

Practice Makes Practice

Installment #1

Jen Tynes talks to Erika Howsare
about *How is Travel a Folded Form?* by Erika
Howsare and *I Mean* by Kate Colby
(March 23-May 23, 2018)

Practice Makes Practice is a series of conversations and collaborations between writers. In each installment, one writer invites another to submit for attention a book they authored, a book they find interesting, and a practice that one or both writers should engage in while reading those books. For more information and more installments, go to **magnificentfield.com**.

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EH: I have two different ideas for your daily practice and will let you choose whichever's most appealing:

Make a short daily visit to one spot in your town that you know some history about. A public history or just a story told to you by someone else, that centers on a place -- a landmark, a neighborhood, a street, a building or park, maybe even an actual tourist attraction. I'm curious about how your daily experience there will interleave, overlap, overwrite or struggle against the history you've previously learned that isn't your own. Your imagining of the received history, the facts you know, and your sense of the way it's been told and maybe retold, versus your lived experience there. Being a pilgrim (as in pilgrimage) versus a pioneer (exploring).

Go to a spot of your choice and answer the questions in the left-hand column on pages 62-66 of my book. These are meant to bring awareness to a particular place. You could do this in the same place each day or a different one. Maybe my list of questions will begin to mutate into a different list that you want to answer for yourself?

JT: My plan may change as the days go on, but yesterday I decided that I would make daily visits to Butterworth #2 Landfill. This is a place I already visit several days a week -- it's a big meadow along the Grand River with a bike path running through it, and it's also a superfund site. As much time as I tend to spend there, I am always in motion; I sometimes stop to take pictures or explore a little, but I never just sit. Since I'm planning to stick to the same place, I decided to give myself a

time limit for writing and responding to questions. Yesterday I did seven minutes (which I picked arbitrarily, mostly for the sound of “superfund seven”) and replied very briefly to the first five questions on the list. My plan is to pick up with the next questions today, and so on. Seven minutes went by extremely quickly but right now I’m imagining the feel of that time will change as the days accumulate and questions get repeated. This first responding feels uncertain -- I’m curious to see how I will think about the questions and the job of answering them differently as I keep doing this.

Do you think we could start off by talking about how Isabella Bird becomes a character of *How is Travel a Folded Form*? I'm really interested in the between space she occupies -- you don't "just" treat her diaries as a textual companion, but your story also doesn't get full-on fantastical -- she is never a fully-formed human walking beside you. She's kind of a ghost traveling partner. I'm interested in the how the way you include her becomes a way to evaluate your own experience and also really represents accurately, for me anyway, the feeling of living with a really present written voice for a period of time. (I have been, for example, walking around with you for the last week or so! Could you sense it? It's been great!) Can you talk about how her presence developed in the book and why she is important to your investigations?

EH: So, I think I get what you're asking about and I will try to get at an answer, with the caveat that this book was mostly written over a decade ago, so the details of its history are somewhat

fuzzy in my memory. I remember what I was trying to do but not everything about how I ended up doing it.

I was not reading Isabella Bird while traveling, though that would be a worthy project (and that is the approach I took with my Lewis and Clark project -- reading their journals while tracing their path, and then writing into a lot of the tensions and coincidences that arose). With the Isabella project, my travels came first and a year or two later, I discovered her writing. I found her to be an appealing voice and also a representative of some of the notions, contemporary to the 19th century but not exclusively of that time, that we in our era have learned to question or investigate. For example, I love when she says that a certain vista she encountered makes her almost angry with Nature for its close imitation of art. The ways that art influences how we see are one of my longtime interests, representation shaping reality, and here was someone (un-ironically? I'm not sure) perfectly evincing that phenomenon.

I had been traveling with Laura Ingalls Wilder as a mental companion, as you describe, but as I say in the book, I realized at some point that Laura was a less appropriate analog for me than Isabella, because Laura and her family were more like pioneers whereas Isabella and I, both tourists in essence, are pilgrims. It's the difference between forging a path and following one. (There is a lot more to say about the Ingalls family and their stories, of course, but that's another conversation.)

At the same time, I was conscious that the conditions under which Isabella traveled were infinitely more rugged, dangerous, and demanding than mine. She traveled by horse, stayed with pioneer families, traveled with no itinerary and in close contact with the land. It awed me that she moved about in the way she did, in a time when women generally had few freedoms -- in societal terms she was certainly a pioneer. And relative to the comfort of car travel, with a cell phone and a credit card, she might as well be Lewis and Clark. In other words, I was interested in the tension between Isabella as an intrepid figure, whose conditions I could not hope to recreate, and the ways that she and I both were only visitors to the West, there to have a look-see but not to get truly involved. Playing, not working. And a feeling of longing that I think permeates a lot of travel -- the longing to possess, to return, to make contact but all within certain boundaries. We want to swallow places but not be permanently swallowed by them. I never get the sense from Isabella Bird that she considered staying in the Rocky Mountains or wanted to die there.

I ended up seeing this book as a narrative (it started as more of an essay) but both the narrator and Isabella, and eventually also the reader, are as you say rather ghostly figures. Symbolic vessels for urges, emotions, ways of seeing. Making characters, of a sort, was a way for me call forth a loose plot. It's a story of mental, not physical, wanderings. An attempt to break through and the ultimate failure of that attempt.

That Isabella represents "the body" in a later portion of the book is probably a serious distortion of what the real Isabella

was like, but it does stem from my imagining of her travels as being much more embodied than mine. She could never go faster than a body (hers or a horse's) could move. Yet I think we did probably share the sheer (if relative) thrill of travel, and of solo travel. I'm just this moment realizing that's it ironic, then, for me to have put the two of us in one car, trying to get along!

JT: I've been thinking a lot about embodiment, reading *How is Travel a Folded Form?* -- where the body is your literal own and experience is both limited and only possible because of it -- the very experience of being in and of a body. Spring has been winking off and on here the past few weeks, and so my human body has been remembering how to be in the world in different ways, new smells and sounds outside, fewer layers between us and air, more people and animals to interact with or observe, different food desires, seasonal allergies even, and as usual my writing is evidence of that: I am out there and attentive, but I am also preoccupied with my body and its own very basic sensory reception in a way that feels limiting. I've been thinking about this too in relation to meditation, the seemingly contradictory way that mindfulness can sometimes be in conflict with creativity. Even before Isabella "officially" becomes the embodiment of body, we get, as readers, that she is directed by some sensual needs: water on her face, sunlight on her hair. Obviously the real Isabella wrote and observed plenty, and we see that in this book too, but there's also that sense that the body is the form, as you note at one point in the bolded definitions (is that the right word?) that evolve (again, is that the right word?) along the bottom of some pages -- if the

body had its experience, what is the text or photo (which you write about, re: tourism, later in the book) for? How and when do text or photo become something other than recording you arrived at a certain point (physical or mental) and is it possible for that recording not to disembody you. I appreciate the moments when writing is actually described -- where and how it happens during travel, the sound of typing, etc. I don't have page numbers on this manuscript print-out, but I'm thinking of a passage earlier in the book that has particularly been resonating with me:

I write to her:

I feel larger in my body now, but smaller in my mouth. I am rushing out even in sleep. I want my own square mile. My legs go wider forward to bit off the grass. These plains are so thin and delicious, gulpable, stretchable, my arms are the only arms, unopposed. I am making my own alphabet, I'm speeding over billions. Haven't been seen in a week. Have grown by thirds. The compass throws its darts out from my palm and I am unpierced, just under clouds. I understand everything now and there is no one to explain it to. This is fully interior, Isabella, do you know that? And I am being drawn out by gas pedals, bootheels, fingers.

I am leaving, leaving, leaving—a little volume smeared over states and then more flat states. My body metal and moving.

It's interesting because it seems to illustrate that shift somehow: the first lines feel so much about being in and of a

body, but as it rushes and speeds, the movement becomes more clearly driving, covering long distances quickly and along their surfaces. What's my question? I don't have one. What do you think?

A PS, because just after I sent this I was kneading dough for this week's bread and listening to Krista Tippett interview Helen Fisher about the biology of love and sex, and it occurred to me that maybe romantic love (and the chemical processes happening to us when we feel romantic love) is applicable to the ideas of tourism and pilgrimage thinking about the embodiment. That romantic love is perhaps biologically necessary to form attachments, and then that wears off, and that's when a deeper or at least more complex process of knowing a person and a relationship begins. I guess the comparison could just be that tourism = romantic love and pioneering = the development of that relationship, but that doesn't really illuminate anything, does it? I'm curious about the distinction between tourism and pilgrimage in your book -- is it about intention or presence or sometimes literally just time spent?

I guess I'm curious about romantic love as an end itself, rather than a means to an end, and the idea of that in relation to travel, engagement with a space -- how thinking about trip as pilgrimage rather than tour might fiddle with how romantic love of a place is experienced or understood.

Or if it is a means to an end, an end other than pioneering or settlement? M told me about a post he read in a backpacking group he follows online, where a person was complaining because she arrived at an established park backcountry campsite and found that someone had left a bunch of little painted rocks. Someone else affirmed that annoyance, saying that when he was camping, he liked to be able to feel as if he were the first person to ever be there. M and I laughed at that a lot, but I know it's not really any more ridiculous and problematic than what I do: intentionally going camping where and when I think I'll see fewer people, celebrating a hike or an overnight where I saw no one but M, or when I'm glad about human interactions while camping, it can be pretty judgmental -- I'm glad because I approve somehow of the person, how they are being in the landscape. At the same time that I am experiencing curiosity about and interest in the history of a place, who and what was there before, and also all the rest of the living things there with me, the plants and animals. Back to the relationship metaphor -- there's the term compersion, which I've mostly heard re: poly and open relationships, the pleasure you can feel at the pleasure your partner gets from another person. Is that a useful idea to think about in terms of tourism and pilgrimage?

EH: I love this question. For me, in this book, tourists and pilgrims are equivalents. (When I say pilgrim, btw, I mean one who makes a pilgrimage to a site already known through others' descriptions, as we do if we visit Notre Dame, the Taj Mahal, or Old Faithful.) Pioneers are those who enter a place

and then start to do their living there. Once they're in a spot, they start walking in circles, like one does while tidying the house, or like the movement of your hands as you knead your dough: repetitively doing the same daily work over and over, which by definition does take time. I identify this in the book as a more archetypally female type of activity, thinking of housework and household maintenance, while the "male" equivalent is the bold plunge into new (to you) territory, which you can only do once by definition. But gendering it gets, of course, tricky.

I think in many ways I tend to assume that engagement over time (with a place or a person) is somehow superior, deeper wisdom to be had, calmer and more true acceptance of what is, less frenzy and illusion in the experience. Yet who doesn't love falling in love, or getting somewhere for the first time? I like what you're suggesting -- that maybe the hormonal high of new romance is a lot like the thrill of travel -- it's all discovery -- and that perhaps the hierarchy of romance vs. love, or travel vs. dwelling, or pioneer vs. pilgrim, is one of those dichotomies that's better off seen as a spectrum. What do we gain, what's important to us as humans, from that initial delicious (if somewhat insane) period of a new encounter? Maybe we need that to set us up for the patient commitment of longer-term involvement?

But you're asking about romantic love as an end in itself. Well, joy is important!

Some marriages are arranged, and yet successful. Some people stay where they're born, a place they didn't choose, and love and nurture that place.

So, one of the things that I notice in Kate Colby's "I Mean" is this recurring idea that we choose what we see, and also that the world we experience in some way exists because we are in it. The eye as the progenitor of existence. Near the beginning the voice says "this isn't the beginning": we are always jumping in on a continuum somewhere; history doesn't have a starting point; this whole book, like history, accretes. Because experience is contingent on history, our view is selective. It's what "I can see" vs. what "I'm looking at". And landscape comes up explicitly, especially regarding horizons: "a horizon / is only how you see it," "I mean as far as I can see / meaning horizon," "I mean I wish I could think of more". And "illusion is optical / preference". And "landscape is bound / because we are in it". And speaking of embodiment, "I mean landscape extends only so far as the lens // I mean cranium".

I think this is very much related to what you describe about yourself and other people (and I am among them) preferring to be in a landscape as though it were uninhabited. We have a major attachment to unpeopled landscapes, maybe because then we get to feel ourselves very explicitly as the center of that landscape? When others are around, the de-centered nature of experience is harder to ignore, and that is a little unsettling. I'm here with my eyes defining "my" horizon, but someone else is over there with a different little personal

viewshed. It's actually kind of cool to imagine, say, ten backpackers in a campground, cooking and walking around, and each one has his/her own slightly offset version of where that landscape's horizon is. And all that that suggests.

Even within the foreground, I am always and forever interested in what we edit out of our vision because it doesn't fit some master narrative. In traveling I often feel and explore the collisions between what's in front of me and the overarching idea I have of the place -- the myths, histories, tourism bromides. I even feel some amount of that where I live, since I didn't grow up here. I think I even feel that in the place where I did grow up, because I left and developed a bunch of IDEAS about it. Do you experience this? Are you sizing up the place where you live against a recent or long-held notion about what that place is about?

You raise the term compersion and that makes me think of having a local guide -- seeing a place through the eyes of a resident or native -- a secondary knowing and often, yes, pleasure experienced through one who knows a place well.

Here's another strain of what I'm thinking as I read Kate Colby.

I see a recurrent thread in her book of a kind of spirituality-through-poetry, though at least half the time it shows up as an expression of futility -- that poetry (language) can never get you there for longer than an instant. There's a longing for an experience of self, or place, or even a Cheerio (p. 33) that is unfiltered. She mentions "immanence," "inscape,"

attentiveness and presence, "the sublime," "the layer after landscape," "I'd like to / include everything and / simultaneously," "trying to access everything other than myself."

I love the line " "I mean to leave it [the skin]/ in a heap on the floor/ in a hot tryst with looking"-- shedding the self for pure sensory experience.

But also there's this thread of ideas about the futility of grasping meaning; language as a self-healing wall that she throws language at to try to break through. "By the time I get there/ someone's always already pulled the ball away." Yes, yes, I know, I know, and yet I find as life moves along that I'm less interested in the futility, or the slipperiness of meaning and history and vision, and more interested in the attempt. I just want to try to be scrutable, and to gain understanding, against all the odds. I want an experience of connection.

Kate Colby seems to identify place as a particular site of where this attempt is worthy and where it fails. See page 102, "Place is what clings most closely to the body that is not the body itself." -- I have always shared this writerly troubled attachment to place. "What is the one sentence of this place?" I wrote about home, probably during college, after I'd lived away. Its specificities and how they are generalized, i.e. make an entire world, for those who live within their conditions (land, weather, history, accents, biota, foods...) If I imagine my current home as being at 10,000 feet elevation instead of 1,000, the defamiliarization instantly makes it more fascinating and

loveable again, and my own connection to it lighter and simpler, like when I first came here.

Kate Colby is describing a relationship to an impossible subject, as in endless, “always more to excavate and to try to synthesize.” For me, the West is a site of (at first) unfamiliarity, “emptiness” of my own history/connection, therefore openness and possibility, maybe inventing a new self -- yet I realize this is exactly part of the myth, that it can't be that simply true, that my sense of freedom there is in part written by many who came before me, as Kate Colby describes living and writing within the legacies of literary New England. She describes Gloucester as a place that's “extra ‘real,’ objectified and abstracted” -- this applies to the West too. So my writing on the West by necessity exists on the surface level of myth and imagination, a place experienced in motion, thru the window. Actually much of my childhood was experienced that way too. I'm trying to connect my kids more palpably to rocks, water, plants, soil in their homeplace.

A few pages later she says "There's no permanent state of perspective to be had." Last week I was told by an ecologist that the landscape here in Virginia, which we think of primevally forested, was once largely prairie, roamed by megafauna we now associate with Africa. I was totally tickled by this fresh view of the place, unperturbed by my incorrect assumptions about it. In deep time, place is certainly transcendent. I think we can access that for brief moments. The paradox of connection that happens via a profound humbling.

A related question -- Can writing re-embody you, take you back to a previous moment when you were having an intense physical experience? I sort of doubt it, but maybe it can create a sort of new analog experience, a different kind of thrill or pain that arises from reading? Reading can be a physical experience, laughing or crying, breathing differently in response to a text. It can deflate or excite us. Same with looking at photos, obviously.

Journaling is different than "travel writing," and my journal was written for me before bits of it made it into this public book. A journal can be a tool for later public writing or just a means of reflection that helps make meaning out of unformed, maybe chaotic lived experience. We take a journey, we do things like write or photograph to fix the memory, but whether we are writing for ourselves or someone else, we are deforming the experience as soon as we describe it. And as Kate Colby says in one of her essays, every time we remember something (access the memory) we deform the memory a little further.

The question of embodiment is one thing I was contemplating as I read *I Mean*. Reading the long title poem, I was mesmerized in many ways, and most of the way through it I realized that I was understanding it as a very mental piece of writing that reaches toward something almost spiritual at times. But not a very physical work. It feels ethereal and disembodied to me. So I was surprised and curious when I got to one of the essays later in the book that declares, "A sense of the body that made the work is necessary to living, moving, unresolvable art." I am wondering what embodied poetry would look like. I assume it

would not look very formal, or maybe that it would be rhythmic, or maybe that it would include bits of the real speech that comes out of our mouths, even if that speech is unpoetic or flat or informal (a strategy I think we share an interest in as writers, though you have such a great ear for "wet" speech and I tend toward "dry"). Sensory detail is another strategy I always try to stay connected to, but of course there is a great divide between the lived experience of a smell and its description on a page. Evocation is an attempt to close the loop, but it's a loop that loops through another plane, or spirals upward, or something. Kate Colby returns to the Mobius metaphor several times. My book is also very mental, I think, even as it contemplates bodies in landscapes. However, I think I would feel complimented if someone said my book did have a sense of a body behind it or within it.

I'm curious to hear more of your thoughts about mindfulness vs. creativity. Is it that when we're being mindful to our bodies and our environments, an act of creativity like writing takes us away from the mindfulness? Or that sometimes you have to tune out of where you are in order to make something? This is another major conflict I have often felt while traveling (and living!). To take a photo you have to cover up your eyes with the camera. When you are camping or hiking and also thinking about the history and environmental aspects of where you are, do you feel a tug or a collision between information and your senses?

JT: I read these notes of yours before I was very far into my reading of *I Mean*, so it's definitely possible that directed my reading, but I think I experienced both your books as having a sense of body they are engaging with. In between reading the two books I finished watching the second season of the TV show *Sneaky Pete*, which has zero to do with any part of our conversation so far, but it's all about con artistry, and there's a plot line in this season (spoiler alert?) involving a taxidermied buffalo. The con artists need to steal the buffalo in plain sight, and the combination of both psychological and physical tricks they employ to make this happen became weirdly resonant with the way I was thinking about embodiment. In a lot of ways, the trick to making the buffalo disappear is to make it visible to people who've never truly seen it -- one person has to be convinced it has great historical value and another emotional value and another that it needs to be treated for insect infestation or protected from water damage. There's a sheet that's draped over it with inflatable panels that can take the shape of the buffalo, so it can be slipped out while the sheet keeps its form. I looked up lists of confidence tricks (which have great names!) and also got very interested in the word "confidence" -- to make someone believe or get their trust, but also to confide, to share something personal or that maybe hasn't been articulated before. And that we mostly use the word confidence now self-referentially; confidence and self-confidence are almost synonymous. *I Mean* has references to what could be considered literal confidence tricks, like Cleveland's secret facial surgery, and you both reference the natural landmarks being unnaturally maintained for the benefit

of tourists (you write about Arches National Park and Colby writes about Old Man of the Mountain), but I also noticed in Colby's book the repetitions of references to negative space and the sculptural idea of chipping away at what isn't until you discover what's left, which is what the long poem itself seemed to be doing. I like the ways that the words "I mean" shift through repetition: sometimes it reads like "the meaning of my person is" and sometimes "what I am trying to communicate is" and sometimes a verbal tic that could emphasize or could be akin to a stutter or space filler, something suggesting speech. In your book too there is the sense of confidence: that the speaker is confiding in the reader and exploring the confidences of her companion travelers, but more importantly this constant negotiation of purpose: what is it we (body, landscape, machine; reader, Isabella, writer) are doing and accomplishing here, and how do our bodily needs and desires match up with our plans and circumstances? The running interrogation of the word "matter" in your book and the notes on title, headings, etc., are also really contributing to this embodiment for me, and this sense of everything being constantly revised and in flux. I probably bring everything back to Gertrude Stein too much, but with both your and Colby's books I was thinking about her "Continuous present is one thing and beginning again and again is another thing. These are both things. And then there is using everything." Both your books seem to exist in time as the body does, highlighting the idea of revision as addition or continuation or palimpsest rather than replacement. I thought of your book a lot regarding her line

place is what clings most closely to the body that is not the body itself. For me, writing about where I've been and where I live is both an indulgence and a form of resistance--I can voraciously parse my own impetuses while thwarting my yen for hermeticism. I love to close loops but stop believing in them as soon as I do.

There is a complexity and multi-layered visual aspect, a diversity of form, to the pages of your book that I associate with your writing and that defies closure and containment from the get-go. I think a lot of the speed reading I've learned to do as a sort-of-academic has encouraged a bad habit of prediction and oversimplifying (premature closure?) -- even reading for "pleasure" I find myself quickly trying to intuit where a book is heading and what its patterns will be, and I really appreciate that you never allow me to get caught in that trap! I also appreciate the ritual or practice you suggested alongside your book, which I want to talk about here in a minute (in relation to mindfulness!) -- I may be asking about forgotten details of origin again, but I'm curious how you came to the list of questions near the end of your book and whether they've been a part of writing practice for you?

EH: Confidence can be physically or conceptually engendered; same with belief, which is probably the word I'd use regarding what tourists "see" when they are in a highly traveled place. You're seeing the stories you've been hearing long before you got there. But it's interesting to think of that as a confidence

game -- certainly there are ulterior motives of different kinds behind what those stories emphasize and obscure.

I'm glad that there are various aspects of my book that are building a sense of embodiment for you. The publisher is doing something great in that the designer, Don Mitchell, agreed to put some of the text in my actual handwriting (sort of a big pain in the butt for him), and embodiment or immediacy is huge part of the reason we both wanted it to be that way. I was looking for a sense that Isabella and the narrator are taking notes as they travel. It's a little bit of theater, of course, but it recreates something that really happens when I travel and I'm sure happened for Isabella too: a real notebook, a real writing implement, a real body curling over the page.

I like your distinctions about what revision means; yes, that feels like realism, too. Fossils get buried and then they resurface. We actually found some last weekend on a hike! I've never found one before in the field, and it was a thrill. At another point I spotted a plant I'd just learned earlier this year, wild ginger. Do you know it (not sure if it grows where you are)? It's a species that you recognize by its largish leaves, but to see the flower you have to look right down at ground level, because the bloom is literally on the earth and in this case was covered by dead leaves. It does this because its pollinator is a crawling beetle, not a flying bee or moth. Anyway, I noticed in both these cases that the experience of finding something I'd only known before in books/museums/through an expert -- just encountering it on my own, having it quietly appear in my awareness -- had such lasting satisfaction. My book does a lot

of longing for discovery, and a lot of fretting that language and culture are in the way, and here is an antidote.

I think this kind of experience might be the opposite of chipping away at the world like a sculptor. Instead it's the sensation of the world becoming fuller, rising to meet one with more detail and more presence than previously understood.

My book quotes Mircea Eliade on "the sacred" and, as I said earlier, I sense Colby reaching toward something deeper/higher too. Mindfulness (looking at the ground where the fossils and wild ginger are! Or up, or out...) offers the reward of presence, one's own and that of the world, and perhaps can erase the distinctions between those two. Eliade's idea of the sacred, if I recall, is origin, or being.

Just reading Jenny Bouilly's new book of essays and opened it randomly to this:

When life filters through you, and it has given you a gift (and you've already been gifted as a poet, that is, with the swift ability to conjure language), will you be poet enough to return this gift on the page? Life will filter through you and deposit gifts your way. You must be astute enough to see what each thing has to say.

Poetry is an instant. It is an instant in which transcendence is achieved, where a miracle occurs, and knowledge, experience, and memory are obliterated and transformed into awe. The instant passes quickly, so quickly, and then

you are just your regular self again. This instant is what has been; the page is artifact to that.

I don't think I've specifically used those questions as a writing practice, but they are definitely in line with an idea I've worked with and have taught students in different settings -- to try to expand one's awareness by tuning in on a greater number of levels than usual. We make big lists of our senses on the blackboard, starting with the usual five, then going on: a sense of direction, a sense of enclosure, a sense of who's nearby...it goes on and on. One student claimed to have "hair sense." A multitude of ways to be aware, and always choices about which get prioritized -- just like you're describing in Sneaky Pete.

JT: I think as a writer my engagement with the history of a place has often been superficial -- I stumble on some fact or bit of story that fascinates me, and I use it as a jumping-off point for creating something else, rather than really engaging with how the history of a place has shaped it. Like a tourist, maybe I think I get easily snared by quirkiness and characters and interesting turns of phrase and forget to find out what actually happened. I have lived in Grand Rapids, Michigan, now, longer than I've lived in any one city or state as an adult, and I am trying to truly learn about it. One thing I have loved about being in one place, so far, is the opportunity for repetition and return -- walking the same trail several times a week in all seasons for several years, for example. Right now all this adds up to me being a pretty horrible guide: when friends, and strangers who read for our poetry series have come to visit, I have often ended up

going on walks with them, and probably there's a little information I can share about the place, or I know some names of plants that they are interested to find out, but my experience of these places I love is so much about accretion -- the accumulation of all my walks there -- that I feel like I'm this constant "you had to be there" narrative. This is where I once saw a giant snapping turtle and sometimes this entire trail is under the river and in a month that is not this month you sometimes find morels right here and so on. I always end up feeling like I've built a place up a bit too much, because when I think of it I am thinking of every time I have ever been there, while my visitor is just having this one layer of a walk. Maybe I need to become a better storyteller! And start reading up on my place. This takes me back, though, to what you were saying earlier on about the longing a person feels when traveling. I find it almost unbearable sometimes, really (in spite of what I said earlier, about my tendency to be a tourist with history) -- that feeling, as a traveler, that you are missing out on most of what it really means to be there, that even with the best agenda and attention you cannot hack time. That's an interesting thing about the idea of pilgrimage -- even if you as a person only make that trip once, there is an assumption that you have this wealth of context, story, history you are working from, not just of the place, but of the trip itself, the closest thing to hacking time. I suppose some types of tourism work that way too -- even if there isn't shared purpose, there is a checklist of things a person does when going to X or Y place and narratives about other people's experience on that same route. Talk to me about folded forms, Erika Howsare!

EH: Ha ha! Realism is a folded form, right? I mean if we're just committing, as people or writers, to paying attention to what is real, then time isn't so much a loss (as in, everything happened here *before* and all I can do as a tourist is strain to imagine it) as a, here's this word again, presence. There is time now and a place here. What's it like? What can I write about it?

Having said that, I'm not sure I always follow that advice in this book; it reflects a side of me (and a time of me) that is more cerebral, more -- to put it baldly -- worried. But there are places where I'm trying to write the collage of how the world really is, like in the parade scene, where insurance cards and smartphones are in this mashup with cowboy poetry and buckskin clothing. I mean the world is one giant anachronism, in my experience. I was visiting an outdoor historical museum with my kids and we were walking toward a beautiful log farmhouse that had been moved there from some other location -- painstakingly taken apart, put back together, and then furnished with lovely old quilts and tables and costumed interpreters. Behind it was one of those Cracker Barrel signs that's super tall so it can be seen from the interstate. My daughter had recently learned the word "anachronism" and we sort of deployed it together in relation to the Cracker Barrel sign. And then I more or less slapped my forehead, remembering that it was the farmhouse that was out of time! Cracker Barrel is totally appropriate for our time. And now I'm slapping my forehead for a second time, realizing that our time

also includes a huge amount of nostalgia for earlier times, so that brings the farmhouse right back into the fold. (-ed form).

JT: There's been a week's break in our conversation while I graded final essays and wrote back to you in my head but not on paper. I'm going to try to retrace the several different paths I was mentally going down and see if they intersect much.

I guess there are studies showing that mindfulness meditation can train the brain away from types of wandering and rumination that are useful for creativity, though I haven't read much into the specifics. I know a lot of meditating writers and artists who would say meditation benefits their work, and the past couple years of mostly-daily, brief meditation have, I think, helped me step back and observe what I am writing in the same way I am practicing observing thoughts. I have no idea if that is making me create "better" writing, but it is making the process of writing more engaging to me. People talk about using meditation to learn how to respond rather than react; reaction does have its draws, though -- maybe in some of the same ways that romantic love does, all those quick associations that can create a sense of perfect timing and connection but actually require some bilocation and manipulation of the dials.

I managed to go to the landfill and respond to the list of questions from the end of your book about twelve times since we started this conversation, and there were another handful of times when the weather was not conducive to sitting outside that I held a few questions in my mind while I walked the

landfill trail and then tried to write notes down once I got home. I'm sorry I neglected to type up much to share with you - that had been my intention when we started. The landfill was already a place I visited regularly because of its liminality -- behind a Coca-Cola bottling plant on the edge of town, it's an open meadow beside the Grand River surrounded by industrial spaces and interstate with a paved trail running through it that's mostly used by cyclists and dog walkers. Recently signage has been added calling it "Oxford Trails;" there have always been signs warning you not to walk off trail because of its former life as a landfill, and people who are homeless tend to set up temporary shelters there. There are several red benches along the trail, and until you "assigned" me this practice I had never once stopped and sat on one, and I'd never seen anyone do so. The days that I did sit at the bench along the river, which appropriately had *ce n'est pas un banc* graffitied beneath it, people walking by actually stared. I have often used that space as a place to move and think -- I would walk the loop quickly and plan a class, and I might notice a deer or fox or that the milkweed pods were starting to open, but I could also very easily stay in my head the entire walk and get back to my house without remembering how I'd gotten there. One thing that kept coming up in my writing there was precision -- realizing how many things I didn't have a name for. I have since been practicing visually locating song birds to better identify them, rather than just appreciating the familiarity of their sounds. I also learned what a storm water pump station is! I love that experience you describe with the wild ginger -- the discovery of the thing but also having the name to give it. And also how your

ability to see that thing increases once you've become familiar with its shape, what mushroom hunters call "mushroom eyes." It's amazing to me that this is an actual physical, not just mental, phenomena (that animals experience too) -- we can actually locate a thing more easily the more often we've encountered it.

I have just started researching a woman named Frances Glessner Lee -- have you heard of her? In the mid 1900s she created *The Nutshell Studies of Unexplained Death*, which are these little dollhouses that perfectly duplicate real crime scenes, down to amazing, eccentric detail. They were meant to be -- and were, and still are! -- teaching tools for detectives. Restoring some of them has been tricky because any detail could potentially be a clue. I have thought of her in relation to what you were saying about archetypal female activities -- her use of dollhouses and craft and the domestic space itself to engage in forensics work that was pretty exclusively male and to be a pioneer in that field is fascinating. And, too, I was thinking of her reading Colby on the Isabella Stewart Gardner museum -- she writes that the museum's arrangement makes it difficult to consider any one item in isolation, and how, in spite of Gardner's attempt to "hermetically seal her world," it has "leakages" and "imbalance" -- the empty spots where stolen artworks used to hang. There is something excruciating about those crime scenes frozen in time, being investigated over and over, and something deeply moving about the parts that refuse to freeze. You can't have catharsis or resolution if time is standing still. It seems like what should make them self-

contained actually creates an open circuit. In a very different way, of course, your book explores this too; at the end of the trip, when the speaker is looking at “a long line” in front of them and considers the question that is the title, there’s a sense of circularity but to return to where you started is of course not to be in the same place, because of the fourth dimension of time.

EH: This has been such a nicely layered conversation; maybe your unsent notes from your landfill walks are meant to be a ghostly presence -- for you, a real high-resolution experience, for me, an idea that is satisfying in itself, just knowing it happened. There’s another whole discussion that’s possible about the writerly urge to include enough sensory details, and arrange them in just the right way, so that the reader’s experience approximates the original experience, and whether that could ever succeed. When I picture your walks, my mind puts you in a park in Charlottesville where I’ve often walked and run, with a few particulars changed to make it unfamiliar. Stories I read are often set, in my imagination, in the homes of childhood friends or relatives. Our own archetypal locations might envelop the narratives generated (and even, first, lived) by other people.

Yes, I have heard of Frances Glessner Lee; did you see there is (or recently was) an exhibit of her dioramas at one of the Smithsonian museums in DC? It makes me think of “claiming” places: taking over or holding on; claiming a feminine space within a masculine field; pushing a group out of some territory

or seeing space as yours *a priori*; standing in a place and imagining yourself as having a primary experience there.

It's funny, it sounds like we adopted a similar meditation routine at around the same time. I don't think I'm in any danger of meditating my way out of the writing life; I'd like to meditate my way in, actually, and I think so far having a tiny bit of distance on my own thoughts is only to the better, across many areas of life. The romantic idea of the possessed artist, the absent self, the out-of-control creator, has never worked for me as a model. Self-awareness, and lightness about self, seems like a better bet. We sure need that on a cultural level, but – again -- that's another discussion!

I like that meditation is a very old technology, or tool is probably a less stilted word; a tool that humans came up with to help us sidestep our most troublesome human traits, our hyperactive and repetitive minds. Now we're becoming more and more identified with our tools and technologies. I am writing a newspaper article about a new botanical garden that's being planned in Charlottesville, and just went to a media event/tour on the site. Currently it's a forgotten corner of a public park, wooded and choked with invasive species, with an eroded stream and a bunch of old tires and beer cans scattered about. We walked through it as a group, envisioning it as a lovely, highly designed environment that will draw attention to very specific plants, educate children, encourage nature connection, and act as a backdrop for people's heightened personal memories. Someone asked whether the trees and plants will be labeled when the garden opens in a few years.

The answer was no, there will be “nodes” where you can access information via your phone. Not having a smartphone, I initially felt the familiar left-behind feeling, along with equally familiar indignation that everyone just assumes every human is carrying this particular machine around at all times, but then was cheered to imagine visiting with the knowledge that I’ll just have to go ahead and pay attention to the plants themselves (and maybe bring a field guide if I’m burning to identify stuff).

A day later, we were at Monticello and experienced the other side of that -- some beautiful enormous trees were identified with little brass plaques, including notations about which were planted by Thomas Jefferson and in what year. I considered all that very helpful. I noticed a beautiful flowering plant called “Lewis’s flax” and wondered aloud whether that had to do with Lewis and Clark, who of course were sent west by Jefferson, then noticed (in a calligraphic script on the wooden garden marker; this is Monticello, after all) a small “L&C.” Yes!

The Monticello website

[\[https://www.monticello.org/site/house-and-gardens/in-bloom/lewiss-prairie-flax\]](https://www.monticello.org/site/house-and-gardens/in-bloom/lewiss-prairie-flax) says Lewis and Clark “discovered” this plant along the Missouri River on the expedition -- that language is so persistent in our history, as opposed to just “noticed” or “recorded,” surely a more accurate description -- and also, wonderfully, gives a complete history of its bloom time at Monticello going back 15 years! Actually, the bloom times have varied fairly wildly.

Anyway, the helpful plant markers are related to “mushroom eyes,” I think -- text, like other forms of knowledge transmittal,

can help us zero in on meaning in the environment, in a place. And yet there is a point where it becomes too much. I did an interview [<http://therumpus.net/author/erika-howsare/>] with two California poets, Denise Newman and Hazel White, last year about a site project they did in a California botanical garden, and one of the first things that came up was their feeling that the garden already had “too much language,” which complicated and excited their task as poets. They ended up functioning at least as much as language collectors as they were language generators.

Well, this has been so much fun. Thank you. Here’s what’s blooming here now: lilac, iris, the last few tulips, pawpaw trees, dogwood, fleabane, about a hundred billion buttercups, and many catkin-making trees; and there are maple seeds all over the ground, in a panoply of colors and sizes.

Erika Howsare grew up near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and studied art and writing at Oberlin College. She earned an MFA from Brown University in 2005 and has since lived in rural Virginia, where she's worked as a teacher of writing, a journalist, and a full-time mother. She was a longtime co-editor at horse less press. Her poetry and prose have been published in *Fence*, *Verse*, *the Denver Quarterly*, *The Rumpus*, and *The Millions*. She is the author of several chapbooks, a full-length collaboration with Kate Schapira called *FILL: A Collection*, and *How Is Travel a Folded Form?*, forthcoming in 2018 from Saddle Road Press.

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