

David St. John

AIN'T GOT NO HOME IN THIS WORLD ANYMORE:

Notes On A Son's Homecoming

I.

Some years ago I was asked by W. T. Pfefferle to write an introduction for his book, *The Poetry of Place*, a collection of interviews he'd conducted with American poets about the importance of place and local landscape in their poetry. In thinking of this essay, I re-read that introduction and came upon this passage that I had written then:

We live in a world that is constantly in movement, perpetually fragmenting and re-assembling itself. Those places from which we come and those to which we've moved provide the ground against which the figures of our lives themselves move, change, depart. Poetry is forever looking to discover and then describe what we mean by a sense of "home." Is such a place located in an actual place, in the imagination, in albums of memory, or in some combination of them all? From the time we are young, we all fear that loss of home, of place, of belonging. . . [We all] know that the poetry of the human heart and the living mind always seeks residence in the available landscapes of the lived world. The poetry of American solace is the poetry of place.

Often, the summoning of place is an almost incantatory act against loss. In the same way that we tell stories of those who have died as an attempt in some measure to keep them alive, so do many poets tell -- in their poems -- the stories of landscapes they fear may be lost to memory or to progress or to any of those many erasures we gather under the rubric of "time." So, too, we recognize the intrinsic social and political natures of these poems of place, however personal they may at first seem . . .

Today, it is a soft April morning here in Venice Beach where I make my home. Looking out the long window in front of my desk, I can see the newly dense garden outside, the lavender stalks exploding, the widening bells of the trumpet vine eager to make some noise about the spring. Hanging in long clusters along the arbor trellis, the wisteria is shaking its soft violet blossoms along with the breezes that have been uncurling off the ocean all morning, as the early tides build just a few blocks away.

My son, who is visiting me, is still asleep after his long train and bus ride from my mother's house up in the San Joaquin Valley of California, in Fresno (the city where I was born). It is a house that my mother designed and had built, a house where I lived from the time I was six until eighteen. Last night, my son, who is also named David, reminded me that my house in Venice Beach is the place where I have lived longer than any other in my life. I was startled to realize that he was right, that I had moved here over fourteen years ago when my daughter Vivienne, David's half-sister, was only a few months old. We began talking about the fact that it was almost fourteen years to the month that, four days after graduating from The University of Southern California, the university where I teach, David boarded an airplane to return to Tokyo, to make a life, to find a life, in a city where he had already lived for two of his five years as an undergraduate in college.

Home/Lands.

A collection of essays commissioned by the International Writing Program at The University of Iowa to mark the third New Symposium held on the island of Paros, Greece, in May 2008.

As a young man, David had always been enviably adept at languages. He'd studied Vietnamese, Mandarin Chinese, and Russian as a teen-ager. At The University of Southern California his major area of study was Japanese. He'd learned Japanese so quickly and so proficiently that the department of East Asian Studies allowed him to go abroad and study at Wasada University as a sophomore, after only one year of work at USC. He returned to Los Angeles and USC for the next year but was soon back in Japan again for yet another year of study before finally coming home to Los Angeles to complete his degree.

My photos of him in his graduation robes holding Vivienne in the brilliant sunlight of May, 1994 became a reminder to me of the moment my son stepped from the shore of one life in America to the shore of a new life in Japan. David had always loved traveling to those places in Southeast Asia that fascinated him -- Thailand, Indonesia, all of the islands in the Ring of Fire. While traveling, he designed his own tattoo of a dragon holding the globe of the world in its talons, to be etched onto his bicep by Jimmy Wong, a renowned tattoo artist in Bangkok. It always seemed to me his proclamation of holding the world in his own talons, his own capable hands. David had always felt comfortable traveling, taking his home with him in his backpack, in his mind, and carried along by his body. A body-builder since his teen-age years, he was confident of his physical place in the world, of his ability to respond to any of the physical demands or threats his travels might present.

Perhaps here is the place to say that David himself lived from the time he was very young with the reality of having come from what is called a "broken" home, a home which broke into two pieces as the result of a divorce. He lived with his mother and his younger half-brother, Andrew, for some years in Fresno, where my parents' house (and my childhood home) remained a centerpiece of stability and continuity for the boys. Then, they moved to Minnesota, where David lived until his senior year of high school, when he returned to Fresno to live with my parents. During those years he would spend time with me in Baltimore, where I was teaching at The Johns Hopkins University, and later, in Southern California -- Venice -- after I'd moved there to teach at USC, a place he would also move to begin his college education.

Yet, I'd always felt that David's sense of "home" seemed consistently -- and admirably -- portable, fluid, attendant less to a particular place than to the weather systems of his being and his tireless curiosity. His urge to travel, to see something he'd never seen, to explore what was unknown, wasn't simply that of a restless and reckless young man (though he may have been both). Like any young person "on the road" he was, of course, enacting an important coming of age drama; but I believe he found that travel in some way -- or many ways -- suited his temperament, suited his physical, emotional, and psychological rhythms. I know this to be true because, in him, I recognized all of these same characteristics that I'd first found in myself as a young man as well. He was the embodied mirror of that calm I had always felt while traveling, that peace that comes with one's movement across cultures and borders, that consoling sense of the world's expanse and its infinite varieties of experience.

And so, after graduating from college, David had gone to Japan to make a life. He founded an English Language School and then moved into advertising, writing copy in both Japanese and English, working as the art director on some campaigns as well. He edited a magazine for teens published by Sony. He helped design the first Citibank website for Southeast Asia. He met and

married a beautiful young Japanese woman who was a competitive ballroom dancer, a woman whose life seemed to have been lifted intact from the great Japanese film, *Shall We Dance*. They had three children, Michael, Rachel, and William. They lived in Chiba, in the suburbs of Tokyo where his wife, Yoshie, had grown up. After ten years, wearied by the advertising world, David began to look toward the natural world, toward the ideas of Permaculture and sustainable agriculture. He took his family first to a rural farmhouse in the Nagara region of Japan, a house so rustic he said, his wife blanched. Then, they found an exceptionally capacious and warm house to rent on the eastern coast of Japan, near Shimoda at the southernmost tip of the Izu peninsula. On a large piece of land, surrounded by trees, set against a hillside, a short walk to the ocean, it seemed to them an ideal spot. It seemed like a place they could make a home.

Over the three years he was there, David turned the hillside into series of terraces in which he could plant. He moved over ten tons of rock from the surrounding fields and mountains to build stone walls in order to create planting beds, bringing ages-old humus from the nearby forests to turn into the earth to make these beds. From the local fishermen he was given hundreds of pounds of kelp; from the local stable he brought over 500 pounds of horse manure. Among the many things he planted were: grape vines, inter-planted with peas and beans and wild blackberries; tomatoes, green peppers and eggplants; cabbage and broccoli; spinach, mustard, buckwheat, baby greens, turnips, radishes, and daikons; a field of four varieties of potatoes bordered by more lettuce and radishes; another field of corn, beans, and pumpkins; blueberry and strawberry plants; two cherry trees, fig trees, mulberries, and goumi (a relative of the olive); and lastly, apple trees, a lemon tree, and a tangerine. Still, it would not be the home that he had imagined.

In fact, this would be his last house, the last home he would have in Japan before coming back to the United States. After more than two years of struggle, his marriage came apart for good. As in all such difficult and wrenching separations, the reasons were many and deeply personal, and to some degree long-standing. I'd followed the oscillations from a distance, offering the little wisdom and counsel I could along the way. Now, he had come back, first to a homecoming in Fresno, in the Central San Joaquin Valley of California, to see my mother, his only living grandparent, and to see Andrew, who'd moved back to Fresno from Minnesota and bought a home only four houses from my mother's. For Andrew, who had at times lived in my mother's house to help take care of her while building his own life in Fresno, to have found a house so near the gravitational center of his emotional past-life, a house so close to the place he had always thought of as home, echoed exactly David's sense of return. Although David and his family had visited the States many times over the fourteen years that he'd lived in Japan, this was a different kind of visit back to Fresno. In fact, it wasn't a visit at all; it was an actual *return*. It was in every sense of the word, a homecoming. And now, as he is sleeping in this house, my house, here in Venice Beach, I have been thinking about his being here, of his homecoming to this place, to his father's house. When he awakens I tell him that I have been writing this essay, that I have told the story of his last house and his memorable garden, and of how proud I am of him and all of the work he put into making such an extraordinary place, such a powerful sense of home.

Having listened carefully to what I'd had to say, David looked at me and said, "Under Japanese law every rental house must be returned to exactly the state it was in when one moved in. My last weeks in that house in Izu were spent uprooting all of the trees and vegetables I'd planted, moving the ten tons of stone back to the hillsides. Before I left, the wild boars came through and devastated whatever was left in the fields." He continued, "When I arrived in Japan fourteen years ago, I arrived with my backpack, a few books, and almost no money." He looked at me with a wry smile,

understanding that I knew he'd given all of the money he'd made from advertising all of those years to his ex-wife, all of the gold he'd shrewdly bought and saved at a time of an uncertain economy, and said, simply, "And I left the same way."

I wonder now about the place my son will next call home. There are many possibilities, of course, and he is taking his time. He wants a place where he will know his children will feel comfortable when they come to stay with him over the summers. Like many of us, he now carries with him the sleek, portable home of his laptop computer, a reliable link to his extended community of friends and family. Email has become the echo-location device that can home in on the place or places he is or will be, wherever in this world that happens to be... and wherever he is, now, is likely as not to be at least a momentary version -- however temporary -- of home. Then, he will again find that place that feels like the place he might belong, a place he can imagine that he truly belongs.

A few days ago, sitting with David and Andrew and Vivienne in a café looking out over the ocean, I said that I didn't know if I could ever live anywhere else, that I love Venice Beach and being by the ocean. I began to add that I loved it in part because... and then David interrupted me with a huge grin on his face, quoting me from an interview I'd given to a magazine once, repeating something he must have also heard me say at other times as well, that I "loved those places that were at the end of the road, where the land ran out and there was nowhere left to go, places like Key West and Venice Beach," places where all varieties of human life had washed up upon its shores. To me, those were always the places that felt like home.

II.

One summer in the late 1970s, back seeing my family in my old home in Fresno, I decided to drive down to Laguna Beach to visit my friend, the poet Charles Wright. On a gorgeous California night, we sat on the deck of his home in the hills above Laguna, the stars overhead and the lights from houses across the valley all competing for our attention. He'd put on the record player -- people had record players in those days -- a collection of his beloved Carter Family tunes, including one of my favorites, an old Baptist hymn called in some versions, "This World Is Not My Home." As tunes about salvation go, it's a catchy, buoyant song, and I loved the Carter Family's version of it. It was also a song that Woody Guthrie had heard in the migrant labor camps he'd visited in the late 1930s, a song that Guthrie had taken exception to, a song that had in many ways angered him, as he knew it was asking the migrants to accept their worldly fate and wait for their reward in the next life. To the same tune as the original hymn, Guthrie had written in 1938 a revised version that, as his biographer Joe Klein says, "stood the [original] song on its head...." Woody Guthrie called his song, "I Ain't Got No Home," and its final verse is:

*Now as I look around, it's mighty plain to see
This world is such a great and a funny place to be;
Oh, the gamblin' man is rich an' the workin' man is poor,
And I ain't got no home in this world anymore.*

I love the dark humor of Guthrie here, contrasting the heavenly salvation of the original song with those more common and earthly struggles we all share; I also love his witty insistence upon the grace of being in this world, not beyond it. We all are used to living in several places at once, half in one place, half in another -- in the past and the present, with loved ones and utterly alone, in Japan and America, even heaven and hell. Which, the question often becomes, will one day be thought of as our final "home"?

In these past few weeks since he's returned from Japan, I've been reminded that David was never anyone to do something half-way, never someone who could live half-way in any regard. When I asked him what the most difficult thing had been about living for those fourteen years in Japan, a look of sadness passed over his face, a momentary flash of defeat, then he said that the most difficult moment had been realizing one day that, however long he lived there, he would always be seen as being unalterably *other*. And I knew he felt this dilemma of being "other," of "half-ness," most profoundly when it came to his children. David himself had grown up with surprising ease with two families, two half-brothers and two half-sisters. In his heart and his life, he'd made sure that those halves had always been held and made whole. Now, at this distance, he would need to do something even more difficult -- to provide a sense of completion and wholeness to the identities of his children, Michael, Rachel, and William, who were half American, half Japanese. He would have to be sure that they knew always they were and would always be, even divided by an ocean, wholly his children.

We are all, at different times in our lives, made aware that we are simply not at home, that we have become simply "other" in our circumstances, whether we've crossed the borders of other countries or perhaps just the borders of the heart. Those profound feelings of alienation, loneliness, exclusion and judgment can occur throughout the world and in our own homes, of course, even in our own "homes," those very places we have built and created to counter that solitude we so often experience in the world, that larger world which unfolds so constantly and complexly around us. More and more these days, it seems to me that the job of every one of us, whatever our occupations or professions, is to try and make this world a slightly less lonely place, to help make out of those clusters of individual "homes" scattered across the planet some more elaborate and connected conversation of hope, by which I mean a joining of voices, some alignment of possibilities, and the claiming, person by person, nation by nation, of our fragile, worldly home. I speak only for myself of course, but I'm weary of singing Woody's final, ironic line, "*I Ain't Got No Home in This World Anymore.*" I want a home as large as the world, and world that might one day become as safe and as tender as a home.

III.

Since returning from Paros and the symposium on "Home/Land," I've had many discussions with friends and family, recalling for them some of the most startling and moving details of the essays and conversations that emerged there -- and recalling my impressions of those days, of the voices, of the reflections we all shared. Though I remember that I talked of this at the time, I feel the most lasting sense I have taken away with me is the understanding that we each carry with us a sense of home that is connected to a profound experience of loss, and that we spend much of our creative lives attempting to explain, to reclaim, to redeem, or to reconcile that loss. As if any and every home were a womb from which we have been expelled, the sensation arises of the everlasting emptiness of home, the resonant hollow that stands in our pasts, the backdrop of our yearnings. The

garden, the womb, the home -- all of these temporary residences on the earth (to invoke Neruda) -- remind us of our inevitable passage from one residence to another. We move across the world with the knowledge that at any moment our temporary homes may be shifted and perhaps disappear beneath us . . . the ground of family, of relationships, of love, of nation are all capable at any moment of registering some shock as the tectonic plates of our lives shift.

The poignancy of the stories of home I heard on Paros was over-whelming. The pleasures of “home/land” were always troubled by the facts of each writer’s true and actual experience of home, which was always also an experience of loss. In every case, that experience of loss was also the inevitable re-entry into a passage of constant departure from both an actual home and an idea of “home”; and in every case what was left -- and perhaps what is often left in this situation -- was a wound, is a wound. In so many of our essays, home seemed an absence-to-be, and the world a wound. Yet if we pass through the world searching for a home, perhaps some home that resembles one of our first or early homes, what we may discover is what I believe every essay on Paros revealed: that those losses can be made more whole by the smallest gestures and reflections of “home,” that we are re-making at every moment some semblance of “home” by writing of home and by invoking both our past and future homes. Home is the healing of the wound of home. Every line of every story and every poem becomes another board nailed to the wall/page of our most recent home. Every book becomes our safest residence for the time it takes to write it, even when its furniture feels battered and worn. As with Harold’s purple crayon, we write the homes in which we wish to live. We sketch the rooms, the stanzas, and we draw the doorways, the apertures looking back into our memories and opening onto our hopes, doorways that offer us a new and yet familiar conversation with our world. What more could we wish?

