

# Place, Paradox, and Love

Leslie Van Gelder

*If there is a stage at which an individual life becomes truly adult, it must be when one grasps the irony in its unfolding and accepts responsibility for a life lived in the midst of such paradox. One must live in the middle of contradiction, because if all contradiction were eliminated at once life would collapse. There are simply no answers to some of the great pressing questions. You continue to live them out, making your life a worthy expression of leaning into the light.* Barry Lopez, *Arctic Dreams*

Let me begin with some images. First, Degas' nude bather stepping gingerly into the tub, unknowingly beautiful in the eyes of the painter who cannot resist capturing the play of light along her back. Second, a grove of aspens illuminated against a darkening sky, leaves beating against wind in a butterfly's dance moments before the rain comes. Third, a daughter, morning after her 21<sup>st</sup> birthday, sitting across from her father, both cradling cups of coffee, she noticing for the first time that the silhouette of their hands is somehow the same.

With each image, time stops. Each moment poised on either side of something else, shaped by the sepals of an unfolding parenthesis, holds a moment of intimacy made poignant by its fleetingness. Intimacy permits the examination of time's texture by leaving us hanging on pregnant harpstrings of past and present waiting as it were, for the note to be struck in exquisite tension. How we love that waiting for release; how we wish it would never come so we could feel timelessness forever. What a perfect paradox.

Geographer Yi Fu Tuan wrote that "Place is a pause in movement,"<sup>1</sup> an idea which has a richness, but to which ultimately I cannot support. Place is not a pause in movement, a warm bed in a world of wild unknowns. Tuan has confused place with intimacy, which may indeed be his pregnant pause. Place, on the other hand, is the motion of relationships in a world of continuous processes. And place, through its woven interplay of the implicit and the explicit, offers a doorway through which we can come to understand the intricacies of intimacy, paradox, and love.

I first became interested in Place as a concept because I wanted to understand Time. I wanted to know its sinews, its hollows. How could it be possible to be a four year old girl, a thirty-five year old woman, and the great granddaughter of a strong woman named Sipporah who dug her own grave and was shot into it, a woman I never knew but whose

story I carry; how could it be possible to be all one in the same moment simply by putting a foot on the bottom step of an abandoned house near Sheepshead Bay? I wanted to know how time compresses and expands, how stories live and grow in those spaces, how each moment and each place become who we are. After much wandering and exploring, I finally came to understand that we are all places, storied landscapes of our own, wild geographies of passions and purpose who can carry time's expansiveness through thistle-seeds of story. But in coming to understand place, I realized I would need to understand the nature of relationships and for that I would need to come to understand love.

And that's where the terrain started to get more difficult.

For how is it possible to write about love? Love's power is in its ability to resist the ease of language. Love's impenetrable cloak of wordlessness has served as our deepest source of mystery where the struggle alone for its expression has been an endless wellspring of creative paradox. Each moment of relationship births an entity – the relationship – and still maintains the transformation of each individual in a moment of simultaneity but not sameness. Love must honor the balance between 'I' and 'We,' and we, as places, are also systems in process – ever changing, ever incorporating the past into the present, ever encountering the dynamic landscape of polarity and paradox. The exploration of the tensions which unite our dualities offers the greatest possibility to comprehend how we engage in living. The challenge, though, is that this terrain does not have direct language for there is no physicality on which to hang a commonality of comprehension. No warm familiarity of tree bark or summer grass on which to rest our hands. No way to agree that this is the color orange. And while the poles themselves may be nouns – home, wild, fear, love - the terrain between is all verb in motions described by the uncomfortable language of "becoming."

In this wordless landscape of tensions, metaphor and simile become the linguistic lifelines and map legends. Experience of the past anchors the present, simile binds us from one like thing to another, metaphor sprouts multiplicities, as that which is one becomes many simply, by naming an inherent deep sameness in the two. No wonder poets venture bravely into the landscape of paradox for who else could penetrate its depths? Who else could find the words for navigating the space between two trailing silk lines of spider web?

The poles themselves, whether they be love and fear, home and away, in group/out, those appear to us all with enough clarity to recognize them as silhouettes of trees emerging from predawn darkness, but it is the movement itself – the simultaneous tension between the centrifugal and centripetal – which holds wordlessly atomic power. Earlier, I shared that Yi Fu Tuan described place as a pause in motion, a conscious attempt to stop a world of processes. In looking at the system as both particle and wave, he seeks the particle so that we can stop and look at it, while I believe it more fruitful to come to understand the motion of the wave. To see intimacy we need stop time to see the particle; to explore love, we need to know the motion of the wave.

Let me pause for a moment and speak on a definition of love. I will give you those first pictures again – Degas' bather unwittingly illuminated in the light, the painter's brushstroke caressing her back, aspen leaves carried in the wind moments before the storm, a young woman on the cusp of adulthood seeing her family in her self for the first time. Hallmark would cast me out for coming up with these examples – can you see the greeting cards? – but I'll maintain that my definition of love is the feeling of being moved by the beauty of another and that the beauty does not evoke a desire for ownership, but instead a desire to do all things possible to let that beauty continue to flourish. We want to give of ourselves out of simple gratitude for being moved by the beauty of another and no matter what we give, we feel it is never truly enough for the gift we receive. This is the truest love; one that is about bearing witness to a beauty and wanting to see it reach its fullest potential or express its essence. An endless gift.

Tied to the gift of love, skillfully curled, in e.e.cummings, "all other worlds" is Hamlet's undiscovered country of death. To write of paradoxes is like trying to blow dandelion manes without planting seeds, so please forgive me when each time I open up one idea, I find it has immediately sprouted twinned roots with another. But who has loved and then has not immediately contemplated the potential for the loss of that love – its sweetness made all the more poignant by the ever-present potential of its absence? Love and death are our great unarticulated terrains wherein there is no validation of arrival in either location and no way to communicate in words to those back home. The exploration of the space between love and death allows, too, for an inquiry into the movement between safety and risk. When

we enter into relation with others we have to navigate the landscape of safety and risk to understand giving and receiving. When we nourish another, it comes from inside of us bodily, spiritually. We literally give of ourselves and are left with the glass bowl of paradox which continually asks how can we feed another's beauty when we are so nourished by it? Does our gifting transcend the punctuation of death because we, in living or in dying, feed the greater and endless beauty of life itself? More paradoxes.

Up until now I have not made any distinction between the love of humans to each other and the love with that which is not human. I would like to explore this for a moment to bring the subject of place back into this discussion for I believe it is the comprehension of love of place which allows us to make explicit the nature of love and relation.

Paul Shepard wrote that, "For the hunter-forager, this Me in a non-Me world is the most penetrating and powerful realization in life. The mature person in such a culture is not concerned with blunting that dreadful reality but with establishing lines of connectedness or relationship. Formal culture is shaped by the elaboration of covenants and negotiations with the Other."<sup>2</sup> What differs to me is that in non hunter-forager cultures like our own, where the in-group of kinship relationships is generally reduced to humans and domesticated animals, we do not have an articulated mature relationship with Otherness, yet it still most certainly and profoundly exists. When we exchange Shepard's word Otherness for place, we see that in the unarticulated relationship with place we are able to see self. Place allows us to see beauty in the world around us in a way that is acceptable perhaps because it is other than human discourse. There are no arguments against expressing being moved by the plum colored morning sky giving way to light or the unmitigated joy of the first daffodil of spring. None of us is capable of producing a sunrise or coaxing a fern frond to unfurl, so we can experience the beauty without reflecting inwards on our own capacities for such things. Among our own human relations are we ever as sure of unabashed beauty or joyfulness for in all of our relations we can not see the other without always finding the possibility of ourselves there, too.

Shepard believed that our encounter with otherness is what makes us human. In otherness we learn boundaries and edges, in otherness we learn resonance, and in the wordlessness of the non-human we can perhaps learn the way to articulate or make explicit love both for the non-human and each other.

From my own experiences, I can tell you that I first fell in love when I was sixteen years old. Up until that point I had traveled much of the world with my father, whose love of place was contagious and openly expressed – but whose choice of loves was not my own. He loved deserts, long expanses of heat and light where geography is shaped by absence as much as presence. He knew the inhabitants, spotted skunks, eland and nyala, lions, not just by their common names but as closely as their liquid eyes or through the extra spot of white on a tail. I had seen him with his love; it was not mine. It was beautiful – but I looked on from the chairs along the wall while he danced.

And then I went to Newfoundland worse yet, Labrador, and fell head over heels in the worst sort of 16 year old's love. I wanted, no, I *needed* to know the name of every bird, every flower, every star. I spent hours inches from sundews, days pressing cottongrass between pages of books hoping their downy heads would sustain me in my impending absence; grieving future separations which made the time together all the sweeter. I swam in iceberg waves and discovered the nature of possibility existed compressed into the moment of wave hitting rock when all the world could happen before the spray landed back into the ocean again. I found northern stars hanging on threads closer than fireflies and knew the aurora's stomp dance for the first time in my life. Raven taught me how to curl just the edges of her wings to fly.

I was in love. I still am today. I couldn't tell anyone in words that made sense. I still can't, the only difference now I know what an impossibility it is to try and yet what fruitful creative space to endeavor. What I learned in that love was the buoyancy of loving the world and being a part of it. And, in loving it, I wanted to give of myself to feed the life, the future promise of that place.

So I taught the children in the area the names of the same birds and trees that I was coming to know myself. We made up stories, we lived in the land, we ate of it in salmon, moose, caribou, and cloudberry. We knit ourselves into the stories of the place. In the moments where I believed I was truest in my love, I was simply giving of the best of myself. Far away, in this place in Ireland, which was once the same piece of land as my Newfoundland, I am still feeding that love. It is no less real here than there as it transcends time and location.

How can love of place transcend all boundaries of physical geography? Our relationship with places are not only geographical instances bounded by heres and nows, they are underground springs of unarticulated feeling which feed how we act and live in the world. For what else could so powerfully feed the roots of our sense of home and self, our experience of the wild and otherness, safety and fear, than the very geographical nature of needing to feel *from* and *of*? This subterranean river of place feeds the essence of who we are by shaping our landscapes of belonging and longing.

While our love of other humans lives explicitly in our lives – we wear rings to declare it, engage in regular discussion of those relations, send Christmas and Valentine’s cards, give boxes of chocolate – our love of place has no overt ritualized expressions or venue in our culture. How does our little garden in Oxford know of my love? How does raven know that I have never once taken for granted my lessons in flight? I can express only through gesture, and gestures must speak for intention and emotion.

For is there an etiquette for wordless love?

The morning I wrote this I woke before dawn. My husband was still lost in dreams. I tucked him in a bit tighter so as not to get cold, pulled on my clothes, and slipped out into the blueness of morning. I knew where I would walk – to a meadow at the edge of the reservoir, a place I have known since before I could speak or walk on my own. I have been to this meadow as many times in darkness as in light. At difficult times in my life it has been a refuge. In joyful times a playing field. Once, when I was five and the bigger boys let me play with them, I caught a baseball, right in my left eye. Once my sled made it all the way from the top of the hill across to the middle of the meadow. Once I saw ducks throw night diamonds from their wings when they thought no one was looking beneath an autumn moon. Just once.

In the shadow time between darkness and dawn, the time when the walls between the worlds are thin, I leaned against an old friend, to wait for the light. And for a few quiet moments, all made sense in the world. We had been there so many times like this before.

Is this the etiquette of love? The tending of relations? I could offer the meadow, the trees, the familiar pattern of stars nothing, and yet I came to them because we are tied together and in all that I take away from my relationship with them, I must give something of myself for I am ever nourished by them. Whatever I give will never be enough in my eyes, but by going to the meadow to watch the sunrise, I have given something, even if I can't say what it is. Maybe it is simply having given my thanks, for those trees have known me through some of the most difficult times in my life and in healing each time, their shape, their quiet presence, have entered into who I am.

In one of the most moving pieces of literature I have ever known, Barry Lopez's *River Notes*, he explores the profound wordlessness of grief and the gifts the non-human world offer in giving us the place and space to find relations again when we believe we have lost them. At the end of the book, the river that has nourished the narrator through his journey outwards back into the community of living beings, dries up in the face of a long drought. Like a dying elder for whom he can do nothing but bear witness, the narrator offers the river a selfless gift. "With no more strength than there is in a bundle of sticks" he tells us, "I tried to dance, to dance the dance of the long-legged birds who lived in the shallows. I danced it because I could not think of anything more beautiful."<sup>3</sup>

The heron, the silent keeper of wisdom throughout the book, comes to the narrator, and honors him for trying to dance. He is honored not for his previous scientific study of the river, nor for having learned some sort of nature's lessons, but for expressing selfless love, true compassion. In the voice of the Blue Heron he writes,

Before we could ask for rain there had to be someone to do something completely selfless, with no hope of success. You went after that fish, and then at the end you were trying to dance. A person cannot be afraid of being foolish. For everything, every gesture, is sacred.<sup>4</sup>

Lopez's roadmap to hope begins with the possibility of a single selfless gesture. This, I too believe is the heart of the etiquette of wordless love. For in his story, and life, the mitigation of aloneness and fear comes from connecting selflessly, lovingly to the dance of life. Lopez writes, "Everyone has to learn how to die, that song, that dance, alone and in

time.” But, “To stick your hands into the river is to feel the cords that bind the earth together in one piece.”<sup>5</sup> Healed.

Lopez’s vision inspires with its simplicity and pureness of possibility. We need only give of ourselves to be nourished, but it is our intention that must be pure for we cannot give to be nourished, we can only give because we want to offer the gift, the gesture which we must believe is never truly enough. As if this weren’t challenging enough, let me return for a moment to love’s partner in the dance of paradox. Love’s partner is not hate, regardless of what theology would have us believe, love’s partner is fear. If love is a mountain spring bounding within us, fear is a glacier, freezing us in place. Fear, like intimacy, is a pause in movement, only fear suspends us in a block of translucent ice, teasing us to believe that we are in motion because we can see out. Immobility blocks the flow of life as fear does not give or nourish or bring new growth, it lives like a tapeworm by feasting on what’s good in us.

While love engages in the desire for timelessness knowing full well the ever-present possibility of temporal endings, fear capitalizes on compressing time into the simplicity of an unknown future which looms ever closer. Fear produces the myth of scarcity by implying that whatever we have is not enough in the face of the impending absence, which is always just ahead. In scarcity we build walls, in scarcity we hoard against an unknown future, in fear what we court, we find, and the view is not of all things feeding something larger, it is of larger things feeding on us. Fear makes us consume the world instead of nourish it and the experience of otherness is not an opportunity to find resonance, but a license for destruction.

Where love is worldless, fear has powerful rhetoric, the right words, ones which make us think that the world is not one of continuous processes but one of end products. If something is named or known, it is able to be caged, controlled, and consumed. Love lives in the spaces in between – fear needs everything to be known. Fear’s goal is paradoxically its source – death. For death is the one unknown we cannot know for sure until we experience it ourselves, so it is the ultimate source for the river of ice should we allow its desire for named certainty to freeze us.

We live in the marriage bed shared by love and fear. So much is dedicated in our culture to the exploration, or description of our human loves while we act on the world as if it were not there. What if we were instead to embrace the wordlessness of love as a way of breaking ourselves from the cycles of consumption? While we may not be able to do this with our human companions, perhaps we can find our way to it through exploring our relationships with places, for there, I believe everyone, even those who have not found love among are own kind, is the capacity for selfless love. This is our real wildlife refuge, the last landscape which has still not been exploited. Fear does not even know its there.

I continually study Place simply because I am in love. First it was the love of Labrador but in the twenty years since then I have added the love of a certain slant of afternoon light on the Otago hills. The love of autumn leaves in New Jersey, the love of the one day in spring when the cherry blossoms in Oxford fly in petaled rain. The love of my husband, Kevin, our family. And those loves make me want to give of myself because I am continually nourished by that beauty and carry it as a form of hope, of wisdom, and of the root of my faith in possibility.

I write to catch in my hands moments that carry within them simultaneous mixtures of longing and love, home and away, of wanting to belong to a land and feeling it writing itself into me. I write to say all of the things I don't know how to say. And when I can't find the words at all, I pause for a moment and bathe in the intimacy of the world, as I am privy to seeing the first morning light brush the tops of familiar trees, or late day English light filling pussy willows with illumination. My writing is not my gift; my desire to celebrate what is beautiful in the world, is.

For gifting, true gifting is the oxygen of a loving world. My hope is that if we as humans can come to know the contours of that river that lies within us, we can learn the etiquette of gifting again and see the world and each other as extraordinarily beautiful. Then we can be *from*, *of*, and most importantly *with*.

A very wise friend once told me that the way through paradox is not to try to resolve the contradiction, for that would be to destroy it. Instead, he suggested, the art is in being able to embrace it whole. And then, quite simply, to ask it to dance.

---

<sup>1</sup> Tuan, Yi Fu. (2001) *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 138.

<sup>2</sup> Shepard, Paul. (1995) *The Only World We've Got*. Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 178.

<sup>3</sup> Lopez, Barry. (1979) *River Notes: The Dance of Herons*. New York: Avon Books, 80.

<sup>4</sup> Lopez, 80.

<sup>5</sup> Lopez, 81.