

## 1. Location, Location, Location

In the middle of my new parlour I have, you may remember, a curious republic of industrious hornets... My family are so accustomed to their strong buzzing, that no one takes any notice of them.

– de Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782)

Sometimes, waking suddenly, I don't know where I am. The room, the city, even the country will not come clear; they wait for the conscious mind's wheels to take hold on the firm ground of the here, of location. Waking slowly, I never have this limbo moment of unlocation. While my mind rises from unconsciousness to consciousness, vibrations, the air's wetness or dryness, the room's closeness or expanse, and above all, the sounds have located me firmly before I reach the surface. Every location has these distinctive markers. Even in the "quiet" of night there are sounds that say unequivocally, "This is a west Kentucky June midnight", or "It is just before dawn in the Tucson Mountains".

For these are the two places where I spend most of my time. Not that I couldn't be waking elsewhere—some town where I lived months of my life, such as Ankara or New Orleans, London, Madrid, or even Springfield, Ohio, where my family spent a miserable but memorable winter when I was seven. I could even be waking in a place I've *never* been before. One has those wakings, caused by the slowing of the train and the change in noises; peering out of the always grimy windows with eyes blurred by sleep and lack of eye-glasses (Where are they? Good Lord, tell me they're not in the berth with me and that I haven't crushed them!),

one sees the spire of a church sliding leftwards in the middle distance. Is this York? Is that the dome of St. Eustace? Can we have reached Edinburgh already? How far have I come? As much as I enjoy it, traveling is a transition, and I am not myself while traveling. But the usual mechanism works to try to locate me. It is as if clear perception and thinking were tied to knowing where one is, like those telescopes that start with an extremely accurate fix of their locations derived from the satellites of the Global Positioning System. They listen for signals, triangulate, find exactly where they are, and then they can “think”, can find any star or other celestial object in their memories.

These two places where I live: the Blood River basin on Kentucky Lake and the eastward slope of the Tucson Mountains, though they are so different, have shaped my experience and perception. They also have made notches – default settings, if you will – in whatever interior position finder I have. I grew up in Tucson, but more importantly, spent my college years there, married there, and my first son was born there. A landscape where the eye can reach unobstructed to the horizon always seems more comfortable to me than one where trees or hills stop the eye. But for thirty years, almost all of my working life, I have lived in Kentucky, where I learned about deciduous forest, wide river bottoms and lakes, unsubtle seasonal change. Sailing became a new love, and clear winter skies far away from any city enchanted me. In both these places I feel located. I suspect some of the new regionalists like Wendell Berry, reading that last sentence, would snort that it is not possible to be located in two places, that such rootlessness is part of the reason the country is in such a pitiful condition. My own sense of being located differs from theirs in an important way: the ties I have to place were not bound up before I was born, nor yet in early child-

hood. I built attachments to these places through an adult's reflection and association. And location for me is a present state. But this is to simplify too radically the very complicated notion of where I am "at home" and how I locate myself. Locating turns out to be a process that is not independent of time and culture, although for me, it is remarkably free of the usual associations of home.

Let us begin by being precise. My house on the Blood River is at north latitude  $36^{\circ} 02' 24''$  and west longitude  $88^{\circ} 04' 41''$ . My house in the desert is at north latitude  $32^{\circ} 16' 30''$  and west longitude  $111^{\circ} 03' 38''$ . I know these numbers because I have studied a navigation chart of Kentucky Lake (mile 41.5 to mile 57.8) and a topographical map of the Tucson Mountain area that includes my house there. Why? Because I am interested in what can be seen in the sky. Because, as it turns out, internet programs that will tell you what's in the night sky at any given time—right down to the exact derivation of the space junk you may see orbiting overhead (is it a Russian Okean satellite or a spent booster rocket?)—these programs ask for your exact location. Your location determines the precise time and the precise direction in the sky where you will see transient phenomena like orbiting space junk or comets as well as perennially recurring sights such as the constellation of Hercules at its zenith.

Latitude and longitude constitute a simple system of coordinates for locating any point on the earth, starting from an imaginary circle around the earth's slightly bulging middle—the equator—and a circle that goes through the poles and Greenwich, England. This system is at once abstract (composed as it is of arbitrary and imaginary lines) and mortally specific: satellites in stationary orbits beam signals to receivers on Earth that

can direct a bomb to within a few yards of any dictator's desk or child's cradle. Such accurate mayhem was not the purpose of latitude and longitude, of course. The coordinate system was intended for travelers; it is an attempt to locate us, in transit, on a global scale. This is, of course, to simplify and to make innocent what has never really been so. Maps are the tools of states, produced by kings and used by them to appropriate. The Global Positioning System, which enables us to find our location within feet anywhere on earth, was developed to direct weapons, and until just a few years ago, all civilian GPS devices had errors deliberately built into them because the Pentagon feared they would be used by enemies with intentions just as bellicose as those of the inventors. And longitude was not a useful coordinate until the British government bribed inventors to come up with an accurate timepiece so that it could be measured, and measured mainly to preserve British superiority on the high seas.

Terrestrial and celestial ways of locating are connected. For example, the easiest way to find your latitude quickly in the northern hemisphere is to measure the angle between the horizon and Polaris, the North Star. That angle *is* your latitude. But in order to find longitude, measuring the height of stars is not enough; one must also know what time it is. Longitude itself can be seen as a measure of time. Imagine the earth as the center of a giant clock dial, and imagine a single clock hand projecting up into the sky from Greenwich, England—where the longitude is zero degrees. In twenty-four hours that clock hand will sweep the whole sky and be pointing again to the same place it started. That clock hand travels, in other words, at just half the rate of an ordinary clock's hour hand. At Greenwich, all we would have to do is look at the stars' positions to know what time it is. But if we were not at Greenwich, we

would have to know the stars' positions *and the time* to know how far west or east of Greenwich we were — that is, our longitude. In a universe where everything is in motion, location is dependent on time. These days, of course, Greenwich is nowhere near where the political measurements start, but at one time it was, and that's why the longitude measurement started there as well.

On a more human scale, the Kentucky house is situated about thirty feet above Kentucky Lake, more specifically a bay on the lake named for the Blood River that feeds into it. Our rise has a parallel ridge across the water, green at its peak even in winter. Though it's called Kentucky Lake, this long and narrow impoundment basin was created by damming the north-flowing Tennessee River in 1943. During my first summer in this house thirty years ago, I beached my little day-sailer on the limestone scabble of the far shore of the Blood River and climbed the ridge there, through the hickory and oak trees into the pine grove on the crest. There I found a tiny cemetery with two dozen graves, their markers all of punched tin and all dated 1943. My first reaction was that it must have been the resting place for a local military unit wiped out somewhere in the Pacific in the middle of World War II; then I realized that I was in a removal cemetery of graves that had stood in the flood plain of the new lake, near the then small tributary of the Tennessee called the Blood River, so called because the ubiquitous red clay, not the blood of its young men, stained the waters.

The Blood River house is the way I think of it, BR for short. Coincidentally (is it Freud who says there is no such thing as coincidence?) these initials are also our way of referring to the Brown Recluse Spider, our perennial roommate in the Blood River house, there the day we moved in and never eliminated completely by the spraying or fumigation of the house that we do at

intervals of five or ten years. We capture the spiders in a glass and take them outside when we find them in closets or bathrooms—generally two or three a week. Though their bites can be dangerous, sometimes causing a necrotic destruction of much of the flesh around the wound, ours have never, so far as I know, bitten anyone in the house.

At one point my wife Katharine and I considered officially naming the house. The president's lodging at my little college is pretentiously called Oakhurst, so we thought Pighurst might do for our house. Another possible name was Camp Cohen. When we were younger and entertained the friends with whom we'd taught in New Orleans, sometimes five families at once, everyone called the place Camp Cohen. But the Blood River house is the way I think of it.

The desert house also has its tentative name and its creatures. Many years ago, someone put up a sign that read "Guard Dog" to deter burglars and weekend fun-seekers who cruise dirt roads in the desert. The house is isolated, or was; other houses have encroached and now there are newcomers within a hundred yards where before it was half a mile to the closest house. Some time after the first sign was put up, a friend commissioned a tile that reads "Guard Dog Ranch". It is not a ranch, though there is a corral, a well, and a few acres of mesquite and chaparral. Katharine likes to refer to the place as GDR. I prefer to call it just the desert house.

As for creatures, there are coyotes and javelina, neither dangerous to humans. One night a Western Diamondback, a rattlesnake gave its unmistakable warning, like a tiny maraca, to my son, who had opened the patio door to step outside; snakes occasionally get into the walled back yard. The house's smaller denizens are potentially more dangerous than the snakes or the bob-

cat that sometimes gets up on the roof: we share the indoor space with a few scorpions, sun spiders, and the ubiquitous kissing bugs. Some readers with monthly pest control and airtight houses will doubtless be dismayed by my account of these poisonous creatures or by the seeming nonchalance with which we live among them. But we are careful. We watch where we put our hands and our behinds (scorpions love toilets—water being always at a premium for desert creatures). And much must be said for being used to it. Melville has a wonderful chapter in *Moby Dick* called “The Line”, which describes the long rope attached to the whaler’s harpoon. The line snakes in and out among the rowers in the whaleboat and may at any moment, if the harpooner hits a whale, begin to run out at incredible speed, posing obvious dangers to all the crew members near it, and every crew member in the tiny whaleboat is near it. “If you be a philosopher,” writes Melville, “you will realize that you always face risks, even sitting at home in seeming safety.” His point is that most of us don’t think we’re at risk at home, though we would know we were at risk in that whaleboat. My little creatures help remind me I’m at risk at home, just as you and I are at risk anywhere.

I am located when I am in one of these places. I know that in Tucson, the North Star is over the small Palo Verde tree behind the back wall of the patio; on the Blood River, the North Star is nearly in line with the lake-facing side of the house. I know where the sun rises in the summer and where in the winter, because, as I said, in such a universe as this, moving “in all of the directions it can whiz” (as “The Galaxy Song” has it), location is tied up with time.

The connection of space—locations where one lives—and time has fascinated writers of fiction as well as philosophers. In N. Scott Momaday’s *House Made*

of *Dawn* (1969), a grandfather takes his grandsons out into the first light of dawn and faces them toward the black mesa to the east. He tells them they must learn its shape and where along this shape the sun rises at each part of the year, planting and harvest, hunts and celebration times. "They must know the long journey of the sun on the black mesa, how it rode in the seasons and the years, and they must live according to the sun appearing, for only then could they reckon where they were, where all things were, in time..." The temporal quality of location cannot be neglected, nor yet the transience of the place and of the person in it. The philosopher Gaston Bachelard theorizes about one's house and its significance in *The Poetics of Space* (1958). The house in the imagination, Bachelard says, is where our memories are housed; it is a "simple localization of our memories." "At times," he continues, "we think we know ourselves in time, when all we know is a sequence of fixations in the spaces of the being's stability... In its countless alveoli space contains compressed time. That is what space is for." This idea of space as a receptacle of time and memory is the theme, also, of Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* (1913-1927), where places (Combray, Balbec, Paris) or paths through places ("Swann's Way" or "The Guermantes Way") are the containers of memory, which can be evoked by revisiting the place or traveling along the path. Bachelard specifically points to the ancient memory aid of associating a series of things we want to remember with rooms in a house we know well. Though he does not mention Proust, *In Search of Lost Time* monumentally illustrates this way memory works.

As living spaces my places were produced historically by appropriation—we could probably say the same (certainly Nietzsche would) of all living spaces. The Blood River house sits on a ridge of rocky clay soil

that would never have been cleared of its deciduous oak and hickory forest (with a few pines mixed in) for houses or even for farmland. Even bottomland is barely farmable in this part of the county. But the Blood River lies only a few hundred yards to the east, and the Blood River runs into the Tennessee – which the Army Corps of Engineers and the Tennessee Valley Authority decided to dam after the great flood of 1937. They built a dam twenty-five miles to the north and filled the whole basin of the Tennessee and its tributaries with water, evicting hundreds from bottomland farms and small settlements. Eventually, when Kentucky Lake's twin, Lake Barkley, was created by damming the Cumberland, whole towns were displaced. As a result of these events and others they put in motion (the growth of the little teachers' college that became my university, for instance), I now have a waterfront house on the Blood River, no longer a river but a half-mile wide bay of Kentucky Lake.

In Arizona, the Santa Cruz River Valley was for more than a millennium the home of a people now known only as the Hohokam, a name given them by the Pima Indians who replaced them. Hohokam means "those who are gone", and indeed, there are scarcely more than a few pottery fragments to mark the places where Hohokam settlements dotted the valley and nearby uplands until about 1500 A.D., when the Hohokam mysteriously disappeared. The later settlers, the Pima and the Tohono O'odham, ranged freely across the river valley and the mountain ranges of this part of Arizona until they were "put in their place", first by the Spanish missionaries, starting with Eusebio Kino, then by Mexicans after they won their independence from Spain, then by the U. S. Army, whose Tucson encampment, Fort Lowell, was built over the remains of a Hohokam extended village established more than

fifteen hundred years ago—a few miles east of where my house now stands. The Tucson city founders got no resistance from the by-that-time pious and peaceful Indians who came after the Hohokam and, who after all, had never been raiders like their Apache cousins. Then, using a map like a sword, the U. S. Government restricted the Indians to their reserved lands, in this case, on the other side of the Tucson Mountains from where my house now stands.

But the physical and historical spaces of my houses are not their only locators; each has also a dimension of mind. Milton's Satan, speciously arguing that hell can be made into heaven, is at least partly right that "the mind is its own place." Conversely, places are at least partly mental spaces. And here I believe myself peculiarly at odds with the usual mental associations and connotations of places we call home. For the theorist of space, Gaston Bachelard, all inhabited places, even the merest shelters, partake of the features imagination ties to the concept of "home": in dreams and memory and in the images of poetry, the house is maternal, comforting; it has "the illusion of protection". The feminine and protective ideas attached to "home" are romanticized in their most famous nineteenth-century statement by John Ruskin.

In an 1864 lecture called "Of Queens' Gardens", Ruskin gives the sentimental view of home as ultimate refuge and sanctuary:

This is the true nature of home—it is the place of Peace, the shelter, not only from all injury, but from all terror, doubt, and division. In so far as it is not this, it is not home: so far as these anxieties of the outer life penetrate into it, and the inconsistently-minded, unknown, unloved, or hostile society of the outer world is allowed by either husband or wife to cross the threshold, it ceases to be home; it is then only a part of that outer world which you have roofed over, and lighted fire in. But so far as it is a sacred place, a vestal

temple, a temple of the hearth watched over by Household Gods, before whose faces none may come but those whom they can receive with love, — so far as it is this, and roof and fire are types only of a nobler shade and light, — shade as of the rock in a weary land, and light as of the Pharos in the stormy sea, — so far it vindicates the name, and fulfills the praise, of home.

In Ruskin's view of home, the impossible shining shield that surrounds it and the impossibly idealized woman within are synonymous; she somehow generates the shield. We are a little less patient with this patronizing notion about women as sacred homemakers now, but Ruskin's words about the sacred temple of the home still resonate with many people. I cannot go along with either of his notions — that where one lives is profoundly distinct from the outside world, far less that it should be an extension of one's person. Those who see their houses as personal extensions try to create a structure around themselves that is completely those selves: each householder generates his own shining shield. The house becomes a material representation of the owner, an exudate of his personality. Rather than being *in a place* when we go home, we enter into ourselves. Home thus becomes a material extension of the modern cult of individuality. The notion seems to be first of all meretricious: what we generate, I believe, is more likely to be a reflection of consumer culture than of some original essential being of our own. Tolstoy, in *The Death of Ivan Ilych*, pitilessly describes Ilych's "home improvement", and his complacent belief that he has made his house distinctive. "In reality it was just what is usually seen in the houses of people of moderate means who want to appear rich," writes Tolstoy. "His house was so like the others that it would never have been noticed, but to him it all seemed to be quite exceptional." Some may indeed successfully

create in a house an image of a self, an image that is at once original and distinct from advertising culture. But here, what happens is the substitution of an awareness of oneself for an awareness of place.

As for myself, I fear that I have indeed, in my houses, merely “only a part of that outer world” which I have “roofed over, and lighted fire in.” But that outer world is what I seek to know, rather than merely to mount a mirror in place of it, and build a wall around the mirror.

The Blood River house was built by a Mr. Moore, whose son had just started to teach at Murray State University. For many years after we first moved in—we bought it the year after I began teaching at Murray State—people in the neighborhood still referred to it as “the Moore place”. The desert house belonged to Katharine’s parents before it was ours, but it was built by yet another family. I don’t think of myself as a squatter, exactly, but I do feel my own presence as more temporary than, if not these houses, then certainly the oaks that surround the Blood River house. And I have not changed the houses much. “Late in life,” writes Bachelard, “with indomitable courage, we continue to say that we are going to do what we have not yet done: we are going to build a house.” Everyone, according to Bachelard, has a “dream house”, by which he means a house composed of memories, an imaginative ideal of the past, but he also means what we ordinarily mean by this cliché: a perfect house that we would like to build, which contains all those things we have liked in other houses. Everyone is commonly imagined to have such a dream house. But I don’t. What does it mean not to have a dream house? I think it means that I do not seek in a house what is commonly associated with the notion in dream, memory, popular imagination: the “illusion of protection”, as Bachelard so aptly puts it, and

the warmth and coziness of the space of the mother. I am strangely content with houses built by others. A house is for me, like existence itself, where I find myself, where I have ended up. Of course I modify the space; merely being in it modifies it. But my changes are fewer than my tolerances for what is. Thoreau, not one of my favorite thinkers, nevertheless expresses my thought exactly when he calls a man rich in proportion to what he can afford to leave alone. And I think I am also of Montaigne's mind, when, in "Of Vanity" he writes about being content with his father's estate at Montaigne, completing a wall his father started or repairing some building, not really ablaze to put his own mark on the place.

Knowing where I am is just that; location isn't refuge or self-expression. Nor is it safety or permanence, though these are qualities we may unthinkingly ascribe to being at home. Neither quality inheres in the buildings of the Blood River house or the desert house, nor yet even in the trees or the stones. When we moved into the Blood River house, a river birch tree stood thirty feet or so from the water. This tree was a locating mark when we approached by boat, and in spring we often picnicked under its branches. It seemed sturdier, somehow, than the oaks farther up the water's edge, built for stress and change. When high winds took its top branches out, it looked distressed for a season; then it rallied and swelled out in a new, squatter shape. Last year the water, driven by the prevailing north wind, began to undercut the birch tree's roots from the bank. This year the tree is gone.

Behind the desert house, a small cairn of stones, perhaps ten inches high, marks a bend in one of the horse trails. My father-in-law, who lived in this house before me, piled these stones, picking up a suitably-sized rock every few days as he approached the cairn from either

direction along the trail, piling them loosely but purposefully. Then one day, perhaps the very day he had the small stroke that was the beginning of his final illness, he placed the last stone there. Horses occasionally kick a stone away, and eventually the spot will look exactly like the scrabble around it—unless, of course, I take to piling up rocks there myself. The houses themselves seem to have more permanence, but in the desert's or the river's scheme of time they are no different from the cairn of stones. Proust writes at the end of *Swann's Way* that "houses, roads, avenues are as fugitive, alas, as the years." His narrator reminds us of this impermanence of places and how we try to save them in "the little world of space on which we map them for our own convenience", whether our maps are those of memory, of a novel, or of an essay.

Well before daylight the first Mourning Dove begins to call. First come two notes, then its whole mournful yodel. For a while only one dove sings. Later answering calls come. There are pauses, as would not be the case in full spring. After some minutes the single note of a Gambel's Quail joins the chorus. Now the eastern sky has barely lightened. Finally, as some light begins to touch the western part of the sky's dome, the more enthusiastic song of the house finch joins the other two voices.

Though I am still not fully awake, these impressions have registered on my stirring consciousness. This is not the noisy, multi-layered dawn chorus of a Kentucky morning at any time, nor yet the sparer but still exuberant April or May morning song of Arizona birds. It is March, just before dawn in the Tucson Mountains. I know where I am.