

Memory, Place, Being

JOSEPH WILDER *with* ELIZABETH HONOR WILDER

I live in a city that is forgetting itself, forgetting itself even as it constantly remakes itself into new impermanent shapes. A city driven by change, but not renewal, which might suggest an idea, a civic principle seeking expression. A city ordered, if at all, only by its changing, by its ever-expanding rivers of traffic coursing ever-widening channels. As it forgets itself, I lose myself.

We are relational beings, our ontology predicated on our ties to each other and to the places we inhabit.

BEHOLD

I recall as a boy accompanying my mother as we went to Old Pascua, Tucson's original Yaqui Village, at Easter-time. Across the great dirt plaza, late at night, out of the darkness, I could see the yellow-white light from a bare bulb hanging in a ramada, as we made our way quietly toward the small bunch of people gathered, the silence only interrupted by the irregular drum beat coming out of the darkness like an echo, the beat hanging in the air. And then the flute. Working our way to the front, I would behold the pascolas and musicians and the central figure, motionless, ready, standing in the center. My mother bends down and whispers in my ear: "Look, Joe, the deer dancer."

A Yaqui pahko is a ceremonial event celebrating and expressing religious meaning. It is especially associated with deer songs and the deer dancer. To me attending, observing, or just being in the vicinity and hearing a pahko underway captures the quintessential feeling of our desert Southwest. For me it is one of those apertures through which I am tied to place and tied to the layers of my own being experienced over time. A seeming lifetime after my childhood, I remember a night in

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Potam when I was the guest of Felipe Molina and his Sonoran compadre. I was sleeping in a daub-and-wattle structure in the family compound. I had gone to sleep hearing, in the distance, a pahko underway, the sound of flute and drum. In the middle of the night I awoke and heard that solitary drum beat—a resonating “bong” that carried through the black Potam night—followed by an interval of silence before a brief trill of flute. Lying there I felt at once the exoticism the sounds conveyed to me, as well as the deep comfort of the familiar, the remembrance of the many deer dances I had seen, from childhood on. I drifted back to sleep easily; Yaquis—the Yoeme—were doing a pahko, and an almost chiropractic adjustment was being made in our corner of the world.

CITIES OF MEMORY

I live in a city increasingly defined, for me, by its absences. In one of his “City Life” essays for the *New York Times* earlier this year, Verlyn Klinkenborg wrote that we carry with us “footprints of vanished places,” leaving us in our daily navigation “the strange sense of knowing our way around a world that can no longer be found.” Klinkenborg’s expression locates exactly a peculiarly American alienation—or perhaps as well the estrangement experienced by victims of total war or natural devastation: the routine loss of particular place imbued with memory and meaning and, thereby, being. I cherish the places I may walk that my father walked and that I walk with my son and daughter, three generations absolutely joined in place and time and memory. Linkages broken casually, brutally, thoughtlessly, and usually needlessly. Sometimes, almost as a miracle, the chain of being survives intact. In her 1935 diary, my mother wrote of my parents’ first home together on Main Street: “We would walk past our own open window, and by a light from one of the back rooms we could see outlines of our things. From the sidewalk as we strolled past our own window we were strangers looking in on two other people’s happiness, sensing the mystery of their togetherness in what was very likely their first house: they seem young. She is thinking how wonderful that he should walk so carelessly through that doorway as though it were all his; he is thinking she stays here and does not go away; she sleeps here; she has taken calm possession of the place. We turn around and walk past again and by this time we are homesick and almost sad thinking of the life beyond that window. One of us says this looks like a cozy place, let’s go in, and so we do.”

The place on Main survives not only as memory and relations of memory, but as ground, and thus, however transformed, as a ground of being.

Not so very long ago I visited another city of my youth—Amsterdam—with my young teenaged daughter, arriving just as the American bombing and destruction of Baghdad commenced, shock and awe, a weird example of an American impulse more commonly associated with the Mongol horde when faced with urbanism and structures of memory: lay waste to it. For my then-eighth grade daughter it was a great trip to a foreign land, a chance to see first hand reactions to our country, to see ourselves as other in a time of crisis and discomfort. For me it was that and more: a return to a potent place of memory and recall where my younger traces were not effaced, were intact, at least for me. I remember walking with Elizabeth on the Prinsengracht, returning from dinner with old friends on the Lindengracht, a dinner we had hosted together. And the Prinsengracht was beautiful, it was a soft spring evening, and I still smoked cigarettes, pensive drags as I strolled along under the still-bare, towering elm and lime trees, a rich man with a beautiful daughter. Some 35 years previous I had walked the same Prinsengracht, the long arc back to Leidseplein where I would pick up my tram to the working class ring of apartments where most people, in fact, lived. Then I was impoverished, lonely and excited by it all; now I was joined together, my life whole and full, found and reflected in the ancient integrity of a place by which to measure my meager span and rejoice in a temporality that can transcend itself in the permanence of place.

A YAQUI MADELEINE

My daughter, Elizabeth Honor, is now grown up, and a part of that growing up was applying to college, an arduous process that now requires, for selective colleges, amid a myriad of onerous demands, the writing of multiple essays. I include here, with permission, one of hers, an expression, you may detect, of her deep love of Marcel Proust as well as her own particular grounding.

It seems that, even then, I underestimated the desert. I forgot its inevitability, its vast unbroken indifference. I forgot how quickly sand loses its heat once the sun has set. This desert—the desert of my childhood—is captured in my memory of one night, the night

we went to see the Deer Dancer. My desert's genesis is physical but its reality, according to the blind perception of my memory, exists in my father's jacket and that one night it always recalls. As a little girl, on the night before Easter, when the desert cold surprised me, I reached for my father's jean jacket—an instinct that I never questioned then but that now seems ironic. The jacket I chose for warmth and protection was an embodiment of everything that was incomprehensible and frightening about the desert. It was big enough that I could get lost in it as easily as in the desert itself. The material was as cold as the desiccated air that chapped our lips as we stood watching the Deer Dancer, while its stiffness recalled the rigidity of my spine as I struggled not to shiver. The collar was slightly frayed but intact: a testament to the desert's vow of integrity. My struggle to break in the fabric was simply an echo of the saguaro cacti's uncompromising, upright posture. The jacket didn't protect against the cold but I reached for it anyway in an unconscious grasp for the protection it did offer: the insulation of adventure, of independence, of strangeness and infinity. It presaged the gauzy delicacy of the dress I would wear the next morning with the austere strength of denim. Wearing it, I stood proudly as a girl dressed in revolution and pearls. On that night before Easter, I woke up and slipped my arms into the jean sleeves, wiggling my fingers into the corners of the pockets and pulling the fabric around me like a shawl.

Although it is April, Christmas lights still garland the stucco houses of Old Pascua. Elsewhere in the city, brown trees on the curb and piles of unspent cards are all that remain of the season, but in this Yaqui neighborhood the lights linger long after winter. On the night before Easter, they guide wanderers past the spider web highways to a humble dirt lot where the Deer Dancer dances. He is seventy now, naked from the waist up even in the cold air, with the head of a deer secured to his own and gourds bound to his wrists and ankles. He dances through the night on the packed-dirt ground lit only by a single bare light bulb. The men who gather to watch share cigarettes with any strangers brave enough to keep vigil, while at the opposite end of the lot women in Catholic burquas keen in prayer at an altar.

At first I am so distracted by the cold I don't notice the Deer Dancer. To keep from shivering, I picture my spine, cradled by

muscles like interlocked fingers, and move closer to the bonfire that burns to one side of the lot. Smoke from the fire burrows into the fabric of my jacket. Someone hands me a paper cup of hot chocolate and finally I feel warm enough to concentrate on the dancing. In the strange echoing silence I watch the Deer Dancer's calloused, certain feet as they imprint the fleeting dust with shadows of their existence.

In *Justine*, Lawrence Durrell writes that "we are the children of our landscape." There is a shared geography that the Deer Dancer and I will always return to in our respective dislocations. When the time comes for me to leave, I will not be able to pack the desert up and carry it in my luggage. Nor will I take my father's jacket with me. I will no longer need to. Like the Deer Dancer who carries Yaqui tradition into concrete modernity, I will always carry the desert into the green and rainy cities of my future. I have made the trip to Old Pascua at Easter many times, but in some way I will always be a six-year-old girl lost in her father's jacket.

INTIMATE GEOGRAPHY

Place, memory, being. We are at once lens, image refracted, and receptive soul imprinted upon—and then layered by time as memory. We are this refractory collection, a community of place embodied, remembered, felt, imagined, and focused in our own singular particularity. And shared. We take up each other's narratives, connecting them to place, expanding and re-telling them, changing them and making them our own. It is the notion that we exist in complicated and dialogical networks—husband and wife, lover and lover, father and mother and daughter and son, friend to friend and foe to foe—bands or ties that coil almost infinitely, crossing and layering what we apprehend as ourselves and our world, and this almost unfathomable network of relations is set into place, always in a particular place, conditioning the relation while drawing it into its own foundation. We become, so to speak, layers upon the earth, the dust upon the ground, that from which we come and that to which we go, beings in transit, not separated. We begin to suspect that the world we encounter is a lattice-work of hallowed ground—always bearing someone's history—and thereby sacred in its entirety. The persistence of place sustains a continuity of meaning, a community, a chain of being

maintained through the literal touch of memory-drenched ground. We inscribe our histories in our places, joining together in complex, overlapping narratives, making our places ever more deeply human, soulful, and hallowed. These are the places that, even if strange or new to us, are felt as intelligible and oddly familiar, that are recognizable to us. They constitute our ground of being, from which we constantly depart to elaborate our lives and to which we return, seeking our memory, our selves, our home.

A book I tried to read but could not finish: Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*. A story so sad I would put it down after one or two sentences, a story, I realize, so desolate because it pictures the nearly absolute destruction of place, that renders a father's love of his son and effort to protect him so painful and precarious as to be, for me, beyond all ability to witness. Place, understood like this, matters and stands against the annihilating architecture and geography of nothing, the deracinated modernity that erases memory and looks to destroy us and to unbind the generations linking us to past and future in an endless and endlessly dying present. These structures of memory, these intimate geographies are, at last, all we have and all that we most need. We depend upon them, and we are lost without them.

That which is sought and which we most want, we call home. Not losing ourselves, but finding ourselves, day after day, in an existence ordered by place and by the complex memories we carry with us of being in place. This is a being that opens itself imaginatively to the world, recognizing new structures of meaning, adumbrated by the deep connection between memory and imagination. There is my home; I have seen it in my dreaming; I recognize it; I claim it.

Amsterdam, Potam, Pascua, Main Street, the desert. Bare bulbs illuminating a warm circle in a pitch-black night. I am drawn to the depth of dwelling. I walk about and stare at buildings, finding them redolent of meaning and human imprint and human possibility. Except for those that don't, that are redolent of nothing at all, and diminish me. We construct our narratives, and if we can, we dwell within them, in place remembered, in loving fellowship, at home, our doors and windows open, inviting in a beautiful world, in calm and sure possession of all that is, and should be, ours. ❖