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SHERI BENNING

*Dollhouse*

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I

Oh, if this old house could talk,  
what a story it would tell;  
it would tell about the good times  
and the bad times as well.  
It would tell about the love that lived  
and died inside these walls...  
Why, if this old house could talk,  
all it would say is welcome home.  
– Loretta Lynn



'Dollhouse', Sinclair, Manitoba. (Photo: Heather Benning)

In Autumn, as the school bus pulled away from our yard, Heather and I would run to the house, throw aside our school outfits for our worn out 'work clothes', and head to the back forty of our farm where there was an old wooden granary. We spent hours cleaning that granary, though no amount of scrubbing rid the musk of decaying wood, barley chaff, mouse shit, and the debris of swallow nests. If asked what we were up to, we'd mutter something about playing 'pioneer', though this was more of an expedient explanation than an actual indicator of what we were doing. Together, but isolated – both of us immersed in our own imagined worlds – Heather and I staged and restaged the granary with rain-bloated furniture, torn books and nick-knacks that we found scattered in the rock-pile behind the dugout, or in the attic of the barn. If we got hungry, we'd raid the ripe garden for food, dodging made-up enemies – wild animals, and equally wild storybook 'Indians'. During autumn the mere scent of what's almost ineffable – dusk air tinged with stubble fire, cut clover – places me back in that granary. I'm reading *Anne of Green Gables*, while Heather has quiet conversations with her favourite doll, whom she aptly calls 'Dolly'. I still tease Heather about how she and Dolly bear a

funny resemblance – they share reddish, matted curls, limbs scuffed with mud and grass, a few freckles and cheeky grins.

Cultural geographer Yi-Fu Tuan writes that place acquires deep meaning for the adult through the steady accretion of sentiment over the years. Tuan goes on to say that this sentiment for place accrues not necessarily through grand happenings – heroic battles won and lost – but through small, almost nameless, intimate experiences. Deep attachment to place wells up via the familiarity and ease of the seemingly quotidian – the unspoken assurance of nurture and security in sounds and smells of communal activities. When the sun set behind the aspen scrub that lined the back of our home acre, Heather and I would race back to the house – frost biting at our cheeks; Mom calling us in, 'Girls, time for supper'; the glow of the porch light like that of a hearth; the shouts of our brother playing with our German Shepherd in the front yard; Mom's hands brushing grain dust from our hair; the root-cellar smell of bay leaves and ham-bones from the borsht warming on the stove; the drone of the evening news; our cold-chapped hands unclenching against a hot bowl of soup. Place can become a living archive of tender moments. Born of their dailiness, these moments lend place a feeling of permanence; sewn together with such intimacies, the reassuring permanency of place becomes our shelter from the world's ceaseless flux, from our own mortal frailty.

Just as humble, unspoken moments render places intimate, so do quotidian objects that we know primarily through use. We do not typically pay heed to such items the way we would *objets d'art*; they become part of the fabric of our lives, too close to us to be noticed. When we do pause to consider these inconsequentials, Tuan writes that the word 'holiness' comes to mind. The cracked-leather CCM skates hanging in the back entrance; Dad's work boots by the porch door thick with mud, manure and straw; the wind-up alarm clock upon which a porcelain figurine of a drunk-looking leprechaun leans, a present from our Irish grandfather. If contemplated, we feel for these common objects what a thing of beauty makes us feel – as though we are in the midst of an independent presence.

Because, as Tuan writes, the data of the senses are often ignored in favour of what we are taught to see and admire, the fleeting intimacies of direct experience often escape notice. And so we think of the *house* as home and place. However, it is not the actual building, but rather the small, everyday things we glimpse with our peripheral vision, the quiet intimacies of domestic contentment that evoke the true quality of place. As Tuan puts it, our hearts gather their 'magpie hoard, heedless of the calculating eye and intelligence'. Though our merry Irish alarm clock never did keep proper time, Mom kept it on her bedroom bureau throughout our childhood; it became an anchor in time, fortifying us against an unknowable future.



'Dollhouse', Sinclair, Manitoba. (Photo: Heather Benning)

What generates a sense of place are profoundly significant intimacies which are almost indiscernible. However, art bears the capacity to illumine these 'inconspicuous fields of human care'. Tuan writes that art and architecture create a culture's image; both express the 'characteristic rhythmic functional patterns which constitute a culture'. If pressed now to explain what Heather and I were up to in that granary, I'd suggest we were deeply engaged in the art of place-making. We were playing at rendering visible the intimacy that creates place – we rescued furnishings and nick-knacks to give sensible form to the moods and rhythms, the subtle flavours of home. The comfort we derived from our place-making was made all the more palpable by the menaces that existed beyond the granary's confines – the imagined wild animals and 'Indians', but also the real threat of farm debt, the drought of the mid-1980s, and our Mom and Dad's consequent episodic, human, instability.

As children we relate to people and objects with a directness unshackled by the protective cynicism of adulthood; we seek security, but remain open to the world, allow ourselves the sigh of comfort in the place of a loved one's arms, or in the quiet conversations with a favourite doll. Tuan suggests that this openness grants children the ability to know the world more sensuously than adults, adding that this lost childhood gift of receptivity 'is one reason why the adult cannot go home again'.

## II

No matter what plea or adjustment I make, I cannot catch hold of the peculiar magic of those [childhood] places... No effort of will can restore to me that perception, that view of the horizon not yet tainted by futurity – it runs through me sometimes, but I cannot summon it. And yet everything I would say about place depends on it, and everything I search for in myself involves some deep fantasy of its restoration. My best, truest – I cannot define my terms – self is vitally connected to a few square miles of land.

– Sven Birkerts

The contemporary philosopher Edward Casey suggests we interiorise places; that is, we hold inside us a gathering of the places we've inhabited. According to Casey, our sense of self grows out of and reflects the places from which we come and where we have been. We derive our character through relating to place as much as we do through our attachments to people. As Lawrence Durrell writes, 'We are the children of our landscape. It dictates behavior and even thought to the measure in which we are responsive to it.'

If who we are is constituted by the places we inhabit, the experience of displacement can cause us genuine trauma. By the late 1990s diversified farming in prairie Canada had given way to agribusiness and, faced with perpetually tightening profit margins, my parents were met with the impossible choice either to drastically expand our small farm, thereby taking on massive debt, or sell out. In 1998, my folks sold our farm and my family collectively embarked on mourning the place we will always consider home. Shortly after my parents moved to town, I took an environmental philosophy course from the Canadian poet, Tim Lilburn. I remember lingering after class one day, overwhelmed by the feeling that I had nowhere to go. Confused, Lilburn asked me if I needed something. For no reason I can name, I simply told him that my parents sold our farm. Lilburn was kind. He sat down at a desk beside me and said, 'This will feel like a death. You'll need to grieve.'



'Dollhouse', Sinclair, Manitoba. (Photo: Naomi Potter)

My family's experience of exile, our bereavement for that place in central Saskatchewan, is by no means unique. The streamlining of industrial operations in farming has removed many families from their homes. Stan Rowe writes that of Saskatchewan's approximately 70,000 farms that existed in the 1970s, by the late 1990s when my parents sold our place, only some 30,000 remained. A report on the experience of displacement cited by Casey reveals that the results of over 25 studies around the world indicate, with no exceptions, that 'the execution of compulsory relocation among rural populations with strong ties to their land and homes is a traumatic experience for the majority of the relocates'.

We in the modern world are displaced persons; we suffer from collective amnesia regarding place's primacy in the order of being. Casey writes that nostalgia is our culture's most obvious symptom of displacement. We can witness nostalgia's pervasive presence in its bizarre exploitation by popular culture engines such as Disney World or in the rhetoric of our politicians. The word nostalgia is a modern Latin translation of the German word *Heimweh*, which signifies homesickness. Thus, nostalgia, contrary to what we might typically think, is not only a pining for lost times, but also for places we once inhabited and to which we can no longer return. Is there any wonder we are nostalgic or homesick? Increasingly, we lose our places to ecological devastation and to our high-speed pursuit of the elusive flow of global capital. Casey prescribes that our way out of the predicament of displacement will require more than nostalgic glimpses backward into personal or collective history. Nostalgia and its exoticism are part of the problem and do not bear the solution. What's needed is to regain living contact with place itself, that power we had as children to be fully present in our world.

### III

The past is not a peaceful landscape lying there behind me, a country in which I can stroll wherever I please, and which will gradually show me all its secret hills and dales. As I was moving forward, so it was crumbling. Most of the wreckage that can still be seen is distorted, frozen... Here and there, I see occasional pieces whose melancholy beauty enchants me.

Simone de Beauvoir

Sometimes Heather and I get into her half ton and drive Saskatchewan's back roads. If asked, we might say we're 'abandoned-house hunting', again just one of our easy explanations for a game we play that can't really be named. The driveway approaches are grown over with sow thistle and brome. There's usually a barn, or old wooden granaries at the back forty leaning into pasture grass like cattle resting on their haunches. Heather helps me climb the barbed wire fences and then jogs ahead to find a way into the wind-peeled, boarded-up houses. She always steps in first to make sure the floor will hold our weight. There's the familiar musk of decay as we quietly poke through the debris of uprooted lives – laceless work boots, rusted bedframes, brittle copies of the *Winnipeg Free Press*. Once I found a journal, its pages stained with swallow shit. The faded pencil cursive was from a time when handwriting was still



'Dollhouse', Sinclair, Manitoba. (Photo: Naomi Potter)

elegant. The few pages I could decipher bore an account of the quotidian – the weather, the day's labour, a recipe for 'Mary's matrimonial cake'.

While working as an artist-in-residence in Redvers, a small town in the southeast corner of Saskatchewan, Heather restored an abandoned house so the interior would reflect the date of its abandonment in the mid-1960s. She re-plastered the walls and painted them the colours that she found beneath layers of rain-soaked wallpaper. Upon stripping the floors, she found original linoleum in the living room. She re-shingled the rotting roof with shingles that she recycled from the house's north wall. Heather removed the north wall and replaced it with plexiglass so that viewers could look into the house as they would into a dollhouse. Finally, Heather staged the house with old furnishings that local community members retrieved from their barn attics, basements, the back forties of their own abandoned yard-sites.

French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari write that every work of art is a monument, but the monument is not something that commemorates or represents the past; rather it generates a bloc of pure sensation. Heather was not interested in the particular histories of the materials she employed – the abandoned house, the borrowed furnishings. She wasn't engaged in constructing a tomb or a museum. Rather she desired to engender in the viewer the pure sensation of what it is to intimately dwell. Memory, according to Deleuze and Guattari, can only issue forth old perceptions, entrenched modes of thinking, and thus plays a small part in art. The monument's action is not memory but 'creative fabulation'. It goes beyond the perceptual and affective states of the lived to create new insight.

How does the artist do this? How does she flee established manners of thinking and perceiving to generate fresh, intuitive understanding? Deleuze and Guattari suggest that to escape the rigid identities that limit how we think and feel, we must undergo a process of becoming-child in the present. Becoming-child is not a reactive contemplation of a self that one no longer is; rather, becoming-child dismantles 'our egos and their presuppositions', releasing us from habitual modes of being. Becoming-child revitalises our action in the present and allows for a kind of somatic knowledge that goes



'Dollhouse', Sinclair, Manitoba. (Photo: Naomi Potter)



'Dollhouse', Sinclair, Manitoba. (Photo: Naomi Potter)

beyond the knowledge provided by representational thinking. While working on the Dollhouse, Heather was not simply recalling and nostalgically re-evoking our childhood game in that granary. Rather, to construct her Dollhouse, Heather became-child to engage sensually with place.

To help her complete this project, Heather occasionally carted her old friend Dolly along with her to the site. When I asked her why she had Dolly with her, Heather replied that Dolly helped her get into the 'head-space' that she needed to create. Heather's attachment to Dolly is not indicative of some sort of regression. Rather, Dolly acted as a 'talismatic inducement' – her presence aided in unblocking Heather's imagination, a necessary step to escape the bonds of 'social maturation' and regain a child's brilliance at receptively interacting with place. Encumbered by established modes of thought, the adult can never go home again. We must become-children to sensually find our way back into an intimate engagement with our milieu.

Whenever she's asked why she embarked on the Dollhouse, Heather's modest reply is that she wants people to think about these abandoned homes. She excavated layers of dwelling to render visible for us all those unthought potencies that engender a deep sense of place. From the grid road the exterior of the house looks abandoned, but walk through the overgrown rhubarb plants to the back of the house and laid bare behind the plexiglass is a worn cooking

pot on the kitchen stove, starched lace curtains, children's books stacked on a windowsill, a blue-boy figurine atop a bedroom bureau, skates hanging in the entrance, a nightshirt on a bedframe post. And for a moment, as we view Heather's Dollhouse, we become-child. Heather's Dollhouse invites us home, asks us to take our shoes off at the door, have a cup of tea at the formica kitchen table. One evening, just after dusk, Heather and I lit the house with a borrowed generator. The rooms filled with lamplight and shadows cast by these gathered remnants of domesticity. Though we didn't speak it, the refrain 'holiness' came to mind.

Heather and I wish to thank Dianne Chisholm for her clear thinking on Deleuze and Guattari which has had an invaluable 'affect' on our respective artistic practices.

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