

## Location, Location, Locution: Native Ground and Native Tongue as Character in Short Fiction

Any reporter knows that to Get the Story, he or she has to find out who, what, where, when and why. As fiction writers we actually have to construct these interwoven factors, create the answers and make certain they not only fit together but advance one another in both practical and magical ways. For us, who and why are inextricably linked, for a character's motivation is a matter of why he is who he is and is becoming. What? is a question of plottery, though not a free-standing, separate matter, as character shapes action. My goal today, however, is to refresh all our memories – as we keep breathing our mantra *character is action* – that even in fiction, everything that happens does so in a place or places at a time or times, and the more intimately the writer knows and imagines the crucial aspects of the site, the more convincing will be the actions that occur there. S-i-t-e yields s-i-g-h-t, which opens all the doors of perception, and then of imagination. To gaze, said Salvador Dali, is to think. And place – at which we gaze, in which we feel and smell and hear – is more than geography and topography, architecture and furnishings, geology and weather. It involves atmosphere, custom, language, available stimuli and limitations, and the story must carry a sense of local probability – a snowball fight in Cancun is a hard sell, as is a steel mill accident in the Okefenokee Swamp, but a knife fight in a Gastonia strip joint on a Christmas Eve in deep recession? I'll buy shares in that one, especially if the story touches solidly on the properties of the space – the busted sheetrock, tobacco-scorched pool table rims, Garth Brooks poster, union banner, rancid-smelling toilets and flashing poker machine – in such a way as to resemble a film shot *on*

*location*, authentic, actual and not acted out on a sound stage, with its mobile and collapsible set, its virtual nature.

Think how much easier it is to believe in Circe's seduction of Odysseus once we picture that luxurious bed Homer provides, or the monstrous cannibal acts of Polyphemous as we gawk at the rough cave filled with wickers of cheese and pails of whey, livestock and foodstuff, every object announcing appetite, hunger, gluttony. How quickly we subscribe to the imprudent actions of Hansel and Gretel when we read the toothsome description of the witch's iced gingerbread cottage. How convinced we are of the majesty of the chosen people's ceremonies when we read in Exodus of the vast chambers of the temple, its many-looped purple and scarlet linen curtains, the goatskin coverlets and precious metals, its pillars of shittum wood , its rings and sockets, brads and lintels of cunning smithwork.

When I was in graduate school being taught to teach literature, "setting" was one of the fundamental terms. Character, style, conflict, theme, setting. Eventually I understood that for me, as well as many others, the crucial word would become "Place," native ground or foreign, my time or some other era. Everything that happens does so in some place. Action TAKES PLACE, in two senses: it both occurs and it REQUIRES place, seizes it. Eudora Welty, one of the great students of people and their places says, "Location is the ground conductor of all the currents of emotion and belief and moral conviction." So to her it's hardly backdrop, a mere two-dimensional gameboard, not just a catalyst either, but an active ingredient, a cause. Flannery O'Connor gets her two cents worth in: "A writer operates at a peculiar crossroad where time and place and eternity meet. His problem is to find that location." The more you ponder it, the less arbitrary or mechanical fiction's places

seem, and I think it's important and urgent to consider how writers establish place, the realtor's creed of "location, location, location" (which allows for dimension and direction, too). The place of a story is likely to be one of the first ingredients writer and reader discover. "Where are we?" is one of the first things both creator and audience want to know. "Where?" and "when?" Any story, moved to a different place or time, becomes a different story. Try to simply transport Welty's "Why I Live at the P.O." from small-town Mississippi to County Galway or O'Connor's "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" from suburban and then rural Georgia to the South Africa in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, and you can't simply translate, you have to re-imagine, preside over a metamorphosis. You have to make a different story.

But back to this matter of a story's opening. It's certainly possible to strike the match of character with the first sentence -- as B. Traven does in *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* by telling us off the bat that Dobbs' mind is occupied with the simple question of how to get a lot of money fast. But it's less daunting, perhaps for both reader and writer, to begin with what filmmakers call an "establishing shot" that quickly presents a place for the reader's story-seeing imagination to land. I don't mean to say that place, once rendered, becomes tyrannical and absolutely guarantees what kinds of action will or will not occur there, but the impression of physicality, of sensation can encourage a reader to set aside inertia and resistance and become receptive. And once established, place begins to imply probabilities. A place can evoke many responses -- discomfort, confidence, nostalgia, bewilderment, expectation, hostility. Creating the place convincingly allows the writer an opportunity to weave in implication and trope, to excite the ear or the taste buds, certainly the eyes, to plant the seeds whose eventual pattern of foliage will provide

the story's meanings. It may be comforting to have a g. p. s. and to get the weather report from the experts, but even more satisfying to see that a birch tree is, as in nature, not too far from water or that the back of a cab driver's seat has been razored, patched and lipsticked with some obscenity, that the wind is icy or the music loud Reggae where the cannabis smoke taints the warm air. As the place unfolds, word by word, sentence by sentence, characters arrive, words are spoken, motives are divined, and the place itself alters, reminds us how dynamic, how organic location almost always is, how much it is part of the dream dance that is a story. Characters are motivated and move (even if only slightly) across or around or beyond a place. They require an arena, fully and forcefully imagined, even if only subtly revealed.

I want to get to particular locales now to show you how place creates mood and expectation. I want to remind you of some stories which establish place as an active participant in the story, settings which are designed (I think that's an important term here: *designed*.) to make you think, "Yes, that's the kind of place such a thing *could* happen," and supply you with, as I've said, a patch of real estate to land on, so you can lurk on the edge to spy and eavesdrop, engage and learn and be transformed.

Let's look at Poe, as he is in many respects the father of the modern short story form. He took a lot of flak from many stylists in the twentieth century for his elaborateness and intricacy, his excesses and high-faluting indulgences. Hemingway famously said that Poe's mistake was in believing that fiction was a matter of interior decoration; whereas, it is really a matter of architecture, and though Hemingway is not altogether wrong, he seems to underestimate two features of Poe's windy and labyrinthine style. First, Poe's narrators are often the principals in the tales, and their manner of narration not only mirrors the mazes through which they traverse, but also

reveals the design of Poe's real subject, the deepest interior, that of the psyche. How those confiding narrators unfold the tales – their archaic grammar, intricate syntax, inflated diction – reveal them as unsteady, over-intellectualizing, self-impressed and unreliable. And I suspect that Hemingway may not have been remembering Poe as the inventor of the detective story and perpetrator of many literary hoaxes. Maybe Hemingway gets that, the jest of it all, but is just wishing his leg were being pulled less vigorously. But I'm skeptical. (An aside: many of my examples are to be found in the new edition of *Fiction 100*, which is my touchstone text for this semester.)

Now: "The Cask of Amontillado." You know the story. Revenge in festive and venomous old Venice, nasty punning, Freemasonry and bricking up a despised rival in the basement, but what a basement, deep beneath the teeming streets of the ancient and bloody city, where the skeletons of ancestors line the walls, the skulls grinning like masks at the carnival among the myriad casks and bottles of fine wine. "The nitre . . . It hangs like moss upon the vaults," says Montresor. "We are beneath the river's bed. The drops of moisture trickle among the bones...." The atmosphere, much more deftly and economically conjured than in any Stephen King novel, tells us that dark mischief is impending. And the story starts with a nocturnal street party, disguises and torches and drunken revelry in the bustling alleys, the very home court of the lord of misrule. We know we are in a volatile context and that there will be no kiddie rides or waving Pooh bears. Poe often gets ridiculed for this sort of gothic outer-reflects-inner strategy, and there are stories when he overdoes it so much that his sentences would gag a lexicographer or choke a weed-whacker, but he never leaves you short of an immediate sense of place. In fact, other writers who learned from him are lionized for similar strategies of location. Here, for instance. "The

surrounding walls, of amazing thickness, kept off all sounds behind them. The Egyptian character of the masonry weighed upon me with its gloom. But a soft imprisoned turf grew under foot. The heart of the eternal pyramids, it seemed....” Not the lampooned Nevermore Man, as Poe was called, but the often-austere New England master Herman Melville moving toward the conclusion of his “Bartleby the Scrivener.” Of course Melville also has more lively places to take us than Poe, more moods and models and modes, from the forecandle of the *Pequod* to tropical village huts and the law offices of Wall Street. Melville always situates us in a real, literal geography, as Poe does in “Cask” but often prefers not to, in favor of conjuring the mysterious, uncompassed remote. Find the House of Usher’s earthly location on the map, and you’d be one of the first. But before I leave Poe altogether, I want to cite the opening of his Usher story, too, which lacks both the clearly Italian locale of “Cask” and its claustrophobic gothic props. (Get another page into the story, though, and they materialize in spades.) If you don’t now know where that lavish collapsing estate is, you will surely recognize it if you ever get close on the emotional map, in the wild heart. I want to quote it because it reminds us how quickly a chord can be struck and how hypnotic and even beautiful a setting can manifest in language:

“During the whole of a dull, dark and soundless day in the autumn of the year, when the clouds hung oppressively low in the heavens, I had been passing alone, on horseback, through a singularly dreary tract of country; and at length found myself, as the evening drew on, within view of the melancholy house of Usher.” 60 words – stately, subjective, serpentine, languid, musical, suspenseful, not tightly focused or rife with tiny details, but spellbinding, unmistakably opening the black book of Poe’s imagination. The syllables echo one another, the pace seduces. And here’s something

else so well worth saying here that I'll let Tobias Wolfe say it: "Writers don't write about real places. I mean the London of Charles Dickens is not London. It's a London that is in his mind and his spirit, his way of looking at the world." So place is the world in the mind made tangible, convincing, compelling but importantly never unmoored to the measurable world, never violating the essence of the chartable place.

Let's don't leave Hemingway behind, though. He can sculpt a place with silence, reticence, simplicity, employing ingeniously tedious incremental repetition. The sparse, desiccated, evasive speech of the two protagonists of "Hills Like White Elephants" is reflected in the Spanish Ebro Valley and surrounding ridges "long and white," we're told, "no shade," "no trees." But the remote little railroad station with its curtain of bamboo beads, glasses of beer on felt pads, warm wind, minimalist stasis, is still vibrantly, if quietly *there*, and Hemingway's suppression of details conforms to the tense discussion between Jig and her euphemistic and manipulative companion as they debate – through evasive verbal fencing – a procedure he wants her to undergo (voluntarily, of course) so they can be "happy" or "fine," words which will never ring quite the same for you once you've felt their undertones in this story.

What follows now is a passage opening a scene from John Cheever's "The Country Husband," a much more urbane, or sub-urbane, place where the melodrama of Poe and the arid tension of Hemingway's story would perhaps seem equally out of place: "The Weeds' Dutch Colonial house was larger than it appeared from the driveway. The living room was spacious and divided like Gaul into three parts. Around an ell to the left as one entered from the vestibule was the long table, laid for six, with candles and a bowl of fruit at the center. ... The room was polished and tranquil ... nothing here was neglected; nothing had not been burnished. . . The hearth was swept, the

roses on the piano were reflected in the polish of the broad top, and there was an album of Schubert waltzes on the rack.”

*Elegant*, say the roses and Schubert and the tranquility; *static* say the polishing, the sweeping, the burnishing; but *dangerous* says that “divided like Gaul into three parts,” right out of Caesar’s military Commentaries. And we remember another, less appealing, meaning of “on the rack.” Cheever leads us to understand that this place is haunted by what has happened and is about to happen, but not spectral so much as experience haunted, class haunted, people haunted, maybe even money haunted.

William Faulkner’s “A Rose for Emily” provides an interesting variation on the place of place in a story. We know quickly that we are transported to the American South, fully equipped with a fallen aristocracy, a cemetery for both the Confederate and Union dead, Colonels, institutionalized and formal racism, cupolas and spires and scrolled balconies, intricate class distinctions glazed with noblesse oblige, a besotted sense of mythic history, but the prevailing atmosphere of the story is conjured in the voice of the narrator, a self-appointed spokesperson for Jefferson who sports a civic nosiness, a humane conservatism, an affection for languid, trope-riddled sentences and a propensity for deep gossip. He is the embodiment, the animation of the town of Jefferson. His voice is both the native ground of the story and its cunning, even self-indicting but subtle native tongue. Listen to his rhetoric becoming the mood of the place:

“They held the funeral on the second day, with the town coming to look at Miss Emily beneath a mass of bought flowers, with the crayon face of her father musing profoundly over the bier and the ladies sibilant and macabre; and the very old men – some in their brushed Confederate uniforms – on the porch and the lawn talking of

Miss Emily as if she had been a contemporary of theirs, believing they had danced with her or courted her perhaps, confusing time with its mathematical progression, as the old do, to whom the past is not a diminishing road but, instead, a huge meadow, which no winter ever quite touches, divided from them now by the narrow bottleneck of the most recent decade of years.”

Whew! 126 words strung together with that gregarious, paradoxical delight in language that is part of the Old South’s manner and perspective. His sound provides a prudential distance and muted amazement, becoming *our* spokesperson, as he is also for the inhabitants of the story. It is the voice not of an invisible and all-seeing narrator but of a man who partakes, as part of the group, in deliberations, recriminations and even the attempts to perfume Miss Emily Grierson’s charnel-stinking house. A witness, but a tainted and self-serving one. And this representative voice stands in dynamic tension with the acts implied by and image revealed in the central (unseen till the end) chamber of the story, a gothic bridal-burial boudoir complete with rose curtains, rose-shaded lights, tarnished silver grooming articles, delicate crystal and a decaying suit of men’s clothing, not to mention the remains of the treacherous gentleman caller Homer Barron where they have long spoiled in the bed. The Emily story may be grotesque, but the town’s atmospheric pressure of genteel and insular provinciality is a larger story about endured progress and evolving image. The narrator becomes a character by becoming the town, but neither its official identity nor its secret one. He leads us in just intimately enough to wrestle with the deep gossip of the place. To employ Welty again, “Place in fiction is the named, identified, concrete, exact and exacting, and therefore credible gathering spot of all that has been felt.” In other words, the deep gossip.

I've already shifted into the third term of my title, locution. People speak a version of the indigenous dialect of their places and classes and cultures. When they travel, they take something of their places with them. And their manner of speech, their choices and their automatic settings tell us of their limitations and possibilities. The monologue of Salinger's Holden Caulfield owes much to Twain's Huck, but they're not interchangeable, marked as they are by the dialect of place and time. I think it's also crucial to consider something else as valuable as dialect, and that's idiolect, the individual's absolutely personal and unduplicated variation of the local dialect. We all have idiosyncratic speech habits, probably individual in indirect proportion to our relation with the TV and – God protect us -- Twitter. We instinctively mouthe the dialect, but inside it we create metaphors and tics and repetitions which say ME, folks, of them, sure, but really NOBODY BUT ME. As we write stories, careful to weave place and person and songline together, we have to think about how the characters sound like their neighbors and how they don't. How they fit in and how they stand out. Nodamean? You'uns all.

Kate Chopin's economical five-scene story "The Storm" provides us with several instructive examples of how particulars of place and voice bring the people and events to light. The Cajun family of Calixta, Bobinot and Bibi speak an inflected English defined by touches of French, slightly askew grammar and syntax, a strictly social and practical vocabulary and phonetic spellings of mispronounced words, while the more aristocratic Alcee Laballiere speaks with calculation and finesse. When he asks, "May I come and wait on your gallery till the storm is over?" Calixta replies, "Come 'long in, M'sieur Alcee." The contrast is small but distinct. When her husband and son return after the storm, she says, "J'vous responds, we'll have a feas' to night umph! umph!"

The central family are agrarian, uneducated but alert and generally self-composed. Calixta herself, however, is more complex, a woman of great passion and great restraint. And the narrator's voice is distinct from both plebian and patrician currents in the bayou. Of Calixta and Alcee's tryst, that voice tells us: "Her firm elastic flesh that was knowing for the first time its birthright, was like a creamy lily that the sun invites to contribute its breath and perfume to the undying life of the world." Make room, D. H. Lawrence, as the outside narrator provides a lyrical undersong to match the passion of the scene, the lushness of the landscape and what is later called "the very borderland of life's mystery." Over the top? Not so long as this highly romantic register in overdrive is held in check until the storm with its own wildness explodes and dominates – rain beating on the shingled roof with force, lightning striking the chinaberry tree. In relief against this atmospheric disturbance, the bosom can be creamy, her neck elegant, her lips as moist and red as the pomegranate seed, which is by the way not exotic Food of All Nations provender to the people in this story, but local, common, natural, and no less mysterious for that.

"The Storm" depends upon subtext and economy, so Chopin does not give us catalogues of description of flora and fauna, from Spanish moss to alligator, but she selects details that will stand for the whole fecund semi-tropical place. And speaking of telling details – class differences are signaled everywhere: Alcee comes along on his luxurious horse (Bibi and Bobinot, in contract, are on foot.), which he rides into a shelter filled with the pragmatic chickens, plows and a harrow. When at the end of the story Alcee writes and his wife receives a tender letter, the reader is aware that the other couple is less likely to be literate, and certainly Calixta (and her sewing machine) gets no vacations in Biloxi, though readers get to swoop with the narrator's

eye and ear through the delta and ride the air of these several voices like a fortunate ghost.

That story ends by telling us that, even after the adultery, “The storm passed and everyone was happy.” Other stories have differently complicated endings couched in language that begs interrogation. “She would of been a good woman,’ The Misfit said, ‘if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life.’” When the social villain whom some see as an existential hero says this at the conclusion of O’Connor’s “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” readers have already seen the dusty red road, the sky which somehow lacks sun OR cloud, the bloody ditch and the dark edge of the looming woods, but the slightly skewed grammar – “would of been” and “if it had been somebody” – seem to certify the six swift murders as native to this place where humans scrimmage and selfishness and pride must be punished. The standards of discourse have no more authority than the standards of behavior out on the frontier (which is closer than we like to think), and the story’s catalogue of family snarkiness and disrespect seem if not caused or encouraged by the locale at least allowed by it, while the speaker, the criminal who calls himself The Misfit, makes attempts at explaining, with his functional and unbeautiful cracker grammar, just how things don’t fit. The beauty of the story is partly that the author, orchestrating human behavior, locations along the journey and the chorus of shortsighted people’s voices, reveals how they DO fit, snugly, if not nicely. Welty claims it is the writer’s responsibility to present “a continuous, shapely, pleasing and finished surface to the eye.” O’Connor might have added “the ear, as well,” but she probably would have been thinking that presentation of a carefully finished surface may elicit a kind of pleasure, but it’s not necessarily going to make you happy.

I've decided not to go on forever about Place, but I do want to point to three more examples of places which seem spring-loaded to create action and emotion. The first is Gabriel Garcia Marquez's "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings," which begins as follows:

"On the third day of rain they had killed so many crabs inside the house that Pelayo had to cross his drenched courtyard and throw them into the sea, because the newborn child had a temperature all night and they thought it was due to the stench. The world had been sad since Tuesday. Sea and sky were a single ash-gray thing, and the sands of the beach, which on March nights glimmered like powdered light, had become a stew of mud and rotten shellfish."

I haven't mentioned how attentive a writer must be to find the revealing details which make the place appear almost *ex nihilo*. The hue of the sky and then of the night sea, coupled with the stench of the dead crabs create no wish-you-were-here postcard, but they do quickly transport us to this outpost. He doesn't try to describe the smell; we'll provide that from our own imaginations, and he has bigger game in his sights. Two details of atmosphere also tell us that, in addition to the nasty emanations of the shore, it's a place where events of great moment may occur. The confluence of the child's illness with the crab proliferation and death suggests an ominous connection between the meteorological events and survival, and the fact, matter-of-factly delivered, that the world – not just part of it, but the WORLD – "had been sad SINCE TUESDAY" alerts us that cosmic forces are at work. When an ailing and bedraggled geriatric angel shows up, we're ready to say, "Here? Sure, why not."

The reportorial flatness in the speech of "Bub," the narrator of Raymond Carver's "Cathedral," is not specific to any ethnicity or geography, but his manner of speech

does suggest that his membership in the “working” social class identifies him more significantly than those other categories. His opening sequence of monotonous pronoun-to-verb sentences – “He called . . . He would come . . . She hadn’t seen . . . They made . . . I wasn’t. . . He was . . . . – is meant to signal his emotional distance from the blind man’s visit to his wife, but he can’t resist making judgmental and dismissive editorial asides, one word exclamations like “Pathetic” or “Creepy,” and when he gets limbered up with scotch, lots of scotch, he waxes enthusiastic, describing dinner in this fashion: “We ate like there was no tomorrow. We didn’t talk. We ate. We scarfed. We grazed that table.” Also a little monotonous, but this time incantatory due to the repetition and the combined slang (“scarfed”) and humor (“grazed”). Through “Bub”’s conflicting modes of narration the reader sees into his nature: he’s typically smug and distant when sober, but he’s also an alcoholic who wants to create and participate in excitement when he’s lubricated. Nothing particularly regional here, and no slurred speech to convey his drunkenness, no work-related slang or ethnic idiom, but his tongue gives him away as *anxious* in both senses – eager and fretful. As we savor and examine his words, we begin to see the whole turbulent, volatile man. By the end of the story when Bub and the blind visitor Robert have discussed, analyzed, described and drawn a cathedral together, the narrator opens his eyes and says, “It’s really something,” which is his generation’s version of “awesome.” The snide and resentful husband at the beginning of the story has seen a long-hidden side of himself, and his language has altered just enough for us to observe and believe. His change, his growth – at least momentary growth – in the story is registered in the tone of his words. We don’t even need to see an exclamation mark after “It’s really something” to know the pitch and timbre will be different from

his opening bored mask. Will this change last? Carver doesn't give us any guarantees, and we do know that morning will bring sobriety and perhaps a hangover, different language altogether. But for the moment, we know a change is in the air, the place has a new charge because the language has changed.

I want to conclude with a different kind of story. The main character of James Joyce's "Araby" is, as in "Cathedral," the narrator, but the point of view and the narration are not identical. An older, sophisticated, rhetorically adroit and inventive narrator relates an episode from his naïve and idealizing past. The place is Dublin, for the most part a shabby working class neighborhood very different from the festive and affluent Morkin household of Joyce's justly famous "The Dead." The time is the early twentieth century. Much of the story occurs in dusk and shadows. You may remember the opening:

"North Richmond Street, being blind, was a quiet street except when the Christian Brothers' School set the boys free. An uninhabited house of two storeys stood at the blind end, detached from its neighbors in a square ground. The other houses of the street, conscious of decent lives within them, gazed at one another with brown imperturbable faces."

Wow. In some ways, we've almost come back to Poe, who describes the front view of the House of Usher with features that suggest a face, while here the houses are blind, though they gaze, and they are conscious. Then we're told that in a musty back drawing room of the narrator's own boyhood house an old priest had died, leaving behind some books – a Walter Scott novel, *The Devout Communicant* and the account of a scurrilous detective's exploits. What's Joyce up to here? He's looking after us, starting in motion the story's ideas and actions, which will involve thwarted

romance and confused religious devotion. To anchor the implications even more solidly, the wild garden behind the house features, like Eden, “a central apple tree.”

In the next paragraph winter comes, and dusk, the houses are somber, the small space of visible sky violet, and dripping gardens, stinking ashpits and “dark odorous stables.” The narrator (long after the action but at the time of the recounting) sees, quite precisely, the squalor he came from as a boy, an atmosphere which the boy would have sensed back in the day but would have been unable to articulate. What’s about to unfold? The boy yearns for escape, the exotic and romantic. He wants to gain excitement and experience. Instead, he begins to lose his innocence. He tangles up his Catholic reverence for the Virgin Mary with his infatuation for a playmate’s elusive sister and his desire to visit a mysterious bazaar called Araby. When, after various tedious ordeals, he gets there, he finds the place empty, cheap, dark, shabby, quiet as a church with the exception of some coarse flirting between young men and a shop girl. The place is a great disappointment but the site of monumental discovery. The veil has been pulled away, and he sees his dreams as foolish and childish. “Gazing into the darkness,” he says on the “occasion” of the narration, “I saw myself as a creature driven and derided by vanity; and my eyes burned with anguish and anger.”

The texture of the story is comprised of his adult perceptions and language – precise, poetic, evocative, urbane and intellectual – and we can read his childhood character, at least as he recalls it, by his actions. But all we have to go on in deciphering his later nature is his diction, his sentences constructed with careful parallelism, his flair for imagery and continuity and his dramatic timing. But that’s a lot of evidence. Between the place with its blind houses and shadowy lanes and the

rhetoric, character emerges much more vividly than if we trust his romantically misguided boyhood actions alone to reveal his essence. He is what he does, but he is also the indigenous product of this urban, Catholic, hardscrabble place, and he is – now – his wit and mastery of rhetorical tactics that he had to grow into and likely struggle for.

Good art stimulates and speaks to our better selves, and it inspires us to inhabit the world more sensitively and to be worthy of the artist who makes it. It is in the world and of the world, and those of us who want our writing to anchor steadfastly in something we can call reality need to anchor it in a place. The more forcefully we observe and imagine the place of our work, the more likely we are to sense what aboriginal Australians called the songlines, the narrative spirits of the place. But maybe that's bordering too much on the mystical and questionable. It is in the end, surely a matter of s-i-t-e enabling s-i-g-h-t, and that becoming vision, with all its wild particulars. To enable readers to see the secrets whose unfolding in time and space is the story, we have to summon that reader to us, to earn his or her attention, and to do that we must be committed to giving to the "airy nothingness" that is our narrative-conjuring instinct, what Shakespeare called "a local habitation and a name."

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