

Here & There

Now that four months have passed since I moved to this new town I'm thinking more about *place*. Not to say I didn't think about place before I moved here, of course I did. I'm not so casual about the significance of place to uproot myself and move somewhere whose geophysical particulars had never occurred to me.

Those who are not given to think about a place's *placeness*, if you will, seem able to move from one place to another without giving it a second thought. After all, one Walmart is pretty much the same as any other. Ditto Home Depot, McDonald's, Starbucks, Pizza Hut, Orange Julius *ad nauseam*. From Anchorage Alaska to Tampa, Florida, the same malls, gas stations, big box stores, fast food outlets, radio stations, TV networks *ad infinitum*. Come to think of it, pretty much the same people too, or at least the same personalities and "lifestyles." And since so much of "real life" has been supplanted by digital life, most of us seem to be OK as long as we have internet access.

• • •

Moving is never easy but the older you are the harder it gets. Usually you need a good reason to move. (Moves made before attaining independence from your parents don't count; they're not your decision, you move because your parents took you

along with them.) Once you've left the parental nest, you might find yourself moving on a whim; if you can swing it, pure wanderlust may be good enough reason. But within a few years, each subsequent move is usually made for a practical reason: to go to college, join the Marine or Peace Corps or an off-the-grid survivalist death cult. The next move might be for a job, either chasing better employment prospects in a place with greater economic prosperity, or your employer has reassigned you to a satellite branch.

At some point, you might move for marriage: your partner dreams of a sparkly new start in Vegas, you can't imagine living without her or him. Likewise divorce: Vegas was great while it lasted but as with every gambler, your winning streak vanished, you sunk deeper and deeper into the hole, and now the house odds are killing you. After hitting rock bottom, places you never would have considered—Ashtabula, Ohio!—look better each day.

So life goes on. We settle in, get the hang of things (or don't) and tend to level out in one place or another. The thing is, that place, wherever it is, is always *somewhere*, even if it's the middle of nowhere.

From prestige locations—London, New York, Paris—to well known second-tier cities—Seattle, Melbourne, Barcelona—to smaller, downmarket places—Tulsa, Coeur d'Helene, Yellowknife—to the countless “nowherevilles”—Waxahatchee, Moose Jaw, Oxbow—they're all *somewhere*, maybe not culturally, socially or economically, but purely in terms of geophysical coordinates, latitude and longitude, the X, Y and Z

axes of cartography. Even a lean-to nestled deep in an Appalachian hollow in West Virginia is *somewhere*. A random 1 × 1-meter square in the windswept Gobi desert is *somewhere*.

So wherever you end up, world-class megalopolis or off-the-grid hovel, you're *somewhere*, and that somewhere has specific attributes, the “divine particulars,” as Mr Ginsberg put it.

• • •

When I was a kid, maybe nine, ten years old, I had a pastime that added up to many, many hours of imagining, projecting and speculating. I would look at the sky over each cardinal direction—north, east, west, south—and try to imagine what lie far beyond the horizon based on the hue and disposition of the sky above. Each quadrant of sky seemed characterized by its own distinct appearance, quite different from the others.

Looking north, the sky was almost always darker, grave and foreboding. It seemed, nine times out of ten, overcast. Grey, leaden clouds shadowed the land below. The dominant impression was one of a vast slate grey sea, riled with frigid whitecaps and swept with endless snow squalls. Think Labrador in January. A curious image, since I lived around 800 miles inland from the bleak north Atlantic Ocean I imagined far off to the northeast. But I did have vivid images of Lake

Ontario in winter to feed my imagination. The lake was around 30 miles north of where I'd stand in my front yard, staring at the sky for long minutes, imagining I could, with enough concentration, cast my sightline farther and farther beyond the restrictive horizon, cast it like an infinite fishing line that would just keep paying out and paying out until I directed it to stop, or if something broke my concentration.

Thinking back on that, I must have looked like a strange kid, standing stock still for God knows how long, just staring off into the distant sky. *Somethin' not quite right with that boy*, I imagine some obscure grownup thinking or saying if they had noticed me out there for hours, just staring at the sky. Autistic? Epileptic? Retarded? Tellingly, I doubt any grownup actually ever noticed.

I dubbed that northern quadrant "Factory Skies," one, because the oppressive clouds that prevailed there were so dark and heavy, they hung like thick smog; two, because there were, in fact, many factories clustered along that sightline, heavy industry behemoths spewing plumes of exhaust, and illuminating low-hanging snow clouds with an eerie orange-pink glow. Most of the factories in that north end of the city were adjuncts to the steel and chemical production industries: Union Carbide, General Abrasive, Carborundum, Vanadium, Alox, Dupont, Stauffer Chemicals and many smaller orbiting plants that supported the sprawling factories.

As dark and foreboding as the Factory Skies were, I wasn't troubled by them. Somehow, when I cast my gaze farther and farther out over the horizon I knew I would soar past all those factories and arrive at the shore of Lake Ontario, and I

could just keep going, traveling north over the water, over the immense, can't-see-to-the-other-side of the lake, soaring like a crow or hawk unbound by gravity.

Eventually, I'd fly clear across the lake and keep flying over Ontario, and what was to stop me from carrying on farther and farther to Labrador or Newfoundland or whatever the heck was out there, and maybe even all the way to the North Pole if I felt like it?

Behind the house I grew up in was an alley that ran east-west. Narrow and unpaved, the alley was periodically resurfaced with loose cinders. Recalling it now, 60 years later, I wonder how accurate my memory is. From this great remove of distance and time, I can still see those odd cinders, approximately the size and shape of popped popcorn. How accurate can that be? Thinking of it now I don't believe I've ever seen cinders like that since. They had an unusual color. Instead of a dull stone grey or sand or clay or black or white, those popcorn-shaped cinders were a strange iridescent rainbow of colors shading from a coppery red-brown to a charred black, yet glinting with a sheen of purple-blue, like glaze on a clay pot left to singe in a kiln.

Where these cinders came from I don't know, but once a year or so, a convoy of dump trucks would arrive—always top-notch entertainment for young boys—and dump a fresh layer of cinders. What we called a “steam roller” (though surely they were no longer steam-powered by that time) followed the dump trucks and rolled the

freshly laid cinders down over last year's layer.

Were these weird cinders a by-product of some coal burning process? Clinkers? Possibly. Looking back, in view of the town's heavy industry-based economy, and its record, revealed later, of egregious toxic waste dumping, God only knows what kind of poisonous waste product those charred cinders may have been.

Dwelling on the details of those cinders is no mere digression. Their specific qualities, shape and color are significant; they were one of countless things that made that place what it was. Therefore, they shaped where and how I lived, shaped me, who I am.

The reason I mention this alley is that when I was a kid, and looked down it, due east, the sky above the alley formed a narrow wedge, bound on either side by a canopy of leafy trees, fences, hedgerows and garages, all of which created a tunnel effect. In peak summer when the foliage was full the sun would rise dead center over the middle of the alley, framed perfectly by arching elm, maple and black walnut trees. Early morning fog often lingered on the ground, filtering the rising sunlight into a soft yellow glow I could stare directly into because the mist blurred what would otherwise be a blinding sun.

Because I could gaze right into this brilliant soft light with its mellow glow—and because I was a faithful little Catholic—I could clearly see the work of our Creator right then and there. That giant magical beam rolling up over the far horizon was a blessing, a gift, a charm. Being a true believer in magic, I instinctively named the

place where the magic happened: Butter Alley is what I came to know that place by; butter because of the golden-yellow light that seemed to drip down the leaves and pour onto the rooftops and grass and garbage cans.

So, north was Factory Skies and east was Butter Alley. The sky above Butter Alley was one of my favorites because so many mornings phased from dark and cold to glowing gold and warm. Years of reinforcing this impression, years of private myth-making may have instilled a belief (hope?) that the direction east in general, held good places. Places in that direction, far beyond the horizon, were where fresh and positive beginnings were possible. If I had shared those hopeful fancies with a jaded grownup they might have disabused me of such magical thinking. But I didn't. Those were my thoughts, this was my game, and no grumpy grownup was going to ruin it—not yet, anyway.

The attic had the best view of the sky to the south. The attic was the third floor of the tall, narrow house I grew up in, tall to a little kid, anyway. The attic had a special allure to me because it was off the house's main pathways. It was unheated in the winter and un-air-conditioned in the summer so my parents rarely went up there, though two of my older brothers set up makeshift bedrooms up there which added to its draw, making it an even cooler place to explore, especially when they weren't around to chase me away.

Gazing out the attic window on the south side of the house from a height of

maybe 30 feet (to an 8-year old boy, an absolutely Olympian perspective), I could look down on the narrow backyard, the dilapidated garage, out across the residential grid of neighbors' houses and yards and up into the broad expanse of open sky.

I don't remember naming the southern sky the way I named the northern sky Factory Skies and the eastern sky Butter Alley. For some reason, looking out to those skies, I often felt unsettled. I sensed unease in that direction. A distant and vague threat seemed to lie inside the clouds that gathered there. In the rare times when the prevailing westerly winds shifted south (mostly in the summer) those southern clouds brought violent thunderstorms, wild lightning, belligerent thunder, slashing rain, roaring winds. Major hurricanes steamrolling up from the Gulf of Mexico had winds that could sometimes travel 1,500 miles north, what the locals called "the tail end of a hurricane."

The best time for the southern sky was in spring when a warm breeze floated in and melted the iron grip of winter. One stark March or April day a southern breeze would come along and magically change the smell of frozen earth into the smell of fertile mud, and breathe a floral softness into the air. But in two or three months those same southern winds would turn unpredictable and lash out in spontaneous rage.

Finally, the western sky. Where the sun sets. From my yard the view of the

western sky was obstructed by buildings and trees so I had to go elsewhere to get a good view. The best sunset views were down at the Falls, looking across the Niagara river gorge to Niagara Falls, Ontario, Canada. (For those unfamiliar with the geography of those border cities it may sound incorrect to say that looking west from Niagara Falls, New York you see Niagara Falls, Ontario, but it is so. From nearly everywhere else in the US you look north to Canada, not west. But because of Ontario's Niagara peninsula, when you look west from Niagara Falls, New York you see Niagara Falls, Ontario.)

As a kid, watching a massive glowing orange sun align itself portentously behind one of the recently erected towers thrusting up from the Niagara Falls, Ontario skyline was an awesome sight to behold. Every few years it seemed, a new tower would rise on the Ontario side of the river, each one bigger, taller, more futuristic looking, like marvels out of *The Jetsons*.

Meanwhile, on the American side, Niagara Falls, New York was tearing buildings down. "Urban renewal" is what they called it, smashing and razing venerable old landmarks like The Strand and Cataract theaters, Sears and Beir's department stores and an entire commercial district covering an area of several blocks with a dubious promise to rebuild and replace it all with ... *something*. But the project money soon dried up, much of it was squandered, and the best laid plans of mice and men, etc.

The grand failure of the scuppered "urban renewal" project in Niagara Falls,

New York is a disheartening story of misguided “vision” (more to the point, blindness), greed, graft, mismanagement, incompetence and venal mendacity, all a sad legacy of the formerly venerated but now widely reviled megalomaniac, Robert Moses. But that’s another story altogether.

The point here is that for me, as a kid, those western skies represented a gateway to escape. This side, my side, was decline, decay, destruction; that side, the western (Canadian) side was growth, shiny towers rising up into a brilliant sky glowing bright with the rosy glow of a sun that’s had enough of this place and is moving on to better places.

Much better places.

Some Places I Have in Mind

A stand of tall elms huddled near a picnic grove by a rocky beach, whitecaps cracking on grey waves...

Gaslamped rows of Victorian homes decked with wreaths of holly blurred by snow blowing in from Lake Erie...

An abandoned baseball diamond in a rural meadow...

An amber porch light enswirled by a galaxy of moths...

The twist in the river where, if you fell in, the current is so swift you’d die of loneliness before drowning...

Disused concrete grain elevators with a barely legible Robin Hood Flour logo fading in the wan sun...

The place where roiling dimples pock black water pooling in the sluice beside the

millrace...

A barebacked guy taking a smoke break: behind him molten steel pours out of a foundry cauldron...

The place where the cars still park diagonally on Main Street, and on Sunday evenings the Twilight Zone downtown fades to such an empty quiet a dream—or tears—could easily take over...

A patchwork of bright green and sharp yellow bands criss-crossing the undulant hills that somehow, reminded her of France...

The place where abandoned brownfields surround a derelict steel mill, its rusting hulk of smashed windows gaping black and void as the dark side of the moon...

The dogleg in the the creek where long grass sweeps the water dimpled by smooth stones under the clear surface: a drinking spot favored by patient cows...

The place where a glade of red pines gather to fend off others, leaving only kindred trees silent on a surface of soft brown needles spotted like a fawn by dots of golden sunlight seeping through the black canopy...

The place where you stand on the edge of a shale slab, sere grass flattened beneath your boots, and two inches from your toes is wide open air for nearly a mile across and three hundred feet below. You could step forward to your annihilation or just stand there, feeling the watery updraft from the gorge below reminding you just how close death is...

The place where dense sumac bushes cluster on the hillside, making a dome of shade even in the blazing afternoon...

The place where glacial water turns bright turquoise against pocked limestone boulders gleaming white underwater...

• • •

So why move to Belleville? To be closer to loved ones. And after living in Toronto for

27 years, to escape spiralling urban hysteria. When a fight broke out at Toronto's Cherry Beach and two aggrieved fighters returned to the scene armed with a chainsaw that was my cue: time to move.

Belleville's not too big (around 50,000 population), nor too small. It's an easy two-hour drive drive to a big city (Toronto), an easier 45-minute drive to a medium-size city (Kingston) and not too far from either Ottawa or Montreal. Belleville is still related to the great elder, Lake Ontario, yet buttressed by the paw of Prince Edward County outstretched into the lake, buffering Belleville from the lake's long intemperate winters. Prince Edward County, a mere 15-minute drive south of Belleville, is a mix of rolling farmland and also a haven for well-heeled Toronto exiles. A short drive to the north, lakes and hills as yet unmarred by the Greater Toronto Area's (GTA) metastasizing subdivisions.

Plus, it's east, in the direction of where Butter Alley was always pointing.

