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Writing About Places

The Travel Article

Whatever the proportion, it would seem to be relatively easy. The dismal truth is that it's very hard. It must be hard, because it's in this area that most writers—professional and amateur—produce not only their worst work but work that is just plain terrible. The terrible work has nothing to do with some terrible flaw of character. On the contrary, it results from the virtue of enthusiasm. Nobody turns so quickly into a bore as a traveler home from his travels. He enjoyed his trip so much that he wants to tell us all about it—and "all" is what we don't want to hear. We only want to hear some. What made his trip different from everybody else's? What can he tell us that we don't already know? We don't want him to describe every ride at Disneyland, or tell us that the Grand Canyon is awesome, or that Venice has canals. If one of the rides at Disneyland got stuck, if somebody fell into the awesome Grand Canyon, that would be worth hearing about.

It's natural for all of us when we have gone to a certain place to feel that we are the first people who ever went there or thought such sensitive thoughts about it. Fair enough: it's what keeps us going and validates our experience. Who can visit the Tower of London without musing on the wives of Henry VIII, or visit Egypt and not be moved by the size and antiquity of the pyramids? But that is ground already covered by multitudes of people. As a writer you must keep a tight rein on your subjective self—the traveler touched by new sights and sounds and smells—and keep an objective eye on the reader. The article that records everything you did on your trip will fascinate you because it was your trip. Will it fascinate the reader? It won't. The mere agglomeration of detail is no free pass to the reader's interest. The detail must be significant.

The other big trap is style. Nowhere else in nonfiction do writers use such syrupy words and groaning platitudes. Adjectives you would squirm to use in conversation—"wondrous," "dappled," "roseate," "fabled," "scudding"—are common currency. Half the sights seen in a day's sightseeing are quaint, especially windmills
and covered bridges; they are certified for quaintness. Towns situated in hills (or foothills) are nestled—I hardly ever read about an unnestled town in the hills—and the countryside is dotted with byways, preferably half forgotten. In Europe you awake to the clip-clop of horse-drawn wagons along a history-haunted river; you seem to hear the scratch of a quill pen. This is a world where old meets new—old never meets old. It's a world where inanimate objects spring to life: storefronts smile, buildings boast, ruins beckon and the very chimneytops sing their inmemorial song of welcome.

Travelese is also a style of soft words that under hard examination mean nothing, or that mean different things to different people: “attractive,” “charming,” “romantic.” To write that “the city has its own attractiveness” is no help. And who will define “charm,” except the owner of a charm school? Or “romantic”? These are subjective concepts in the eye of the beholder: One man’s romantic sunrise is another man’s hangover.

How can you overcome such fearful odds and write well about a place? My advice can be reduced to two principles—one of style, the other of substance.

First, choose your words with unusual care. If a phrase comes to you easily, look at it with deep suspicion; it’s probably one of the countless clichés that have woven their way so tightly into the fabric of travel writing that you have to make a special effort not to use them. Also resist straining for the luminous lyrical phrase to describe the wondrous waterfall. At best it will make you sound artificial—unlike yourself—and at worst pompous. Strive for fresh words and images. Leave “myriad” and their ilk to the poets. Leave “ilk” to anyone who will take it away.

As for substance, be intensely selective. If you are describing a beach, don’t write that “the shore was scattered with rocks” or that “occasionally a seagull flew over.” Shores have a tendency to be scattered with rocks and to be flown over by seagulls. Eliminate every such fact that is a known attribute: don’t tell us that the sea had waves and the sand was white. Find details that are significant. They may be important to your narrative; they may be unusual, or colorful, or comic, or entertaining. But make sure they do useful work.

I'll give you some examples from various writers, widely different in temperament but alike in the power of the details they choose. The first is from an article by Joan Didion called “Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream.” It's about a hushed crime that occurred in the San Bernardino Valley of California, and in this early passage the writer is taking us, as if in her own car, away from urban civilization to the lonely stretch of road where Lucille Miller’s Volkswagen so unaccountably caught fire:

This is the California where it is easy to Dial-A-Devotion; but hard to buy a book. This is the country of the teased hair and the Capris and the girls for whom all life’s promise comes down to a waltz-length white wedding dress and the birth of a Kimberly or a Sherry or a Debbi and a Tijuana divorce and a return to hairdresser’s school. “We were just crazy kids,” they say without regret, and look to the future. The future always looks good in the golden land, because no one remembers the past. Here is where the hot wind blows and the old ways do not seem relevant, where the divorce rate is double the national average and where one person in every 38 lives in a trailer. Here is the last stop for all those who come from somewhere else, for all those who drifted away from the cold and the past and the old ways. Here is where they are trying to find a new life style, trying to find it in the only places they know to look: the movies and the newspapers. The case of Lucille Marie Maxwell Miller is a tabloid monument to the new style.

Imagine Banyan Street first, because Banyan is where it happened. The way to Banyan is to drive west from San Bernardino out Foothill Boulevard, Route 66: past the Santa Fe switching yards, the Forty Winks Motel. Past the motel that
is 19 stucco tepees: "SLEEP IN A WIGWAM—GET MORE FOR YOUR WAMPUM." Past Fontana Drag City and Fontana Church of the Nazarene and the Pit Stop A Go-Go; past Kaiser Steel, through Cucamonga, out to the Kapu Kai Restaurant-Bar and Coffee Shop, at the corner of Route 66 and Carnelian Avenue. Up Carnelian Avenue from the Kapu Kai, which means "Forbidden Seas," the subdivision flags whip in the harsh wind. "HALF-ACRE RANCHES! SNACK BARS! TRAVERTINE ENTRIES! $95 DOWN." It is the trail of an intention gone haywire, the flotsam of the New California. But after a while the signs thin out on Carnelian Avenue, and the houses are no longer the bright pastels of the Springtime Home owners but the faded bungalows of the people who grow a few grapes and keep a few chickens out here, and then the hill gets steeper and the road climbs and even the bungalows are few, and here—desolate, roughly surfaced, lined with eucalyptus and lemon groves—is Banyan Street.

In only two paragraphs we have a feeling not only for the tawdriness of the New California landscape, with its stucco tepees and instant housing and borrowed Hawaiian romance, but for the pathetic impermanence of the lives and pretensions of the people who have alighted there. All the details—statistics and names and signs—are doing useful work.

Concrete detail is also the anchor of John McPhee's prose. Coming Into the Country, his book about Alaska—to choose one example from his many craftsmanlike books—has a section devoted to the quest for a possible new state capital. It takes McPhee only a few sentences to give us a sense of what's wrong with the present capital, both as a place to live and as a place for lawmakers to make good laws:

A pedestrian today in Juneau, head down and charging, can be stopped for no gain by the wind. There are railings along the streets by which senators and representatives can haul themselves to work. Over the past couple of years, a succession of wind gauges were placed on a ridge above the town. They could measure velocities up to 200 miles per hour. They did not survive. The taku winds tore them apart after driving their indicators to the end of the scale. The weather is not always so bad; but under its influence the town took shape, and so Juneau is a tight community of adjacent buildings and narrow European streets, adhering to its mountainsides and fronting the salt water.

The urge to move the capital came over Harris during those two years [in the Alaska State Senate]. Sessions began in January and ran on at least three months, and Harris developed what he called "a complete sense of isolation—stuck there. People couldn't get at you. You were in a cage. You talked to the hard lobbyists every day. Every day the same people. What was going on needed more airing."

The oddity of the city, so remote from the ordinary American experience, is instantly clear. One possibility for the legislators was to move the capital to Anchorage. There at least people wouldn't feel they were in an alien town. McPhee distills its essence in a paragraph that is adroit both in detail and in metaphor:

Almost all Americans would recognize Anchorage, because Anchorage is that part of any city where the city has burst its seams and extruded Colonel Sanders. Anchorage is sometimes excused in the name of pioneering. Build now, civilize later. But Anchorage is not a frontier town. It is virtually unrelated to its environment. It has come in on the wind, an American spore. A large cookie cutter brought down on El Paso could lift something like Anchorage into the air. Anchorage is the northern rim of Trenton, the center of Oxnard, the ocean-blind precincts of Daytona Beach. It is condensed, instant Albuquerque.
What McPhee has done is to capture the idea of Juneau and Anchorage. Your main task as a travel writer is to find the central idea of the place you’re dealing with. Over the decades countless writers have tried to harness the Mississippi River, to catch the essence of the mighty highway that runs down the pious center of America, often with Biblical wrath. But nobody has done it more succinctly than Jonathan Raban, revisiting the Midwestern states inundated by the river’s recent massive floods. Here’s how his article begins:

Flying to Minneapolis from the West, you see it as a theological problem.

The great flat farms of Minnesota are laid out in a ruled grid, as empty of surprises as a sheet of graph paper. Every gravelled path, every ditch has been projected along the latitude and longitude lines of the township-and-range-survey system. The farms are square, the fields are square, the houses are square; if you could pluck their roofs off from over people’s heads, you’d see families sitting at square tables in the dead center of square rooms. Nature has been stripped, shaven, drilled, punished and repressed in this right-angled, right-thinking Lutheran country. It makes you ache for the sight of a rebellious curve or the irregular, dappled colour of a field where a careless farmer has allowed corn and soybeans to cohabit.

But there are no careless farmers on this flight path. The landscape is open to your inspection—as to God’s—as an enormous advertisement for the awful rectitude of the people. There are no funny goings-on down here, it says; we are plain upright folk, fit candidates for heaven.

Then the river enters the picture—a broad serpentine shadow that sprawls unconformably across the checkerboard. Deviously winding, riddled with black sloughs and green cigar-shaped islands, the Mississippi looks as if it had been put here to teach the god-fearing Midwest a lesson about stubborn and unregenerate nature. Like John Calvin’s bad temper, it presents itself as the wild beast in the heart of the heartland.

When people who live on the river attribute a gender to the Mississippi, they do so without whimsy, and nearly always they give it their own sex. “You better respect the river, or he’ll do you in,” growls the lockmaster. “She’s mean—she’s had a lot of people from round here,” says the waitress at the lunch counter. When Eliot wrote that the river is within us (as the sea is all about us), he was nailing something true in an everyday way about the Mississippi. People do see its muddy turmoil as a bodying-forth of their own turbulent inner selves. When they boast to strangers about their river’s wantonness, its appetite for trouble and destruction, its floods and drownings, there’s a note in their voices that says, I have it in me to do that . . . I know how it feels.

What could be luckier for a nonfiction writer than to live in America? The country is unendingly various and surprising. Whether the locale you write about is urban or rural, east or west, every place has a look, a population and a set of cultural assumptions unlike any other place. Find those distinctive traits. The following three passages describe parts of America that could hardly be more different. Yet in each case the writer has given us so many precise images that we feel we are there. The first excerpt, from “Halfway to Dick and Jane: A Puerto Rican Pilgrimage,” by Jack Agueros, describes the Hispanic neighborhood of the writer’s boyhood in New York, a place where different principalities could exist within a single block:

Every classroom had ten kids who spoke no English. Black, Italian, Puerto Rican relations in the classroom were good, but we all knew we couldn’t visit one another’s neighborhoods.
Sometimes we could not move too freely within our own blocks. On 109th, from the lamp post west, the Latin Aces, and from the lamp post east, the Senecas, the “club” I belonged to. The kids who spoke no English became known as the Marine Tigers, picked up from a popular Spanish song. The Marine Tiger and the Marine Shark were two ships that sailed from San Juan to New York and brought over many, many migrants from the island.

The neighborhood had its boundaries. Third Avenue and east, Italian. Fifth Avenue and west, black. South, there was a hill on 103rd Street known locally as Cooney’s Hill. When you got to the top of the hill, something strange happened: America began, because from the hill south was where the “Americans” lived. Dick and Jane were not dead; they were alive and well in a better neighborhood.

When, as a group of Puerto Rican kids, we decided to go swimming in Jefferson Park Pool, we knew we risked a fight and a beating from the Italians. And when we went to La Milagrosa Church in Harlem, we knew we risked a fight and a beating from the blacks. But when we went over Cooney’s Hill, we risked dirty looks, disapproving looks, and questions from the police like “What are you doing in this neighborhood?” and “Why don’t you kids go back where you belong?”

Where we belonged! Man, I had written compositions about America. Didn’t I belong on the Central Park tennis courts, even if I didn’t know how to play? Couldn’t I watch Dick play? Weren’t these policemen working for me too?

Go from there to a small town in East Texas, just across the border from Arkansas. This piece by Prudence Macintosh ran in Texas Monthly, a magazine I enjoy for the aliveness with which she and her fellow Texas writers take me—a resident of mid-Manhattan—to every corner of their state.

I gradually realized that much of what I had grown up believing was Texan was really Southern. The cherished myths of Texas had little to do with my part of the state. I knew dogwood, chinaberry, crape myrtle, and mimosa, but no bluebonnets or Indian paintbrush. Although the Four States Fair and Rodeo was held in my town, I never really learned to ride a horse. I never knew anyone who wore cowboy hats or boots as anything other than a costume. I knew farmers whose property was known as Old Man So-and-so’s place, not ranches with their cattle brands arched over entrance gates. Streets in my town were called Wood, Pine, Olive, and Boulevard, not Guadalupe and Lavaca.

Go still farther west—to Muroc Field, in California’s Mojave Desert, the one place in America that was hard and desolate enough, as Tom Wolfe explains in the brilliant early chapters of The Right Stuff, for the Army Air Force to use when it set out a generation ago to break the sound barrier.

It looked like some fossil landscape that had long since been left behind by the rest of territorial evolution. It was full of huge dry lake beds, the biggest being Rogers Lake. Other than sagebrush the only vegetation was Joshua trees, twisted freaks of the plant world that looked like a cross between cactus and Japanese bonsai. They had a dark petrified green color and horribly crippled branches. At dusk the Joshua trees stood out in silhouette on the fossil wasteland like some arthritic nightmare. In the summer the temperature went up to 110 degrees as a matter of course, and the dry lake beds were covered in sand, and there would be windstorms and sandstorms right out of a Foreign Legion movie. At night it would drop to near freezing, and in December it would start raining, and the dry lakes would fill up with a few inches of water, and some sort of putrid prehistoric
shrimps would work their way up from out of the ooze, and sea
gulls would come flying in a hundred miles or more from the
ocean, over the mountains, to gobble up these squirming little
throwbacks. A person had to see it to believe it. . . .

When the wind blew the few inches of water back and forth
across the lake beds, they became absolutely smooth and level.
And when the water evaporated in the spring, and the sun
baked the ground hard, the lake beds became the greatest nat-
ural landing fields ever discovered, and also the biggest, with
miles of room for error. That was highly desirable, given the
nature of the enterprise at Muroc:

Besides the wind, sand, tumbleweed, and Joshua trees, there
was nothing at Muroc except for two quonset-style hangars, side
by side, a couple of gasoline pumps, a single concrete runway, a
few tarpaper shacks, and some tents. The officers stayed in the
shacks marked "barracks," and lesser souls stayed in the tents
and froze all night and fried all day. Every road into the property
had a guardhouse on it manned by soldiers. The enterprise the
Army had undertaken in this godforsaken place was the develop-
ment of supersonic jet and rocket planes.

Practice writing this kind of travel piece, and just because I
call it a travel piece I don't mean you have to go to Morocco or
Mombasa. Go to your local mall, or bowling alley, or day-care
center. But whatever place you write about, go there often
enough to isolate the qualities that make it distinctive. Usually
this will be some combination of the place and the people who
inhabit it. If it's your local bowling alley it will be a mixture of the
atmosphere inside and the regular patrons. If it's a foreign city it
will be a mixture of the ancient culture and the present populace.
Try to find it.

A master of this feat of detection was the English author V.S.
Pritchett, one of the best and most versatile of nonfiction writers.
Consider what he squeezes out of a visit to Istanbul:

Istanbul has meant so much to the imagination that the real-
ity shocks most travelers. We cannot get the sultans out of
our minds. We half expect to find them still cross-legged and
jeweled on their divans. We remember tales of the harem. The
truth is that Istanbul has no glory except its situation. It is a city
of steep, cobbled, noisy hills. . . .

Mostly the shops sell cloth, clothes, stockings, shoes, the
Greek traders rushing out, with cloth unrolled, at any potential
customer, the Turks passively waiting. Porters shout; everyone
shouts; you are butted by horses, knocked sideways by loads of
bedding, and, through all this, you see one of the miraculous
sights of Turkey—a demure youth carrying a brass tray sus-
pended on three chains, and in the exact center of the tray a
small glass of red tea. He never spills it; he maneuvers it
through chaos to his boss, who is sitting on the doorstep of his
shop.

One realizes there are two breeds in Turkey: those who
carry and those who sit. No one sits quite so relaxedly, expertly,
beatifically as a Turk, as he sits with every inch of his body, his
eyes closed or open, with half a dozen other sitters: a few polite inquiries about
your age, your marriage, the sex of your children, the number
of your relations, and where and how you live, and then, like
the other sitters, you clear your throat with a hawk that sur-
passes anything heard in Lisbon, New York or Sheffield, and
join the general silence.

I like the phrase "his very face sits"—just four short words,
but they convey an idea so fanciful that they take us by surprise.
They also tell us a great deal about Turks. I'll never be able to visit
Turkey again without noticing its sitters. With one quick insight
Pritchett has caught a whole national trait. This is the essence of
good writing about other countries. Distill the important from the immaterial.

The English (as Pritchett reminds me) have long excelled at a distinctive form of travel writing—the article that’s less notable for what a writer extracts from a place than for what the place extracts from him. New sights touch off thoughts that otherwise wouldn’t have entered the writer’s mind. If travel is broadening, it should broaden more than just our knowledge of how a Gothic cathedral looks or how the French make wine. It should generate a whole constellation of ideas about how men and women work and play, raise their children, worship their gods, live and die. The books by Britain’s desert-crazed scholar-adventurers in Arabia, like T. E. Lawrence, Freya Stark and Wilfred Thesiger, who chose to live among the Bedouin, derive much of their strange power from the reflections born of surviving in so harsh and minimal an environment.

So when you write about a place, try to draw the best out of it. But if the process should work in reverse, let it draw the best out of you. One of the richest travel books written by an American is Walden, though Thoreau only went a mile out of town.

Finally, however, what brings a place alive is human activity: people doing the things that give a locale its character. Forty years later I still remember reading James Baldwin’s dynamic account, in The Fire Next Time, of being a boy preacher in a Harlem church. I still carry with me what it felt like to be in that sanctuary on a Sunday morning, because Baldwin pushed himself beyond mere description into a higher literary region of sounds and rhythms, of shared faith and shared emotions:

The church was very exciting. It took a long time for me to disengage myself from this excitement, and on the blindest, most visceral level, I never really have, and never will. There is no music like that music, no drama like the drama of the saints rejoicing, the sinners moaning, the tambourines racing, and all those voices coming together and crying holy unto the Lord. There is still, for me, no pathos quite like the pathos of those multicolored, worn, somehow triumphant and transfigured faces, speaking from the depths of a visible, tangible continuing despair of the goodness of the Lord. I have never seen anything to equal the fire and excitement that sometimes, without warning, fill a church, causing the church, as Leadbelly and so many others have testified, to “rock.” Nothing that has happened to me since equals the power and the glory that I sometimes felt when, in the middle of a sermon, I knew that I was somehow, by some miracle, really carrying, as they said, “the Word”—when the church and I were one. Their pain and their joy were mine, and mine were theirs—and their cries of “Amen!” and “Hallelujah!” and “Yes, Lord!” and “Praise His name!” and “Preach it, brother!” sustained and whipped on my solos until we all became equal, wringing wet, singing and dancing, in anguish and rejoicing, at the foot of the altar.

Never be afraid to write about a place that you think has had every last word written about it. It’s not your place until you write about it. I set myself that challenge when I decided to write a book, American Places, about 15 heavily touristed, cliché sites that have become American icons or that represent a powerful idea about American ideals and aspirations.

Nine of my sites were super-icons: Mount Rushmore, Niagara Falls, the Alamo, Yellowstone Park, Pearl Harbor, Mount Vernon, Concord & Lexington, Disneyland, and Rockefeller Center. Five were places that embody a distinctive idea about America: Hannibal, Missouri, Mark Twain’s boyhood town, which he used to create twin myths of the Mississippi River and an ideal childhood; Appomattox, where the Civil War ended; Kitty Hawk, where the Wright brothers invented flight, symbolic of America as a nation of genius-tinkerers; Abilene, Kansas, Dwight D. Eisenhower’s prairie town, symbolic of the values of small-town America; and
Chautauqua, the upstate New York village that hatched most of America’s notions of self-improvement and adult education. Only one of my shrines was new: Maya Lin’s Civil Rights Memorial, in Montgomery, Alabama, to the men and women and children who were killed during the civil rights movement in the South. Except for Rockefeller Center, I had never visited any of those places and knew nothing of their history.

My method was not to ask tourists gazing up at Mount Rushmore, “What do you feel?” I know what they would have said: something subjective (“It’s incredible!”) and therefore not useful to me as information. Instead I went to the custodians of these sites and asked: Why do you think two million people a year come to Mount Rushmore? Or three million to the Alamo? Or one million to Concord bridge? Or a quarter million to Hannibal? What kind of quest are all these people on? My purpose was to enter into the intention of each place: to find out what it was trying to be, not what I might have expected or wanted it to be.

By interviewing local men and women—park rangers, curators, librarians, merchants, old-timers, Daughters of the Republic of Texas, ladies of the Mount Vernon Ladies Association—I tapped into one of the richest veins waiting for any writer who goes looking for America: the routine eloquence of people who work at a place that fills a need for someone else. Here are things that custodians at three sites told me:

MOUNT RUSHMORE: “In the afternoon when the sunlight throws the shadows into that socket,” one of the rangers, Fred Banks, said, “you feel that the eyes of those four men are looking right at you, no matter where you move. They’re peering right into your mind, wondering what you’re thinking, making you feel guilty: ‘Are you doing your part?’”

KITTY HAWK: “Half the people who come to Kitty Hawk are people who have some tie to aviation, and they’re looking for the roots of things,” says superintendent Ann Childress. “We periodically have to replace certain photographs of Wilbur and Orville Wright because their faces get rubbed out—visitors want to touch them. The Wrights were everyday guys, barely out of high school in their education, and yet they did something extraordinary, in a very short time, with minimal funds. They succeeded wildly—they changed how we all live—and I think, ‘Could I be so inspired and work so diligently to create something of such magnitude?’”

YELLOWSTONE PARK: “Visiting national parks is an American family tradition,” said ranger George B. Robinson, “and the one park everyone has heard of is Yellowstone. But there’s also a hidden reason. I think people have an innate need to reconnect with the places from which they have evolved. One of the closest bonds I’ve noticed here is the bond between the very young and the very old. They’re nearer to their origins.”

The strong emotional content of the book was supplied by what I got from other people to say. I didn’t need to wax emotional or patriotic. Beware of waxing. If you’re writing about places that are sacred or meaningful, leave the waxing to someone else. One fact that I learned soon after I got to Pearl Harbor is that the battleship Arizona, sunk by the Japanese on December 7, 1941, continues to leak as much as a gallon of oil every day. When I later interviewed superintendent Donald Magee he recalled that upon taking the job he reversed a bureaucratic fiat prohibiting children under 45 inches tall from visiting the Arizona Memorial. Their behavior, it had been decreed, could “negatively impact the experience” for other tourists.

“I don’t think children are too young to appreciate what that ship represents,” Magee told me. “They’ll remember it if they see the leaking oil—if they see that the ship is still bleeding.”