



A Broad Sense of “Place”

“Place” may include, among other things– the physical landscape, weather, population, attitudes of people, ways of working and being in a place, difficult and positive elements of living in a particular place; “place” may be one's home(s), both past and present, culture, way of being raised and growing up, encounters with "locals" and "outsiders," ways of fitting or not fitting in a particular place, etc.

“Place” can be grand or small; regardless, consider thinking of its particularities. For instance, the piano bench is a place, as is “Wind Canyon” in the Badlands, and it includes your experiences, thoughts, feelings, and attitudes about it. Below is an example of poet Aleksandar Hemon contemplating Chicago.

Reasons Why I Do Not Wish to Leave Chicago: An Incomplete, Random List

Excerpted from The Book of My Lives (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, \$25)
By Aleksandar Hemon

1. Driving west at sunset in the summer: blinded by the sun, you cannot see the cars ahead; the ugly warehouses and body shops are blazing orange. When the sun sets, everything becomes deeper: the brick facades acquire a bluish hue; there are charcoal smudges of darkness on the horizon. The sky and the city look endless. West is everywhere you look.
2. The way people in the winter huddle together under the warming lights of the Granville El stop, much like young chickens under a lightbulb. It is an image of human solidarity enforced by the cruelty of nature, the story of Chicago and of civilization.
3. The American vastness of the Wilson Street beach, gulls and kites coasting above it, dogs sprinting along the jagged waves, barking into the void, city kids doing homemade drugs, blind to the distant ships on their mysterious ways from Liverpool, England, to Gary, Indiana.
4. Early September anyplace in the city, when the sunlight angles have abruptly changed and everything and everyone appears better, all the edges softened; the

torments of the hot summer are now over, the cold torments of the winter have not begun, and people bask in the perishable possibility of a kind and gentle city.

5. The basketball court at Foster Street beach, where I once watched an impressively sculpted guy play a whole game—dribbling, shooting, arguing, dunking—with a toothpick in his mouth, taking it out only to spit. For many years he was to me the hero of Chicago cool.

6. The tall ice ranges along the shore when the winter is exceptionally cold and the lake frozen for a while, so ice pushes ice against the land. One freezing day I stood there in awe, realizing that the process exactly replicates the way mountain ranges were formed hundreds of millions of years ago, tectonic plates pushing against each other. The primeval shapes are visible to every cranky driver plowing through the Lake Shore Drive mess, but most of them look ahead and couldn't care less.

7. Looking directly west at night from any Edgewater or Rogers Park high-rise; airplanes hover and glimmer above O'Hare. Once, my visiting mother and I spent an entire evening sitting in the dark, listening to Frank Sinatra, watching the planes, which resembled stunned fireflies, transfixed with the continuous wonder that this world is.

8. The blessed scarcity of celebrities in Chicago, most of whom are overpaid athlete losers. Oprah, one of the *Friends*, and many other people whose names I never knew or now cannot recall have all left for New York or Hollywood or rehab, where they can wear the false badge of their humble Chicago roots, while we can claim them without actually being responsible for the vacuity of their front-page lives.

9. The Hyde Park parakeets, miraculously surviving brutal winters, a colorful example of life that adamantly refuses to perish, of the kind of instinct that has made Chicago harsh and great. I actually have never seen one: the possibility that they are made up makes the whole thing even better.

10. The downtown skyline at night as seen from the Adler Planetarium: lit windows within the dark building frames against the darker sky. It seems that stars have been squared and pasted on the thick wall of a Chicago night; the cold, inhuman beauty containing the enormity of life, each window a possible story, inside which an immigrant is putting in a late shift cleaning corporate trash.

11. The green-gray color of the barely foaming lake when the winds are northwesterly and the sky is chilly.

12. The summer days, long and humid, when the streets seem waxed with sweat; when the air is as thick and warm as honey-sweetened tea; when the beaches are full of families: fathers barbecuing, mothers sunbathing, children approaching...

You can read the rest of his poem here:

<https://www.chicagomag.com/chicago-magazine/april-2013/20-reasons-aleksandar-hemon-will-n-ever-leave-chicago/>

Check out a “parallel poem” that mimics some of his structure:

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Reasons Why I do Not Wish to Leave the Classroom: An Incomplete, Random List

By Candace Brannan

1. Trailing out the auditorium doors with students: chilled by the icy breath of winter, you look for things to write about, and the students chatter in the cold, traipsing along the sidewalk while you linger behind and let them go. “Take field notes,” you say, hoping they’ll see something beautiful, even in the brittle cold. Ahead of you, a young woman, the bright smudge of mustard yellow, and a young man in a red and white “Chicago Blackhawks” stocking cap, wander away. Back in the classroom, the daughter of an old, high school friend sits writing, her long, pale ponytail like a horse’s mane falling over her shoulder. Everywhere you look, a sea of students write.

To create your own poem, start with your observations. Jot notes. Then examine Hemon’s structure and see how you can imitate it.

Additional Prompts for Journal Writing About Place: Tie to regional place/spaces

- Write a descriptive report of a local place, space, or landscape.
- Revise your description in an attempt to get at “the layered, rich, echo-ey” aspects of space.
- Write a scene in which a place is not the subject, but in which that place appears as a character.
- Compare and contrast the concrete details of two very different places.
- Describe your sense of attachment to a place.
- Describe how a particular place is related to your “human being-ness.”

- Describe a place of sanctuary or rest for you or someone else.
- Describe a spiritual or sacred place for you or someone else.
- Describe a place of drudgery or entrapment for you or someone else.
- Describe a place that is contested territory.
- Describe a scene in which the history of that place is present, even if unspoken.
- Write about a place that is a site of change.
- Describe how some particular place was “made.”
- Describe how a place “made” you or your people. How has it influenced you?
- How does what’s natural or land-based about your place impact the meaning it holds for you?
- Describe leaving a place?
- Describe a place you’ve left.
- Describe arriving at a place.
- Describe a place you’ve chosen.
- Describe a missing place.
- Describe returning to a place you once missed.
- Describe a place you remember but have not, for many years, returned to.
- Describe a place that others remember differently than you do.
- Describe another’s deep attachment to a place you are not attached to.
- Describe moving through you place, on foot of in some kind of vehicle.
- Describe a place nostalgically, and then comment on your nostalgia, or nostalgia in general, perhaps positively and/or negatively.
- Describe a place that represents your identity, whether or not you live there.
- Describe the repetition of everyday activities—yours or another’s in some particular place.
- Describe your full habitation of a place.
- Describe the memories a place holds, beyond your own.
- Describe your disconnection from a place.
- Describe something we don’t usually consider “a place” as a kind of place.

*Shared by Barrie Jean Borich, DePaul University in her course: “Workshop: Nonfiction Places and Spaces”, assayjournal.com

