

## PLACES CAN SPEAK, YIELDING LESSONS FOR THE PAGE

BY DANNY HEITMAN



As a college student many years ago, I first thought about stories strictly as a record of what people thought, said, and did.

With that in mind, I was surprised when John Kemp, one of my first writing instructors, took us on a field trip to a weedy stretch of land, eerily quiet, that had figured in a public corruption scandal many decades earlier. A politician, long disgraced and dead, had tried to use tax money to create a private getaway there, but the scheme had come to nothing. John asked us to look around and see what the place might tell us.

I wasn't quite sure what he meant. There was no one on-site to interview, and seeking comment from trees and sky seemed more than a little silly.

But John was trying to teach us that a place has its own language, often yielding important insights that any writer of fiction, nonfiction, or poetry might use. In describing the spot where we stood, now deep in ruin, a skilled writer might offer other dimensions to a tale about best-laid plans gone awry.

A good writer is wise to remember that places can act as a vital character in any story we might tell. In being alert to our surroundings and recording our impressions, we can make a decent piece of writing even better.

Skilled writers often include place as a critical part of their narratives. In writing his acclaimed biography of Harry Truman, David McCullough walked the route that Truman had run as he dashed to the White House after the death of Franklin D. Roosevelt. Traveling on foot as Truman did, McCullough grasped more deeply the physical exertion the new president must have endured.

In *The Shipping News*, novelist Annie Proulx perfectly implicates the gray coast of Newfoundland as a source of both peril and possibility for her characters. She writes arrestingly of a community where the "road ran between the lopy waves of the Strait of Belle Isle and mountains like blue melons. Across the strait sullen Labrador. Trucks ground east in caravans, stainless steel cabs beaded with mist."

The New England landscape of Mary Oliver's poems is so palpably described that it seems to stand over her shoulder as she writes, quietly whispering its secrets. In "Herons in Winter in the Frozen Marsh," she heralds a warmer time: "All spring, as I watched the rising blue-green grass, / above its gleaming and substantial shadows, toss in the breeze, / like wings."

Many of us take to the road each summer because we hope the places we go will teach us something. The best writers work those lessons into the page.



Forum editor **DANNY HEITMAN** has written about the writing craft for numerous publications, including *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*, and he's taught writing to university students.