

Place and Sensory Composition

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When everything else has come and gone from my brain – the President's name, the state capitals, the neighborhoods where I lived, and then my own name and what it was on earth I sought, and then at length the faces of my friends, and finally the faces of my family – when all this has dissolved, what will be left, I believe, is topology: the dreaming memory of land as it lay this way and that.

Annie Dillard, *An American Childhood*, p. 3.

My New England

What I know of my New England, I know as a townie in a small town north of Boston. As one of those who were born there before 'the sticks' became master-planned fields of McMansions and who lived, therefore, in walking distance to the town centre, the post office, the schools, the churches, and the library. As one who walked. As one who came from two big town clans. My parents were widely known by one-word nicknames (Punky, Dric). I heard the heavily accented voices calling out, suffered the adult stories, got caught daily in the sociality pauses on the side of the road that interrupted play or the path to the library.

I was one of those who shared a physical aversion to having the heat on at night (our noses would swell and fill with blood). We apprenticed in laughing and mourning at the state of the world and ourselves in it. We perked up in performances of words and bodies and then, as if in compensation or guilt, we were propelled into retreats of small exhaustions or a flatness. That 'we' had the habit of a moody pause at a window. A peering out at a stillness. It bent to memorizing what was becoming of a wide swath of people whose only affinity

was that of place. It had a loyalty to the expressivity of things. It could see place as a vulnerability and a threshold.

We watched the windows and porches with some vigilance. A curtained window, or a front porch slightly cluttered or too bare, was read as the actual matter of a slackening, a form of slowing and loss. We knew when a few pansies stuck in a window box was a failed gesture at spring and when it succeeded. The aesthetically failed porch was not just a sign of a shut-in inside – an unemployed, a depressive, an addict, or a meanness. It was as if the skin of the house itself had become decrepit, as if it no longer prickled with relation to what happened around it, as if the plastic siding, long-ago layered over the wood, was itself necrotic.

We felt the bony truth in the mantra that the beach is cold and gray in the winter, and windy in a bad way, that the woods are dark, that isolation is dangerous. If you lived in town you could walk to the library (supermarket, post office, drug store, hardware store, school, church). Thanksgiving and Christmas parties were loud, chaotic, exuberant. And then there would be a walk into the gray neighbourhood (Thanksgiving) or to midnight mass (until the church just cancelled the mass because too many people were falling down drunk or giggling). When my father died my mother worried about him in the cold ground. She didn't want me to dedicate a bench on a walk in the woods because it was too lonely. Cold. There were suicides found hanging from the trees in the woods around the lake where people walked their dogs; there were rapes there and estranging teenage first times, and years of partying gone unchecked into self-destruction.

When someone died we were drawn into the crowd at the wake, a body among others. This was not a community blueprint stamped on us but an obligation to witness en masse the weight of the world as it came down in bald, graphic scenes of how lives ended. It was a stunned co-witnessing. It was intimate and not without friction.

Life in this place went on through a dogged endurance or a series of wild trajectories, or, most commonly, a little of both. The world threatened to avalanche. A life's ups and downs were like periods of being in a groove and then having to dig yourself out of something. You kept going, like a plow horse, one foot in front of the other, clearing a path through what amassed. Or you didn't.

There was also a recklessness and certain regional habituations of what might be called a gestural orientation to life and its problems – a partial, or even flippant, or sacrilegious, way of responding to things. The gestural was a thing on its way to going flat, into the slackening, or, alternatively, a way of veering

off into a flipped finger at the shitheads of the world. It started in a moment of not quite being on track – a widespread situation that generated any number of gestural expressivities.

For one, there was the notoriously bad driving. The problem with the driving was that it was rooted in the situation of off-trackness and therefore was more a gesture than a plan. You drove with your eyes straight ahead, your neck rigid, as if you were incapable of turning your head. You whipped out of blind driveways, around packed rotaries, and into rushing lanes of traffic as if driving on a prayer, as if the game was always already lost – fuck it, I'm going, hope for the best, expect the worst. Driving's weak agency tipped easily into aggression as one habitual response. This meant a lot of noise on the soundscape and in bodies – the honking horns, the anxious rages, the constant yelling at other drivers. Or, in an equally wild gestural gestation, the embattled cluelessness of driving could just as easily shift into some surprising and intimate surge to redemption that would drop down on bodies and hunks of metal as if from on high. Because there was always something going on, and whatever was going on could fork off into radically divergent paths, we became attuned to gestures – our own and others. Things skidded into view, or languished unattended by clueless others. Micro social events scored over time and space and bodies like a fourth dimension.

Place here accreted through a repeated self-reference (we're from here, I recognize the look in you're eye . . .). And yet it took place as a shakiness, an adventure, a return of a familiar surprise. It happened episodically in the precise singularity of the sudden crispness of the air in October, or that gesture. Poised between some kind of acceptance and an impulse to say or do something about whatever was happening, it literally took place as a pause of recognition that might also be an estrangement. Place here was all two-dimensional until it wasn't. All talk and icon and then the taste of a Macintosh apple.

An expressivity had reached a general plane that caught people up, half-willingly and half-wittingly, in a sensory-aesthetic conundrum of agency and being. Place threw itself together like a fictional gesture at going on with things. You could wave it like a magic wand to lighten the hard lines of the secret self. You could use it to interrupt an impulse or check an excess or to celebrate or excuse the same. It could neutralize something or get something going. Suturing a private aloneness to a public being with others, it could be an irritant, or a pleasure, or a mixed bag.

The place itself encompassed beings and materialities, rhythms and energies, in a complex (and loud) sensory composition. The sensory composition of a

New England touched the timeless granite, the Dunkin' Donuts sign, the biting air in January. It clung to things, swelled and retracted like a tide. You banked its promise of habit and mood. You rested on the laurels of a beautiful scene. To a townie, place was a thing in itself – a living intensity peaking in a scene or weirdly recombinant, dispersed or flattened or nascent. It could die the slow death of an economic downturn, or go on living through things to the point of ongoing exhaustion or resurge in just about anything. It gave spatiotemporality a body. It had events, properties, actors, stakes, consequences, competencies, sediments, horizons, and velocities.¹

Townies recognized one another as a sheer co-presence to events and potentialities. When something happened, you were propelled to an eye contact, maybe even a raised eyebrow for added emphasis. Every day you talked loudly about the weather with people you met on the street, you joked in a open-mouthed town accent about the human condition in the way of the world (what are you gonna' do?), you stuck a few pansies in the window boxes in the spring, you paid at least half-assed homage to the presencing of place in the crisp fall air, the old graveyard, the still-imposing catholic school, or the flurry of decorative American flags everywhere.

Place was an injunction to be, see, hear, smell, taste, and touch. But this made it an experiment, a matter of trial and error. It was as if the place itself tossed out rules just to see what would happen. But its rules were far from social facts or blueprints for action; they were more like irritants and dreams that sparked circuits of reaction. If you took your trash to the recycling centre, for example, you had to place things in a dozen different dumpsters for cardboard, green glass, brown glass, clear glass, grades and sizes of plastic containers, grades and types of metal cans, newspapers. Your trash should be clean. Nothing should be left on the pavement next to the dumpsters. There were stairs you had to negotiate to climb up to the platforms built around the dumpsters. There were detailed signs telling you what to do and how to do it but all the instructions only cracked open queries and reactions. There were those who tried to follow the letter of the law. There were those who would swear loudly throughout the exercise as if the world should be listening. There were those who would do a drive-by, shoving bags and boxes of unsorted trash out of the sides of their car and speeding off, car doors flying open on their hinges, as if there was a surveillance system and a police car on alert to pursue them. A townie felt the pull of all such possibilities blowing through a scene.

A townie's town was the tipping point of a world. A hinge opening onto a sensory-imaginary mapping in process. You could feel the town line in your gut

when you crossed over it. Whiteness, class, and ethnicity hovered over it like a cloud. The line was more than a territory marker or a boundary of privilege and power. It was a material-semiotic residue of the presencing of place. A reverberant chamber of almost hard-wired yet spectral lines of attunement and dispossession.

Once, the town lines here were the spokes of a wheel coming out of the mill cities of Lawrence, Haverill, Lowell, Lynn. Immigrant cities. Ethnicities rolled over the lines in historical waves, taking up residence in towns that became Irish, then mixed with Italians, then peppered with French Canadians, Lebanese, Portuguese. An energetics gathered at the lines. Racisms sparked. There were those who came first, those who got their clan tentacles into the ground of the place and grew, those who came a little later, those whose hold was untried. Ethnic figures of people in place circulated: the Black Irish drank, they were dirty washer-women and bricklayers, the Italians had garish pink houses, loud mouths, and huge statues of the virgin Mary in their yards. One of my aunts remembers throwing rocks at a Lebanese woman who was lovely, always upbeat, always a smile, who worked in the mills, who took the bus to the grocery store on her way home every night and then walked up the long steep hill to cook dinner for her six kids. My aunt says it was a shame that the kids tormented her; that was a different time.

Later, when the economy shifted, when the textile mills ran away from the unions to resettle in the south, when the cities grew poor, when the new immigrants were recruited en masse from Puerto Rico to work in the shoe factories that remained, the smell of glue overpowering even a mile away, when the Merrimack River came into view as a toxic dump, the town lines came to mark a sudden sensory shift from the smothering gray heat of the city and its tenements to a sensory scene of vivid colour with a breeze. Sensory compositions became injunctions and jump-starts; this is what began to lay down the tracks of place.

New England itself had already shifted metaphorically north into a pastoral world of cottage industries and farms attached to new-born dreams of a New Hampshire and a Vermont. The old town centre had already been reconstituted as a vision of pure white colonial houses encircling the town commons.² On the town lines, the two New Englands now rose up in a split imaginary topography of images, icons, ways of living, and sensory surges of loss and potential, belonging and abjection. In my neighbourhood, you could look down Mass. Ave. to the gray buildings and streets of Lawrence. At the town line there was an explosion of green grass, red maples, and yellow light passing out of houses onto solid

lawns. There were parks on our side of the line, playgrounds, and a blue, blue lake. There was the aristocratic Academy Hill and small farms with little farm stands. Even the tiny decrepit mill houses on Water Street were contained at worst, picturesque at moments.

But the world beyond the town line was more than just a world of categorical difference or a dream-destruction. It was a sheer disorientation, as if the very promise and threat of becoming sentient began and ended on this patch of gray pavement.

Being in this place, and of it, was like being an agoraphobe drawn to an edge. There was a habit of stepping out over the edge, a venturing forth into a lost existential territory, a kind of ritual of repeating the refrain of place as an event. Setting out mapless, alone, and unprepared into the world enacted the sharp sensory mapping emergent in an existential drift. You would become lost, trapped in an almost hysterical displaced agency like a hamster on a wheel. But stepping over the line was also an adventure, a literal, sensory venturing out. When you set off to get Pita bread from the Lebanese place or to get your rugs cleaned somewhere you had heard about on South Broadway things happened to a displaced townie.

Driving into Boston, twenty miles away, was another story. That was a place beyond the pale. You would be caught in a maze of one-way streets or shunted off onto a highway you might not find your way back from. And where would you park if you did find your way into the city? Boston was the scene of a townie's abjection. A panic button. If you had to go, you would be counselled to make a dry run in the daylight, on a Sunday morning, to map out your options, see how you managed.

Being of a place here was having a nose for the displayed intelligibility of things, their sound, smell, shape, a tactile sensing out of routes and whatever was happening in scenes. It was an imaginal reanimation lodged in an appreciation of how things present themselves with sensation and purpose in a world of entangled promises and threats.³ It was energies surging and dissolute loss.

Place moved in eddies, cut things off at a sharp edge, erupted episodically, set off in tendrils. Its recurrence had moods. Its sublime upsurges had colour; its sad slackenings had a stuckness. Its partial and bruised coherence scored over matter and meaning like a musical refrain. It could be a restart button or the reminder of a wall. It could make people shine, or dull them. Place could shore you up but it could also abandon you. As when the supermarket downtown closed, stranding the old people whose plan it had been to age in place, walking the ten minutes to town for groceries. Place was a world that resonated and shook. If you were

in it, you were in a situation that could unfold, collapse, grow violent or need defending, or rest in scenes of human–non-human beauty. Riding out the events of place called for a certain hardiness. You had to keep your wits about you.

Sensory singularities

A sensory composition is a crystallization filled with the potentiality of dissolution. Both emergent and concrescent, it is instantly recognizable and unmistakable as some kind of a real, but also essentially retractable, contingent, and of a limited lifespan. It flickers in a moment. It splits into divergent trajectories distributed, tentatively, across a field of subjects-objects-bodies-affects. Poised between form and formlessness, it exposes reality as a rhythmic alternation. It shimmers and dims.

Sometimes, some places, like my New England, can throw together into a compositional coherence like a sand storm in the west, or the water overflowing a riverbank in a valley, or the ad for paint that splashes over the black-and-whiteness of scenes, magically transforming them into the realer-than-real of hyperactive colour. Other places, like my Texas, have little compositional coherence (until they do). But all places have muscle. They live in a state of potentiality with recognizable tendencies and affordances. They press people and things into service, entice qualities out of them, pull them into alignment, stretch them out to a horizon. You keep up with the house painting if that's the thing. Or you dig in the shallow limestone and dark clay soils, planting and replanting the species that draw hummingbirds or don't need water or belong here: Mesquite, buckeye, Persimmon, Redbud, Acanthus, Rosemary, Fragrant Sumac, Bearded Iris, Mexican Oregano, Basket Grass, Big Muhly grass.

A place thrown together as a sensory composition is an infrastructure of feeling and sociality that slowly comes to pass as common habits and shared reactions in lives and attitudes. It happens to degrees and in singularities that create proliferating multiplicities. It lodges in bodies, characters, and habits. There might be a kind of eye contact, a tendency to warm up to strangers right away, or a reserve that jumps seamlessly into a strangely familial intimacy if certain signs are exchanged. Or you wouldn't think of disposing of old furniture or lawnmowers by putting them on the street for anyone to pick up. Or that's exactly what you *do* any chance you get. If what you've put out on the curb doesn't get taken right away you put a sign on it, 'free' or 'SO free'. You watch to see what happens to it. The person who stops to look at it, who decides, tentatively, to

take it, will glance to see if you're looking, maybe call out a question or just pause, stand there waiting to see what will happen, if objections will arise or information or permission or good will might come their way.

The composition of place walks the line between some kind of grandiose gesture at belonging and a barely legible series of distinctions to become the small and strangely shared lines of a life. A 'we' likes hot food or it doesn't, it drives badly in some particular way, it talks about certain things and not others. A practice becomes a phenomenon: suddenly, in one town-becoming-city everyone begins to walk and bike places. The singularities of what a composing place is generating become recognizable in the process of deploying them. Odd bits of things become animate. They become energetic performances of being in a world. They present a present with a body and therefore a weight. They entrain dispositions, expectations, and skilled lines of action.⁴ They unearth characters and scenes, throw up a facial expression or a skin sensation. They generate attunements and disorientations that come of being 'in' what is always already a node of condensation that discloses and spits, a splitting series of possibilities that hit a mark in some people at times.

Place as a sensory composition is, then, what Karen Barad calls an apparatus – a 'specific material reconfiguring of the world that does not merely emerge in time but iteratively reconfigures spacetime-matter as part of the ongoing dynamism of becoming'.⁵ Scoring across stories, photos, literature, film, dream, bodies, put-together and left-behind things, it pulls matter and personhood into a state of expressivity. But it is as much a mistake as an inevitability. It exists as an immanence in some series of events, some circuits of reaction, that might (or might not) be made legible in scenes of intensification and dispersal, in lines of enclosure or abandonment, in residues, accidental side steps, and blockages. So acts of remembering and taking care, accidents and failures, cluelessness and watchfulness become central to the living out of place.

Place is a flickering resource or a mistake that burdens. It drags, it buoys. A composite of sensory singularities thrown together through repetition and an excitement of attentions, place is 'a logic of intensities . . . the logic not only of human subjects . . . but also of . . . faces and landscapes . . . (it) . . . strives to capture existence in the very act of its constitution'.⁶ It makes appearances in gestures, colours, temperatures, moods, and the practices of keeping things up or letting things drop. Like a dream, it lifts into a concrete abstraction that blankets matter, refiguring the disturbances of the self as a way of being in some kind of world. Henry, the husband in Elizabeth Strout's novel, *Olive Kitteredge*, is retired but he remembers how 'mornings used to be his favorite, as though the world were

his secret, tires rumbling softly beneath him and the light emerging through the early fog, the brief sight of the bay off to his right . . . and any uneasiness at the way his wife often left their bed to wander through their home in the night's dark hours . . . receded like a shoreline.⁷

Being in and of a sensory composition of place is like scratching on a chalkboard already overcrowded with lines and erasures. More a prism than a structure, more a collective search engine than a grammar, it is a matter of coming into ordinary contact with performativities that may emerge. It is both a game of watching things snap into place, or noting the jump between the representational short-hand of a characterization of place and its singular sensory props, and a dream of becoming the matter through which something literally makes sense and also, simultaneously, becomes literally eccentric.

A return . . .

A place that takes place as a sensory composition is not an inert landscape made of dead matter but a composting of bodies, affects and forests, of persons, socialities, and existential ecologies of being in a world. This, I believe is the topology Annie Dillard refers to as that which will remain when all other memory and recognition is gone – ‘the dreaming memory of land as it lay this way and that.’⁸ The living remains ungathered in bits and pieces of this and that, the refrains that score ordinary experiences, prompting something (a reaction, a compulsion, a venturing out, a laugh of recognition). The sensory composition of place is one of the ways that experience, and especially the experience of being in some kind of world, becomes an experiment⁹ – a leaning in to something starting up, a performance of something gestural, an effort to characterize or to become a character moving in the manner of something.

I have a dream of going back to my parent's camp in New Hampshire. My brother owns it now. There's a river where the canyon used to be. A dozen people of all sizes and shapes are climbing up on each other's shoulders like cheerleaders in a triangle formation. The guy in the middle holds a towrope behind a speedboat. They take off. A heavy, older, blonde woman falls off the top of the triangle and does a perfect landing in only six inches of water.

Six weeks later I'm there, visiting my brother's place. The trees have grown up, obscuring the view of the canyon, but he is working on clearing them. He's worried about structural issues; he's replacing the wooden pilings on which the house sits perched on a steep hill, its underbelly exposed to the winter. He is

experimenting with cross ties to shore up the pilings and sheets of construction plastic to enclose the exposed pipes.

Since he's rarely there, he doesn't pay for trash removal. So everyday I find a place to dump a bag of trash: at the beach boardwalk, at the supermarket, at a rest area, a restaurant. Everyday it's a preoccupation, a risk, a casing-out of places of possibility, a rush in and out, a victory, a guilty fear flying in the face of the signs on every trash can and dumpster announcing that violators will be prosecuted, a dread of getting caught. Taking on the agency of being a local is a belonging and responsibility to act but it is also a risk and a displacement. You don't want the spotlight turned on you, to be singled out by a mean, punishing world that could show up with a vengeance. The exercise of venturing out with a bag of illegitimate trash is not just a habit of thumbing one's nose at an order of rules but a way of following an interpersonal rule of bodies that bodies forth the sensation that to pay for trash removal would be absurd, excessive, beyond the pale, and not for people who are from around here.

I am bossier in my New England – louder in public, in the groove of an entitled expressivity 'Hey! Where's the exit? . . . What is going on with the restrooms? . . . Excuse me, do you know where's there's a good sub shop around here?' I am up for a lark, flying in the face of something, but this propulsion into expressivity is an energetic channel narrowed, and therefore intensified, by social and affective ruts and roadblocks. Suddenly, and without warning, I am talking again about bed bugs and cockroaches and the horror of a heat wave. I feel my sister Peg's visceral objection to leaving the air conditioner on while there's a window open. I remember that toasters have to be unplugged when you leave the house. Regional character quirks fill in the breathable air, shore up the outline of laughable topics, and hold off extreme trajectories as if they were sand bags holding off rising waters. But they are themselves excesses of expressivity tamped down to a strange little practice or conviction that has come to be shared and taken up in a central sensory circuit of some sort.

We visit Peg on the island. She has gravity, eye contact, playfulness, angst; she's salt of the earth. She and George have dogs the size of horses. They walk them on the beach in the morning, cutting through the marsh behind a house, waving 'how ya doin' to the one who watches for trespassers and would yell at them if they were unknown – 'get off my property'. Peg and George shove grocery bags into the back pocket of their jeans. Evening walks are adventures. We're tromping through the marsh to a field where Ashy likes to poop and where there is an expansive view of the inlet. Technically we're not supposed to be there. We have eyes on the boats out there, on the birds – egrets, osprey,

great blue herons. Tall marsh grasses turn vermillion in the sun. George perks up when I tell him that Ronn buys doggie bags for dog poop. What? Why? George gets them to double bag his groceries so he'll have the bags. I agree it's very strange to buy doggie bags and they're stupidly expensive too, so froo-froo. But, I say, we have a law in Austin against plastic supermarket bags. Well, ya, George says, duh, that's happening here too, it's only a matter of time, that's why I get them to double bag my stuff. Jesus. I'd never buy them. How much does he pay for them? George is dead serious but I find this funny and I also wonder how long I can go on like this. It's fun to tweak a regional nerve but I'm starting to want to branch out on my own.

We are staying in a hotel where they have an egg-cooking machine you have to figure out. I can barely contain my impatience with this. There's one dial for temperature and another for time. You lower your eggs into one of two baskets of steaming water. It seems to take forever. I keep opening still-raw eggs and throwing them away with loud sound effects. Others are getting upset that their eggs are getting mixed up with other people's eggs so they don't know which is which. Finally I notice that there's a big sign with operating instructions but it's not thorough enough to answer all the questions and we've all had enough already anyway. It's as if the rules were never meant to be helpful in the first place, as if someone put this machine here to inflame our desire for our soft-boiled eggs and then frustrate it and blame it all on us. Insult added to injury. What is their (fucking) problem? We're looking around for them. It's personal now. It hits the senses and then sparks off in a little rage, a fuck-you shrug, or a redemptive surge to laugh at the arcane lunacy of the human condition. The circuit of reaction that sparks between some dream of an order and the people who come into contact with it as they're trying to get something done generates heat and spins off in energetic tracks of practicality, resistance, irritation, and humour.

The next day we're staying in a fancy hotel with a chef that cooks breakfast to order from an ornate corner of the dining room that looks like it must have been the coat check station. It has order windows on its two open sides. Tea and coffee are self-served from silver pots and porcelain cups in the hallway. I call out that the tea water isn't hot. The chef calls back to the guy at the front desk, 'She unplugged it'. I say 'I did NOT unplug it'. They ignore me. Ronn says they're not talking about you. Some other 'she'. The next morning the pot is gone. I tell the chef. He says now he has the pot in his station. I see it's a different and very large modern pot. He says it's hot but just give me a minute to get it to a boil. I see he has only small delicate tea cups back there and I don't want to go through

all of this again in five minutes when I need another cup so I hand him a paper cup from the take-out stand still set up in the hall and ask him if he will just fill both the tea cup and the paper cup with water. One bag is enough. So he says would you like a pot. Sure. He brings it to our table. I thank him profusely. But then he doesn't bring the breakfasts. Other people come in and are served. Finally I go up to him. I scheme what to say. I say, I'm sorry, I might have told you the wrong thing for our order, I just want to make sure I told you over-easy. Could you check the order? He asks my name, he reads his list, I see my name has been crossed off. We mumble back and forth, rearranging ourselves in the light of the crossed-out name. Later, when he brings our breakfast, he's talking to the guy at the table next to us about a story in the town paper that says there are heroine addicts shooting up in the library. They're shaking their heads; they can't understand it.

There's been a brawl on George's Plum Island. Some young Asian Americans had a house party. Three of them were walking back from the beach. Two white women were in the street crying (and drunk) because their dogs were missing. The Asian-Americans asked if they could they help. The white women accused them of eating their dogs (and later claimed in print that they had said 'beating' their dogs). There was a fight. At least one broken leg, some ribs, a reaction from some citizens who thought at first that the white people were the victims. Money was raised for their medical bills. Then it turned out that everyone was charged with assault and battery. Peg and George's take is that there's only one cop and he probably had no idea how to untangle the story when he arrived on the scene.

We visit one of my aunts. We're talking about people. Someone who knew my long-dead grandfather thought the world of him (this is a surprise to us since we know him as a mean drunk but no one says anything). There's news of what happened to that one, how that one looks now. I have no idea who they're talking about. My cousins know everyone. BJ's moving back home from two towns over. Maureen cried when they sold their house. It was on Back River Road. Tisha asked her what river that was they were on. The Back. This is funny. It wasn't that they lived on the back part of the river but that they lived on Back River. No one ever heard of that river. I say we might be looking for a summer place. BJ says he knows a lot of people; he could save us a few bucks instead of going on the open market. Everything requires a loop into circuits of people you know. There is a reckoning of territories known and unknown. Then you shoot at a tendril, a fishing line.

Agency in the face of the world is all about knowing people. But the knowing people is as gestural as anything else; you should only go so far. It's a place to start

that is also always an effort to get it over with. Get in and get out fast. My cousin Jamie says he made a phone call to get his daughter a summer job waitressing. He told her she wouldn't like it. She'd be working with 30-year-old bartenders who do this for a living. They would short a little college kid girl on tips. And they did. So she wanted him to get her moved to another place but he said no, he'd made his phone call and that was enough of that. The hours were perfect – twelve to eight. End of story.

Back at the lake, we go to check out a place in Alton bay. Big black storm clouds roll in, bringing a sudden night and a strong wind, white caps on the lake. We stand out in it, breathing in the excitement. A group of teenage girls standing on the porch of the ice cream stand yell back and forth to us. We ask a guy standing on the porch of the general store, 'What's gonna happen?' 'Well, in 10 minutes we're gonna have a big storm.' 'Oh really (ha ha). OK then. So where's Depot Street? We're going over there.' We drive over slowly, spotting the landmarks of the library and the gothic town hall. There's a guy in a beat-up car with New York plates on our tail; he's sitting way back from the steering wheel with one arm draped loosely over it, no seat belt, windows open. When we suddenly stop to veer left onto Depot St., he honks loudly for a full five seconds and then speeds by, still leaning way back in his seat. The house is down a long driveway in the woods. It's a beautiful place by the photographs of it online but I won't even go down the driveway because it feels dark.

The next day we take the old wooden mail boat on its run to deliver mail to the islands. You can mail yourself a postcard from the boat just to get the post stamp. At every stop there are women and children waiting at the dock to meet the boat. The kids have money in sandwich bags to buy the ice cream treats they sell on board. At every stop a group of teenagers gathers and as the boat is pulling away, they climb to the top of high poles and dive into the lake to see it off. One of the islands still has a church. Two have tiny post offices serviced only by the mail boat. Two are YMCA camps with brown cottages from the 1930s. A dozen boys climb onto a docked wooden boat to fish. One has a hand-made pole whittled from a stick. One is wearing big fuzzy slippers. There are stories about the waters and the islands. Fourteen-foot waves have been spotted. Only eight people now winter on the two hundred bridgeless islands. The lake freezes solid by Christmas and breaks up some time in April. A tiny island owned by a well-known Boston lawyer is now lush with plants and trees after his wife planted forty-four species on the then barren land. Shipwreck Island is named after a riverboat that went down there and still sits in 10–15 feet of water; it's a popular scuba diving spot. A place called 'the witches' is a treacherous channel, where dozens of peaked rocks

rising out of the water are all that remain of a sunken island and where boaters regularly try to run the gauntlet and have to be rescued off the rocks. Story has it that it gets its name from puritan times when a father left his troublesome son on the rocks to teach him a lesson. Governor's Island, a prerevolutionary land grant for the governor, now has the highest concentration of millionaires in the country and also a very large number of German officers who had once been stationed on a ship in the lake. Another large island has been designated a wilderness area but it hasn't always been so. The previous owner built an airstrip down the middle. The woman sitting in front of me turns around to speculate that it must have been owned by a movie star wanting privacy. To the husband sitting next to her she throws out gestures of care that only go so far: he could move up a seat to get a better breeze from the window, she grabs the plastic bag he drops so it doesn't fall into the lake.

A world is composed from disjointed pieces. But actively *composed*.¹⁰ Bits of social or historical debris can get something started. A joke or a mystery gets people thinking. A picturesque scene materializes residue as a resonance or a desire. A matter at hand or a relationship requires some care that can become a pact, an economy of living flush with attitude. People might be inspired to venture out by a story line thrown into vague circulation. Or they learn to temper a trajectory they're already on, tamping it down to a gesture of participation.

Place depends on a strangely overfilled and tamped down agency of being-in-a-world. A tunnelling, an unsettling, that has become a primary and generative process.¹¹ Strangeness and familiarity crowd in, filling up a cartographic scene of living with odd bits of thisness and turning people into characters at once ornery and vulnerable, hardy and punctured.

Place carries, along with the weight of some world, a certain experience of the sublime as both a dissolution and a multiplication.¹² It is what Guattari¹³ would call an existential territory composed of multiple refrains: kinaesthetic, conceptual, material and gestural. It gathers affects, percepts and concepts into rhythms, atmospheres, and refrains.¹⁴

All summer there were wedding parties on display. At the hotel in Newburyport, each morning a wedding party would float down to take pictures in the park out front and then walk the three blocks down to the harbour along the brick sidewalk. They were striking, almost shocking, to see in all their colour, flounce, and sparkle. There was also a wedding party at the weirs as we were boarding the mail boat. A bride standing in her dress. Groomsmen clumped in black formality with an air of waiting. Bridesmaids in yellow and lavender

making their way along the boardwalk. They were surreal, these New England wedding scenes.

Place takes place on the edge of the actual and the potential. It's composition is enacted by and through bodies steeped in an energetic field. The compositional assemblage of bits and pieces, the throwing of things into scenes, generates an expressive consistency. Place is an experiment to make some things in the world more tangible and palpable.¹⁵ And in so doing it creates lines of potential, excess, failure, wandering and display.

Notes

- 1 See Ben Anderson and Paul Harrison, 'The Promise of Non-Representational Theories', in *Taking Place: Non-Representational Theories and Geography*, ed. Anderson and Harrison (Surrey: Ashgate, 2010).
- 2 See Joseph Conforti, *Imagining New England* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).
- 3 See Peter Bishop, 'Residence on Earth: Anima Mundi and a Sense of Geographical "Belonging"', *Cultural Geographies* 1 (1994): 59.
- 4 Anderson and Harrison, 'The Promise of Non-Representational Theories.'
- 5 Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), p. 142.
- 6 See Félix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*, trans. Ian Pindar and Paul Sutton (London: The Athlone Press, 2000), p. 30.
- 7 Elizabeth Strout, *Olive Kitteredge* (New York: Random House, 2008), pp. 3 and 4.
- 8 Annie Dillard, *An American Childhood* (New York: HarperCollins, 1987), p. 3.
- 9 See Derek McCormack, *Refrains for Moving Bodies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).
- 10 See Bruno Latour, 'An Attempt at a Compositionist Manifesto', *New Literary History*, 14 (2010): pp. 471–490.
- 11 See John Wylie, 'The Spectral Geographies of W. G. Sebald', *Cultural Geographies* 14 (2007): pp. 171–188.
- 12 Wylie, 'Spectral Geographies', pp. 171–188.
- 13 See Félix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*.
- 14 See McCormack, *Refrains for Moving Bodies*.
- 15 McCormack, *Refrains for Moving Bodies*.