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Introduction

Locating the Nonfiction of Place

Place. Nonfiction. In daily parlance few words could be less precise, less allusive, less descriptive. How then can the words in combination refer to a specific body of literature? A nonfiction of place. How can we define such a term? How can we describe its features for a reader who wants to recognize it when he sees it? for a writer who wants to know it when she creates it?

The nonfiction of place is nonfiction in which the evocation of setting is central to the development of theme or character or action. It has the ability to evoke in the reader who is familiar with the setting recognition of the accuracy and insight of the re-creation. Even if some readers disagree with the essayist's interpretation of life in that setting, they should still be able to say, "Yes, I know this place; this account is true to the place where I live." It also has the ability to trigger in the reader who is unfamiliar with the setting a similar sense of having been there, of being able to dwell within the textual place. This is, after all, what armchair travelers are seeking to achieve, a sense of having lived in a space they have never inhabited except vicariously. In the most successful nonfiction of place, both kinds of readers, insiders and outsiders, feel they are in the same space, feel they would know the space again if they visited it.

In the nonfiction of place, setting—the landscape of the work, the backdrop against which events take place—is often foregrounded to such an extent that it is the primary focus of the work. We might think of this in terms of painting, where a landscape is generally a portrait of a specific terrain, with human beings often only providing a sense of scale rather than being the center of at-

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tention. Think of Chinese hanging scroll paintings, particularly those that hang vertically, in which only close examination reveals a tiny temple or dwelling or a path through the landscape traversed by tiny figures; Guan Tong's *Travelers at a Mountain Pass* or Fan Kuan's *Travelers among Mountains and Streams* evoke such scenes in their titles. Think of Pieter Brueghel's *Hunters Coming Home in the Snow*, a winterscape in which the hunters occupy the trees on a snow-covered bluff at the bottom left of the picture while the landscape stretches off across a valley to mountains in the distance and frozen ponds filled with tiny skaters occupy the center of the image. Think of Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer above a Sea of Mist*, in which a single individual stands on a promontory overlooking mountaintops and intervening cloud-filled valleys. Think of Claude Monet's painting of the Palazzo Dario in Venice, three buildings and a gondola across choppy canal waters, or Gustave Caillebotte's painting *Paris Street, Rainy Day*, with its glistening stone streets and chilly atmosphere. The nonfiction of place may be the literary equivalent of a landscape painting, and like a landscape painting it may be put to any number of purposes or reflect any number of perceptions and perspectives.

The nonfiction of place includes literary works in which setting has such a presence in its impact upon characters or events or atmosphere that specific place is inextricable from everything else in the work—the story cannot be transposed casually from one setting to another; the narrator cannot be easily confused with someone from a different part of the country; the events cannot be imagined as being enacted elsewhere. The nonfiction of place is never about generic locations—think of all the movies you've rented in which you had no real sense of where the story was taking place, in which Toronto or Vancouver (where the films were made) stands in for some vague, unnamed metropolis or a universal suburb. As homogeneous as our towns and cities may have become, it's impossible to create a nonfiction of place that is set everywhere and nowhere. Films and novels may often have generic locations, but I also have read some nonfiction that left me with no sense of place—a family memoir nominally set in Nova Scotia that didn't present a distinct coastline or forest, a travelogue taking the narrator kayaking to Timbuktu that didn't make the Niger River distinguishable from any other river or the city, archetypal for its remoteness, individual or idiosyncratic. Something more has to happen with setting to create a sense of place.

The literary works that make up the nonfiction of place include flat-out,

up-front explorations of particular locales, pilgrimages to special sites, tours of specific terrain, narratives of travel or residence or investigation—indeed, any nonfiction form in which the reader comes away with a powerful sense of place, a vicarious sense of having been there, perhaps in addition to whatever else the book provides. The nonfiction of place, then, encompasses any number of subgenres and forms. It can be an essay like E. B. White’s “Once More to the Lake” or Scott Russell Sanders’s “Cloud Crossing,” a memoir like Ivan Doig’s *This House of Sky* or Patricia Hampl’s *A Romantic Education*, a travel narrative like Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Travels with a Donkey in the Cévennes* or André Aciman’s “In Search of Proust,” a scientific meditation like Chet Raymo’s *Honey from Stone* or Loren Eiseley’s *The Immense Journey*, literary reportage like John McPhee’s “The Search for Marvin Gardens” or Susan Orlean’s *The Orchid Thief*, personal cultural criticism like Jane Tompkins’s “At the Buffalo Bill Museum” or John Elder’s *Following the Brush*. To offer as compressed and exemplary an assortment as I can—beyond the table of contents for this very collection—I’d single out the following: *A Walker in the City* by Alfred Kazin, not only a great American memoir of growing up Jewish in the 1920s but also a vivid evocation of New York City, recreating an era; *Christ Stopped in Eboli* by Carlo Levi, a record of his internal exile to a remote region of Italy during Mussolini’s regime and his discovery of its landscape and its people’s lives; *All But the Waltz* by Mary Clearman Blew, collecting essays about family history that are also recreations of life in Montana; *The Outermost House* by Henry Beston, the nature classic about a year spent on the beach on Cape Cod; *This Cold Heaven* by Gretel Ehrlich, recounting her immersion in the landscape of Greenland; and *Trieste and the Meaning of Nowhere* by Jan Morris, the final travel book by a prolific travel writer. A host of other titles come to mind even as I type, but these should at least suggest the range of works that compose the nonfiction of place.

Writers approach place, generally speaking, from the perspective of either an insider or an outsider. The insider’s story is often about observation, a narrative of close examination of landscape and locale expressing what time and repetition of experience teach the dweller about place. The outsider’s story is often about discovery, a narrative of entering into landscape and locale and learning either how the sojourner passes through it or how to become a dweller in it oneself. The insider is an inhabitant, a denizen, a dweller; the outsider is a tran-

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sient, a traveler, an *inter-loper* (in the sense of one *loping*—or striding—*through* unfamiliar terrain). The inhabitant's advantage is the ability to let understanding accumulate, to have unasked questions answered almost by osmosis rather than by confrontation or direct investigation; he or she has rehearsed the explanation of experience by thinking or talking about it over time, so that the words that emerge in the writing about place come from a deep, broad pool of familiarity. The interloper's advantage is to be able to see things afresh, to ask questions that the inhabitant doesn't think to ask because the answers are so familiar as to become transparent; he or she draws instinctively on experiences of other places in order to understand the one under consideration, so that the words that emerge in the writing allow insights prompted by conscientious scrutiny and candid questioning to surface. Both intimacy and distance have advantages.

Thoreau wrote about Walden Pond as an inhabitant. We know, of course, that he built a cabin on Emerson's woodlot a little distance from the pond, lived there two years, and kept a journal all the while, which he later relied on heavily for much of the early draft of *Walden*. His inhabitant position was one he might claim by simply being in place for so long—he had visited the pond often over the years as he grew up in Concord and continued to tramp around it after he ceased to live there—but without his habit of close observation and thoughtful, prolific journalizing, he might not have been able to represent that inhabitant position in his text.

Thoreau was relentlessly observant as well as thoroughly experienced in the space he moved through. He had a great deal of stored knowledge, both collected and innate, to draw on in his writing about the pond. *Walden* is permeated by his sense of place, in part because Thoreau's sense of place permeates him. For example, in his vivid account of an evening walk he reveals his feeling for place:

This is a delicious evening, when the whole body is one sense, and imbibes delight through every pore. I go and come with a strange liberty in Nature, a part of herself. As I walk along the stony shore of the pond in my shirt sleeves, though it is cool as well as cloudy and windy, and I see nothing special to attract me, all the elements are unusually congenial to me. The bullfrogs trump to usher in the night, and the note of the whip-poorwill is borne on the rippling wind from over the water.

The passage, written in the lyrical or simultaneous present tense, establishes a sensation of place, the feeling that is excited in someone by moving through this particular terrain. It gives us the idea that the writer has been—or at the moment both of his writing and our reading actually *is*—in this location.

In other passages Thoreau writes with the scientific detachment of a surveyor and naturalist, as when he says of the pond that it “is a clear and deep green well, half a mile long and a mile and three quarters in circumference, and contains about sixty-one and a half acres; a perennial spring in the midst of pine and oak woods, without any visible inlet or outlet except by the clouds and evaporation.” In a later chapter he includes a map of the pond complete with locations for depth soundings, and measurements of area, circumference, and length.

Thoreau’s depth of familiarity with the place as well as his thoroughness of observation emerges most clearly in those passages in which he reveals the various angles and seasons of his viewing. At one point he writes: “Walden is blue at one time and green at another, even from the same point of view. . . . Viewed from a hill-top it reflects the color of the sky, but near at hand it is of a yellowish tint next the shore where you can see the sand, then a light green, which gradually deepens to a uniform dark green in the body of the pond.” This conscientious, thorough examination extends to a number of details that the casual visitor might easily overlook or observe without particular notice or curiosity. In talking about the paths around the pond, Thoreau not only notes their presence but also reflects on their origins:

I have been surprised to detect encircling the pond, even where a thick wood has just been cut down on the shore, a narrow shelf-like path in the steep hill-side, alternately rising and falling, approaching and receding from the water’s edge, as old probably as the race of man here, worn by the feet of aboriginal hunters, and still from time to time unwittingly trodden by the present occupants of the land. This is particularly distinct to one standing on the middle of the pond in winter, just after a light snow has fallen, appearing as a clear undulating white line, unobscured by weeds and twigs a quarter of a mile off in many places where in summer it is hardly distinguishable close at hand. The snow reprints it, as it were, in clear white type alto-relievo.

The comparison at the close of the passage is particularly good at making the

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image come alive for a reader, but only someone who has been constantly or repeatedly in a certain locale would begin to distinguish features such as this. Thoreau brings to his description of the pond not only his skills as a naturalist and a surveyor but also the advantage of long association with place. Dwelling in his native ground is not only his motive for making sense of it but also his means. Granted, *Walden* is not simply about physical place or about natural history in a specific locale, but on a certain level it could be said to be about developing an intensive sensitivity to place. A sense of place suffuses the entire book, perhaps because a sense of place suffuses the writer.

Insiders or inhabitants write about place out of a need to understand their relationship to it; outsiders or interlopers write about place as a way of remembering and responding to and reflecting upon locales that affect them somehow, that move them to write about them. Barry Lopez has written that it took him a long time “to see that a writer’s voice had to grow out of his own knowledge and desire.” He advised a man whose young daughter wanted to be a writer that “if she wants to write well, she will have to become someone. She will have to discover her beliefs, and then speak to us from within those beliefs. If her prose does not come out of her belief, whatever that proves to be, she will only be passing along information, of which we are in no great need.” Inhabitants and interlopers alike find that writing about a place not only makes them pay more attention to it, it also brings to the surface associations only the writer can make, juxtapositions that arise because they happen to be stored in that writer’s memory or to be part of that writer’s experience. A writer’s reflections are idiosyncratic, unique to the writer, and valuable precisely because they raise our awareness of other ways of looking at a specific locale. One little book, *A Place on Water*, is a good example of this. Composed of three essays about the same place, Drury Pond in Maine, the essays were written by three essayists—Robert Kimber, Bill Roorbach, and Wesley McNair—who know and visit each other on the pond and give the reader shifting perspectives on both the place and the friendships that center there.

Reg Saner, whose essay in this collection, “Mesa Walk,” is focused on a site close to home, observes in his commentary about the piece that “where we are interacts reciprocally with who we are, what we are.” Deborah Tall’s essay, “Memory’s Landscape,” is set in unfamiliar terrain, Krakow, the site of family history. She points out in her accompanying comment, “The lens through

which we look at the world is unavoidably both cultural and personal.” These ideas complement one another, reminding us that, whether insider or outsider, the writer of place has to wrestle not only with the representation of place but also with the comprehension of how the writer is perceiving the place. One contributor to this book who consistently writes as an explorer to new terrain is Elizabeth Dodd, who says in her commentary that “something I’ve been trying to work toward in my writing [has been] to put the personal narrative of my individual life into a physical and intellectual habitat . . . of larger scope.”

In an essay titled “Cahokia,” originally published in the *Southwest Review*, Dodd writes about the prehistoric mounds across the Mississippi River from St. Louis. She not only helps the reader to imagine what this archaeological site looks like but also links the life that scientists and historians believe was lived there with the life she sees around her as a sojourner in St. Louis. She relies in part on powers of description generated by close observance of her unfamiliar surroundings. After her teaching job in Kansas ends for the semester, she rejoins her husband to spend the summer in St. Louis, where he is in graduate school.

Here we have no air-conditioning, no laundry facilities in the apartment. A grid of clotheslines crisscrosses the cement plaza at the building’s rear and today I carried wet clothes there from the washer in the basement, passing up the single drier in the windowless, musty room to the ample space out back, although I met no one else while at my work. It was a small act, a tiny one, not really geared to reattach life to—well, to what, really? It was a splendid day.

But after the laundry dried, after the lights began to come on in the stairwells of the facing building, I sat on this apartment’s small balcony to watch the night fall. Chimney swifts chattered overhead, the jet planes roared from distance to distance, and at last a woman across the way came out to read the evening paper before the daylight disappeared. All around, the life of the comfortable city continued its background noise, and farther away, the more desperate lives in East St. Louis continued well out of sight and hearing.

Dodd evokes place by calling upon what she sees and what she reacts to in her new surroundings. At Cahokia her activities exploring the mounds lead her to reflect on her position in both time and place.

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To stand atop this earthen structure today is still an exhilarating event although not a terrifying one. For people living in the Mississippi area almost 1,000 years ago, it might have been both. Tallgrasses—mostly switchgrass—riffle in the wind, and the sounds of traffic on the interstate to the north and the state route to the south both shift in tone, a sort of slow, subtle Doppler effect as one rises from the floodplain.

On a clear, warm day, breathing deeply from the 154-step climb, I'm alone on the artificial, nearly level summit. Distance becomes enticing, interesting in its new perspective. To the west, the tall buildings and Gateway Arch of downtown St. Louis look like a model city, the architect's miniature on display. Nearer, the clusters of mounds rise from the flat prairie in a seemingly scattered pattern. Of the original 120 mounds, 68 remain, nestled amid homes and highways—and recent, failed symbols of twentieth-century life. One mound was demolished in the 1950s in order to erect a drive-in theater. In Collinsville the drive-in has fared no better than it has elsewhere.

What she sees influences what she reflects upon; she doesn't have layers of personal prehistory in this place to draw on or to divert her attention from physical details.

The drive to Cahokia, across the Mississippi from St. Louis, takes her through the poverty and decay of East St. Louis, and when she considers the population density and cruel social customs of the ancient mound dwellers—their rulers were buried with slaves, and mass graves reveal brutal atrocities—she finds comparisons with the degradations of modern American urban life unavoidable. The contrast between the prehistoric world and the modern world may be there for any visitor to see, but not every writer would make those associations. But the essay isn't only pointing out inequality and injustice across millennia; the author also hints at similar, more intimate versions of these issues in her own crumbling marriage. This is the way that writing about place uncovers intersections of social and personal and natural history across time and confronts the writer not only with what she observes but also with who she is.

An interloper writing nonfiction about a place is as obligated as an inhabitant to write honestly about whatever he or she observes, but unlike the dweller, the transient makes no claim that the views presented weren't collected in passing. The reader is obligated to accept those conditions for considering place—

all of us, whether we write or we don't, experience place both as inhabitants and as interlopers and can acknowledge the credibility and vitality of either perspective.

If the poles of perspective for the nonfiction of place are occupied at one extreme by denizens and at the other by drifters, it's obvious that there are a multitude of sites in between, innumerable intersections of longitude and latitude where others situate themselves—those who stay in a place long enough to become acclimated beyond the casual but not long enough to feel thoroughly intimate. No one writer necessarily occupies just one site throughout his or her career. Thoreau, the über-inhabitant of Walden Pond, was an interloper in his writings published posthumously as *The Maine Woods*, *Cape Cod*, and *A Yankee in Canada*. E. B. White also often took on the role of interloper—or visitor or outsider—in his essays; in one titled “Walden” he visits Concord, reports on what he sees and does, and reflects on what he feels and how he responds, but doesn't pretend to an insider's perspective. This is in direct contrast to his presence in the great essay “Once More to the Lake,” in which he is so steeped in the setting of Great Pond that memory continually supplies him with a context against which to measure his immediate experience; he is virtually unable to avoid an inhabitant's point of view.

Perhaps some of this shift in perspective simply is unavoidable. If we write about a place we know we almost can't help conjuring contexts that affect how we perceive the location; if we write about a place we are encountering for the first time, we almost can't help dwelling on direct observations and the associations and reactions they produce. Our longitude and latitude may be determined by our relative distance from each of the two poles of perspective.

However, on many of the intersections are transients traveling while immersed in texts written by earlier inhabitants and interlopers. They not only see place directly, as the other writers do, but simultaneously view it through an additional lens, a textual prism. If we write about a place familiar to us from our reading, our vision is refracted by the earlier writing; we see the place principally in terms of how it compares in reality—how it appears to us at the moment we encounter it—to the way it appears in another writer's text. This is not an uncommon approach to the nonfiction of place; witness the number of books retracing the routes of Lewis and Clark in the American West or of Johnson and Boswell through Scotland to the Hebrides. Witness Richard Hol-

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mes (in *Footsteps*) on the trail of Stevenson traveling without a donkey through the Cévennes or John McPhee (in *Pieces of the Frame*) making his reading of *Macbeth* concrete by walking with his family from Birnam wood to Dunsinane or Christine Jerome (in *An Adirondack Passage*) retracing the canoe travels of George Washington Sears (“Nessmuk”). Such an approach presents a portrait of place through a translucent scrim that changes, with the intensity of the lighting, from nearly invisible and transparent to wholly visible and solid, like those two-way mirrors that, with a twist of a dial, superimpose the image of your face onto the face of the person on the other side of the glass. We seem to occupy two (or more) different compass points at once.

Even works that don’t expressly follow in another writer’s footsteps display echoes and reflections of earlier writing, other investigations, literary influences, and factual resources. These ingredients give essays of place distinctive flavors, according to how they’re mixed. Some are more lyrical or more narrative or more expository because of the mix; some border on poetry, some on science; some are such a jumble of motives and modes and intentions and conventions that only vague terms like *creative nonfiction* and *the nonfiction of place* are sufficiently encompassing. As Deborah Tall observes in her commentary on place, “books about places are . . . often adventurous hybrids in which physical description, character portraits, statistics, analysis, personal narrative, dramatic event, argument, meditation, and flights of fancy can happily coexist. Books of place are geographical, ethnographic, environmental, political, spiritual.” This truth about the nonfiction of place helps explain why its titles are shelved and scattered throughout bookstores and libraries rather than handily grouped in one location.

The nonfictionists who contributed commentary and essays for this collection suggest how various the nonfiction of place can be. The landscapes in which their essays place them as figures range from Kyrgyzstan and Krakow to Mexico, from the Sea of Cortés to the North Atlantic and around the United States. The terrains vary as well—beaches and deserts, islands and forests, plains and mountains, towns and cities, caves and canyons and marshes. Some of the writers stay close to home, walking familiar ground; others locate a distant terra incognita and embark on voyages of discovery. In the course of exploring place, the writers here draw on a host of disciplines—archaeology, anthropology, botany, ecology, geography, geology, ornithology, literary criticism, history, zo-

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ology, speleology, theology, and philosophy. As the nonfiction of place may be found in subgenres across the spectrum of nonfiction, so these writers compose in a variety of forms—personal essay, memoir, travel narrative, nature narrative, cultural criticism, literary reportage. Kim Barnes reacts to moving to the mountains after years living in the Clearwater Canyon of Idaho; Alison Deming ranges from Isla Tiburón in the Sea of Cortés to Seal Island in the Bay of Fundy, places she identifies as part of “the territory of birds”; Elizabeth Dodd explores the natural and cultural history behind the Picket Wire Canyonlands in southeastern Colorado, where dinosaur trackways may still be seen; David Gessner connects the impact of terrain, particularly Cape Cod, on his identity as a nature writer; Barbara Hurd examines her experience exploring the underworld of caves in Virginia and New England at a time when she must also face the loss of people she loves; Lisa Knopp reclaims an inland salt marsh near where she lives in Nebraska; John Hanson Mitchell shares a moment in his experiment in Thoreauvian living on Scratch Flat, not far from Walden Pond; Simone Poirier-Bures reports on her travels among the Kyrgyz of Eastern Europe; Robert Root investigates his fascination with the Anasazi cliff dwellers and pueblo builders of the Four Corners area; Scott Russell Sanders returns to familiar ground in Ohio, where he grew up, to consider change; Reg Saner wanders the mesa near his Colorado home and follows threads of connection to other places and the meaning of home; Natalia Rachel Singer recalls her experiences as an expatriate in Mexico; and Deborah Tall visits Krakow, Poland, to discover what an ancestral site might mean to someone who has never been there but knows well its true history.

In addition to the essays collected here, these writers have contributed commentaries exploring the perspectives they bring to place in their writing, the influences on those perspectives, the processes by which they discover what makes particular places resonate so strongly within them. Most would agree with Simone Poirier-Bures’s remark, “The act of writing . . . is always a clarifying. You don’t always see things until you write about them.” The writing comes not only out of an act of exploration, in terms of place, but also out of an act of discovery, in terms of the writer’s connection to place. As David Gessner observes, “The truth is that if you develop a deep relationship with a specific place, you almost can’t help conjuring up strange, deep, and, yes, nearly mystical emotions.” Understanding what underlies those emotions is what makes the writing essential.

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In a sense this book invites several different approaches to reading. One way to read it is simply as an anthology of the nonfiction of place, a collection of essays, memoirs, and travel writing that ranges widely across the country and the world; separately these are companion pieces for the reader's own explorations of place, and collectively they are a prose collage representing the nonfiction of place. Another way to read it is as a book *on* or *about* writing, a collection of commentaries by writers on the ways they compose their nonfictions of place; here the invitation to the reader is to find a place of his or her own, daybook or journal in hand, and spend time discovering and reflecting upon what impact that place generates upon its visitor. The most thorough and complete way to read the book is to read an author's commentary first and then read the writing sample that follows it, and so continue throughout the book as if it were a sequential conversation on the nonfiction of place that you've been invited to overhear. (That the authors are speaking by last name in alphabetical order you may either ignore or pretend is merely coincidental and irrelevant.) For writers who read the book I hope they will want to continue the conversation in their own writing; for readers I hope they will continue it by reading further in the wonderful work these writers have published and considering, as they read beyond these authors, how many other writers might have been included.

In the end this is the way I hope to define the nonfiction of place—by the examples drawn from the writing and by the commentary of the writers themselves. Ah, so this, you may say to yourself after reading a selection, is the nonfiction of place. Ultimately, this is the way I hope you come to recognize it. It may be less concise and concentrated than a dictionary definition, more sprawling and intuitive, but it will ultimately be more encompassing, more suggestive, more accurate, more true.