe a Methodist minister.

On the Fourth of July during the Bicentennial I was still living in my parents’ house in Whittier, California. I was sitting around with Bud
and Betsy, my next-door neighbors. They are real nice people and had just had a baby boy. Bud worked for the telephone company and worked on telephone poles and had a red face from the sun. He had been in Vietnam and really didn’t want to talk about it. I don’t remember exactly what he said. It was clearly heavy and it was the Fourth of July. Somehow it came up and we spoke about it a little bit and then started talking about the baby again. I felt real grown up. I was seventeen and the big fat events of the world seemed like next door. I liked Bud and Betsy and was glad they had moved in next to my parents and had had a baby just when I was about to split. A new pair of feet to run up and down the driveway. I left their house and went up to my spot in the hills to watch the fireworks. I felt really old.

In 1965 or something, I was a little kid and I went shopping for the groceries with my Dad. We piled the cart high and paid for it all and I pushed the cart across the parking lot to the Rambler station wagon. Reaching up over my head to the handle and trying to maneuver as well as I could. My Dad was probably pulling it at the front and let me pretend I was doing it by myself. It was a really beautiful night, tons of stars and as cold as it ever gets in Southern California. We put all the stuff in the car and my Dad looked up at the sky and said to me something like: Wow it is so beautiful. He said, we all can believe different things but for me there is no better church than here under all these stars. This is what my Dad said to me. I remember getting all impressed and nervous that my Dad was talking to me about this big stuff. I think it made sense to me, but I didn’t say anything and we got in the car and rode home.

My Grandpa homesteaded a ranch in the ’20s in Arizona. You could get all this land as long as you’d build a house and try to grow stuff. I guess it never really worked too well because he and my Grandma had to go to Southern California and become housepainters. He really loved it out in Arizona. He kept looking for water on the land but he never did find a drop. It was probably there somewhere.
When I was a really little boy I was out in Arizona at Christmas time with about a million of my cousins. I was walking around with my Grandpa in one of the barns and he gave me something. There was this contest going on at this gas station chain in Arizona where you collected these plastic coins that had all the United States presidents on them. If you collected them all you got some kind of prize. I was saving them, so Grandpa gave me Teddy Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson for my collection. I was really happy because I needed them and my Grandpa gave them to me.

I almost didn’t put this picture of a NYC Gay Pride parade in here. I dunno—part of me wanted to keep everything tidy and friendly, and whose business is it anyway? But that’s screwed up. I mean what is all this stuff with George Washington and responsibility and a brighter future and blab blab blab? How can I crank it out about all that stuff and not talk about back to basics? I’m not sure what my Grandma would think of this or me or that guy from Kansas marching onto her farm in Smith County in 1919. She might just shake her head for a long time, like she did about so many other things before she died. I dunno. I took my boyfriend home for Christmas last year. We had a great time. He’s Jewish. My Dad kept making him bacon and saying it’s kosher. We went on a double date with my parents and went out to dinner and saw a movie and had a lot of fun. I taught my Mom to play video games. I was very happy. We parted in the parking lot and my parents hugged us and said see you tomorrow. They got in their car and we got in ours. And my Mom and Dad honked as they drove off into the night, the promised land.

I was in Colorado last summer doing some stuff and I decided to go and see my great aunt who lived nearby. She and my Grandma and the other eight or nine children had been born and raised on a farm in Kansas in an area called “Twelve Mile Community,” just because they had to call it something and it was twelve miles from the nearest place called anything. I went to her house and another of my
great aunts came by too. I don’t think I’d ever met them, since I’d never been there before. We had a great dinner and I ate like a maniac. I asked a lot of questions about the farm and Kansas. They were real happy that I was interested. I told them about this project I was doing about trying to understand America a little bit and I was so happy that they understood. It seemed really important to me that I could talk about stuff in a way that would make sense to my great aunts. I think about them all the time. That we were really able to talk together, that was really important.

My Dad built a wishing well in front of our house, my house, in Southern California. He designed it and built it himself. My Dad died a little while ago. He worked the whole week selling business machines for Pitney Bowes and then came home on Friday and died. My Dad worked very hard his whole life, doing all those things that
lots of people do—getting married, having kids, being a neighbor, all that simple heroic stuff of day-to-day life. The wishing well that my Dad built has plants in it, so you couldn’t toss coins in to make a wish. But you could jump off of it with an umbrella, thus discovering the fundamentals of flight. You could run a circle into the ground around and around, chasing or being chased. You could find your way home in the dark by the 25-watt bulb inside it, or stand on the very top and look into the future or down the block. My Dad built a wishing well in front of our house. My Dad died a little while ago. I liked my Dad, I loved my Dad. Make a wish.

The sun is really bright sometimes, so you have to squint up your eyes or wear a hat or hold your hand up over your head high enough to see a little bit—around the corner, a wrong turn, half a shortcut, the middle of nowhere. I thought I might run for president of the United States in 1984. Seemed like a good idea, seemed like a thing to do. But then I decided it was stupid for me to do that. I decided there was other stuff to do first. Like go for a little ride and figure it out—how it all works, what it all means, how I fit in, what I’m supposed to do. I read newspapers, I read books. I am proud of some stuff. I do have a common last name, and I did want to be president when I was a kid. But not now. And I could squint my eyes or wear a hat or hold my hand up over my head between me and the light. Or I can take off my dark glasses and see. . . . This land is your. . . . Oh beautiful for. . . .