

Chila Woychik

A Place Called Place: Flux

(For Martin)

“For everything you have missed, you have gained something else, and for everything you gain, you lose something else.” —Ralph Waldo Emerson

Surfaces

Welcome to a world, this world, my world. This new season is the new year, and the new minute, brisk. Coyotes howl and owls “who who who” invariably. Here’s a stray cat or two.

The river runs, Martin; it’s a living thing. Slow flows its course, deep dips its core. Here on a rocky bank I stand, sit; here spans a view of a mile or two. The man beside me fishes, catches and releases catfish and bass, a tree branch on occasion and river-bottom stumps.

I’m as close to water as possible without getting my feet wet, without sliding down the ledge. I’m as close to heaven as can be without dying first.

The trees that cling to these coastlines brave the erosion that accompanies hard rains and rising channels. Eventually, those trunks nearest the bank will lie down and give back to the earth what they’ve taken out over the years. (Reciprocation, such a beautiful word.) Fierce storms and flood-stage surges propel these down, down the way, and deposit them in more convenient pockets where they’ll rest ‘til disintegrated completely or moved yet again, further along their journey.

The coming-fall browns and golds freckle the crocodile greens, sage greens, and lime greens brandishing these tree-replete shores; a stillness except for birdsong and the ever-gurgling river spreads this day with being. I am alive.

When I lived in the city, no one told me it would be like this, though childhood memories of trips to one small stream or another come to mind. We didn’t worry then about *Vibrio vulnificus*; we waded barefooted, splashed one another, and cheered Dad on in his efforts to provide fresh fish for dinner. Mom cooked it tasty good.

With the cooler nights, the mosquito population has eased. Small black biting gnats and Asian Beetles flee harvested soybean fields and trouble us adventurers. Widening circles spread atop the water on spots where insects land from above and fish suck from below. To count the

overlapping rings would be to cipher eternity.

A woody scent, a river's essence, and the distinctive tang of a nearby farm converge to produce an earthy though not unpleasant air. Fish flop, break the surface, retreat below again. There be giants, Jethro!

The muddy riverbed murks this sluice, a tributary of the Iowa River, and the overflow of both dump into the venerable Mississippi. If not for the blue and white of the sky and a glowing behind one dark mass of clouds, this space would be drab indeed, but what lies above not only stays above, it reflects off the water in bright shiny shimmers, in infused lightness, and it brings balance.

Oxygenated bubbles drift along by the thousands. The Cedar is a good river brim-full of living and life, and it gives joy. Eschewing pantheism, I meld with this *mise-en-scène*, am one with this place. But it changes: reduction here, reformation there.

Our 72,000 miles of water in Iowa have changed. One science site describes the concept of stationarity—using the past to predict the future—as a dead model, one which needs to acquiesce to the “new normal.” Miles of waterways mean multiple opportunities for flooding. The Great Iowan Flood of 2008 carried 100 times more sediment down some of these rivers than in a normal year; that's a lot of displaced dirt. Ten square miles of space, tens of thousands of people and homes, acres and crops, disarranged, deranged, destroyed. Stability, where art thou? Tranquility, you have left me blind and stumbling.

Three years later, a 130-mile an hour derecho bore across central eastern Iowa and snapped nearly every tree in the Tree City USA community of Vinton, among others. Two years later, parts of Iowa suffered the same fate again.

Tornadoes, drought, floods, ice storms and hail. Rest not in the remembrance of a sunny day for every good story has its villain, but the ending is what matters, not the dog-eared pages marking a moment's poignancy.

Describe the night, the weight of darkness, sound of silence. Describe the stars, a cricket's chirp, a creaking branch. Can you do it? And will what you hear today sound the same tomorrow? Ever the question, never an answer.

An old back garage in need of paint and a new roof is a sad creature indeed, but I'll paint it; it'll change, my view of it will change, and especially the neighbor's view of it will change—do it for the neighbors, Martin; this is how we make peace with our slice of now, our tinge of home in the

midst of so much living.



Centers

“The sixty-year old woman scabbled out of her tent. The sun had risen two hours before, but the eastern tree line shielded most of it from her eyes, so she slept on. Dreams were of coyote song and silky night skies slathered with shine. Finally, her body could no longer tolerate the air mattress below her. She rose, dressed, and exited.”

This is how I imagine my autobiographical novel might begin if I were to write a novel, a rural concoction with whiffs of *The Bell Jar* meets *Raven's Exile*. But no, convincing fictionists sprout up daily like hybrid corn in a humus-rich Iowan field. Any alien stalk disappears along an inside row, worsted by those trained and tested seeds of immortal tinkering and perfecting, and me the only heirloom.

A song consists of many notes and many strains. Sing it.

I vote. No sense ranting about political direction if we don't put wings to our things in the little square booth. Sure they can vote in China, but the leaders choose the winners. Not all is fair in ballots and tallies, and if life's changes don't claw at your marrow, well, maybe the life has already departed.

Likewise, there are no words to describe the hole left by a religion's lack, the insinuation that arts and letters are somehow not quite as important as one's knowledge of sacred text. There are no words to curse the light which leaves in darkness. There are no words, and no feeling, no loss that hasn't become vile and sinful by degrees. There is only age now, and these late fall gray skies. But there are forces here and fault lines there, and powers beyond me.

The coldish November air settles around your neck and you don't really care, it seems, that you left your scarf inside. The chickens still need fed and the sheep *bleat bleat bleat*. They need you, you tell yourself. You are valuable.

Then, when, you finally realize you may never have anything earth-shattering and brilliant and Pulitzer-worthy and puddingish and great big like that one oak tree with the split trunk and circumference that would take three of us to get our arms around, to leave a legacy about, then, when, it all and suddenly turns okay. There is peace. A softness falls. Sometimes it's the simplest things.

I hope you see the symbolism here.



Remnants

Basically, you don't want to drive fast on these back roads, Martin. Half a dozen times a year at-large cows or horses will pose there like statues cemented to the middle of a highway or the edge of a rural patch of gravel, and it never bodes well for either animal or vehicle when the connection is made. Temblor and shake, we all fall down.

No place is immune, no philosophy or ideal exempt. Life, in its bumps and jingles, encroaches here and messes there.

"I am here; and here is nowhere in particular," William Golding said in *The Spire*. This is the summation, the slow letting go of what's become part of us when it's time to move on. Sway with the wind, Martin, bend with the breeze. And always stay a few miles ahead of the derecho, if possible. Better yet, ride it out 'til it peters out, then celebrate for having survived.

Adieu.