

*Travels
in Search
of the
Emotions
of Place*

Tender Maps

an extract

Alice Maddicott



1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

First published in 2023 by September Publishing

Copyright © Alice Maddicott 2023

The right of Alice Maddicott to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright holder

Typeset by RefineCatch Limited, www.refinecatch.com

Printed in Poland on paper from responsibly managed, sustainable sources by Hussar Books

ISBN 9781914613326

Ebook ISBN 9781914613333

September Publishing

www.septemberpublishing.org

Contents

Prologue: The Maypool	xi
Part One: Thresholds, Kingdoms and Borderlands	1
<i>Women in seventeenth-century Paris map their female terrain; L. M. Montgomery reimagines Prince Edward Island; young girls embroider their lives; journeys are made to the Wood between Worlds of childhood; Alain-Fournier's Lost Domain is revisited; and shadows hold hands in Sicily</i>	
Part Two: Sentient Shapeshiftings	59
<i>Dreams cities are wandered; Italo Calvino's invisible cities explored; the old waters of Venice and Istanbul flow; a recipe is given for Belgrade; female travellers upend convention, and set sail; and a Japanese mountainside is a place to get lost and found</i>	
Part Three: Natural Histories, Habitations and Hauntings	111
<i>The Deep South sings its verdant song; Eudora Welty shares a gentle haunting; and novelist Rose Macaulay wanders a sentient wilderness in London's wartime ruins</i>	
Part Four: Constructions and Manipulations	133
<i>The elusive atmosphere of LA's Autopia; Poundbury promotes pastiche; a Tbilisi balcony vanishes; Bucharest is tracked down and Transylvania roamed; an eighteenth-century vicar seeks the picturesque; Edinburgh is ambled and flâneurs saunter; Montreal promotes the world; Situationists rethink cities and shopping malls seek to confuse</i>	

Part Five: Home, Art, Land	191
<i>Childhood home hovers; the poetics of space are explored; Nan Shepherd inhabits the Cairngorms; artist Ana Mendieta imprints the earth; a prodigy predicts her own disappearance; and homes without walls and thin places are discovered</i>	
Part Six: West Country Magic/West Country Gothic	227
<i>Elizabeth Goudge conjures; the Gurt Worm of Shervage Wood is disguised as a log; Postlebury bluebells work enchantment; an incantation of Cornish names; PJ Harvey sings of white chalk; a forgotten forest is found on an ancient map; and land artist Richard Long goes for a walk</i>	
Part Seven: Definitions	267
<i>The natural history of our senses and the nature of consciousness are debated; a multisensory walk overwhelms; C. S. Lewis is surprised by Joy; Richard Jefferies finds soul-thought in Wiltshire; and the atmosphere of inspiration welcomes us all</i>	
Epilogue: A Manifesto for Being in Place	295
Bibliography	303
Permissions	306
Acknowledgements	307

Prologue

THE MAYPOOL



The water moved yet was still – a contained rippling, dark yet reflecting, a temperamental mirror choosing to show the sky rather than its inner workings deep below.

I sat alone in the rowing boat on the lake-sized pool and magic was everywhere, despite my leggings and nasty orange sweatshirt, whose colour clashed all wrong with the dark greens and deep water of sky. Hair high ponytailed, with an inappropriate large royal blue net bow that caught dandelion seeds in the wind perched on my head against my mother's wishes.

The world began to divide around me. Gossamer veils cut through

PROLOGUE

the view, spider-silk lines to break up the real world of this holiday in deep Devon, and where I was in that moment. It was a realm within a realm. I was close to somewhere else – nearly touching a different place – a place that filled my body with feelings so strange and strong that it was as if I had travelled there. That I was both there and no longer there.

The sun was cool, glinting stars of light that pulsed and made me squint as they fractured the view. Dragonflies were not just dragonflies, but flying jewels. Pond skaters whispered to me the secrets of walking on water, left feet ripples – miniature hints of something profound. I could not move. I was in a kaleidoscope. It held me both out of body and more alive in my awkward, chubby nine-year-old flesh than I'd ever been before. I did not want to go back to shore and the old stone cottage we had hired as a family, not all that far from our home in the once-upon-a-county that was Avon. I did not want my parents or siblings – I wanted to be with these creatures who, it was suddenly clear to me, knew something my family didn't. The smell of water – the light and colour and shapes I could hear as if they were birdsong. The landscape was alive. The natural world was alive with a different force – one that I had missed till this new moment.

I whispered hello, cautiously, waited motionless in the boat, let the anticipation drift around me.

The fields and hills nearby shuddered, rounded tummy rumblings, shivering grass fur.

At this young age I had discovered something: a quest that would follow me through my life. A thirst for this feeling, this travelling within my world to somewhere new; this communication, connection; an awareness of something different; an invisible realm that was not separate to, but part of our visible realm.

I was convinced from that moment that places have feelings too. This feeling was too strong, too mutual a chemistry, to belong to me alone, to not be a communication. As I let this knowledge flow over my skin, as I closed my eyes to the red glow of the sun through lid-blood, then opened them to the seeds that floated and made the breeze visible, I let them cast their magic and it thrilled me.

*Part
One*

Thresholds, Kingdoms
and Borderlands

The Walk

Press pause on the world.

What would you miss? The sounds, the beauty of movement? The world does not work as a stage set. It needs to breathe, to talk, to live like one of us. When we think it is still or silent it is not really – it is just about to show us something different: this is its chance to show what is really there.

There was no bustle. Traffic noise was taken over with the gentler ambience of birdsong. In the spring of 2020, when the whole world seemed to be falling apart, places that we knew transformed in feeling.

I lived in a village in Somerset, but in the cities the streets were also empty. We could not be indoors together, yet outdoors was still distanced – even in my village there were queues outside the local shop, people nervous to stand too near to each other. Driving to buy essential supplies, I felt suspicion. People perceived a threat in the air. There was an invisible enemy that could catch any of us. My friend got told off by the police for going for a walk too far from her house, even though the place she had gone to was only a ten-minute drive away and more remote than her street, so she would be less likely to catch or spread germs.

We were scared, yet the landscape was not. With people gone the animals came out more and the air was cleaner. Ironically for such a terrible time, it was the most glorious spring. The places changed physically through lack of people, but also atmospherically. We suddenly and unexpectedly, in good and bad ways, experienced the feeling of the world differently. There was a change in how we felt around people through this invisible threat of germs; how our lives and routines, purposes, jobs had all been upended, the horrific news

PART ONE

with growing graphs cataloguing deaths – but this was the fear of our human reality, a reality of human contact, projected onto the places where we lived our lives. The places themselves, made remote, emptied, changed in a different way, were more noticeable without the human distractions.

During a spring where my world had fallen apart, as so many others' had, job gone, family in crisis, I was more alone than I had ever been in my life. And as I navigated this strange existence, it was the world that kept me company. The feeling I had been so affected by as a child rose in my local bubble of West Country landscape with a different strength – and it was transformational.

I had walked in my local forest nearly every week for years. I knew the paths and different trees, the changing seasons, bluebells and first green leaves, foxgloves, deep winter mud, evergreens and bare branches, the deer and birds of prey, the baby frogs, the evil flies that bite near the pond. It had always made me feel better, and if you'd asked, I would have said I was aware of its atmosphere and cherished this. But now it felt different. I walked and felt the breeze stroke my skin as if alive; the trees threw the breezes between high branches like a Mexican wave of fake traffic noise; the deer didn't run away so fast; and as for the light . . . It was the same place yet my experience of being in it was not the same; it was transcendental and it was company. The memory of that pool in Devon came back to me – the sense that there was something else going on, that I had somehow travelled within my real world – and this time, as an adult in a place I thought I knew well. No distortion of childhood and holidays, the unreliability of memory – the forest was feeling like this here and now.

What was this place I was responding to? What had happened? Atmosphere as travelling . . . I had never really thought of it in these terms before. I looked around and the forest was the same, yet I felt totally and utterly different. It climbed up me and got inside. My mind was lifted almost as if drugged by the sheer scale of it – the feeling of the forest. I grew up in the Church of England, but do

not consider myself particularly religious in my adult life, yet if I were to try to describe this new feeling, I would say that a religious experience, a sense of something else – a divine presence in every part of this place, a spirit in each plant and tree – is as close as I could get.

And when I left the forest after the first walk when this happened, the feeling did not go away. The immediacy of the atmosphere was no longer there, but a trace of it seemed to have latched on and come home with me. I was aware of something. I went back and each time I expected the intense feeling to have gone, but the way I felt in this forest could never disappear. Something had been awakened in my body and mind when I was in this place – as if it recognised my visits and how I had unlocked its secrets, and now it was open to me. I was no longer there alone – I was walking in but also *with* the place. This experience felt like something we were feeling together.

This is how a place can feel . . . I said to myself. I thought back to past intense experiences; usually when travelling in my twenties and a place was exciting and new, I was hyper-aware of the intensity – its contrast, but this felt different. It was not literal travelling to access an atmosphere that would obviously be new and therefore striking. I had opened myself up, or rather it had opened me, and now this strange symbiosis was done, every tiny bit of wonder was flooding into me, into my familiar world. Each subtle change as I walked, metre by metre, path by path, noise by noise, the smell of pine rising or bluebells – hot earthy air . . . The world slowed and the miniature world danced, seeds and lichen, moss worlds and discarded feathers. I felt like I was on a different plane of existence, yet more deeply embedded in the real world.

It seemed impossible that it was so transcendental yet anchored, but like the difference between earth and sky, the elements of the natural world, it also felt unequivocally true. I had found some *thing* – it was not merely in my head. And another truth was that it changed me, was a complete joy at a time of despair. And that in my fumbling cage of language, whatever a spiritual interpretation might be to each individual, the word that kept falling into my thoughts

PART ONE

was ‘atmosphere’. For the first time, I had truly, deeply felt the atmosphere of these woods. And rather than the word simply being a description of somewhere feeling cosy or creepy or sad, atmosphere was far more complex and profound than I had ever imagined. It was key. It was the heart, the essence – yet fluid, alive and changing; it is the true evolving individual personality of place, and it is there for us if we want it. The world can speak to us, but obviously its language is different. Atmosphere as earth words . . .

I took the atmosphere of being in the forest home, glowing like a secret pocket of pulsing light in my heart, comforting yet strangely, awesomely powerful. I felt like I’d discovered a secret of the world that my childhood self, back on that magical pond in Devon, knew and lost. I could not lose it again. And so my quest to understand it began.

But how can we ever understand something as elusive yet present as atmosphere?

When I began to research online the scientific reasons behind the atmosphere of a place, the combination of things that create it, I could find nothing; no matter how I phrased it in the search engine, there weren’t any mentions of atmosphere other than the kind that encases planets. The gaseous sort that enables us to live, makes somewhere habitable or not. Yet when I think of atmosphere in those terms, habitable, life-sustaining, the other kind is not so different – it might be what attracts or repulses us about a place, makes somewhere *feel* like home (we always say ‘feel’ when it comes to home – an emotional rather than a rational response to a place), terrify or inspire us with awe.

My guesses were all I had and they were obvious – geology and architecture; but that is how somewhere looks, not feels, and as any descriptive writer knows, ignoring all the senses other than sight leads to a poor portrait of a place. And beautiful places can feel sinister in one location and in another – a similar landscape or building – cosy. So is it the associations we bring to a place? Perhaps in part, but my inkling was that it lay deeper than this, seemingly

THRESHOLDS, KINGDOMS AND BORDERLANDS

intangible but somehow physically there, invisible to the eye – a beast of instinct, ancient, stealthy rather than subtle, it can hit you in the gut or soothe the greatest pain. It is a presence. It is a very real ghost.

Atmosphere is intrinsic to place. Even though we may not always be consciously aware of it, we would not experience a sense of place without it, but rather, a disjointed combination of experiences that don't define where we are. Places would blur into each other, become a series of images, with smells and sounds and other sensory experiences; and that sense of where we are, where we truly inhabit in any given moment, would be confused or watered down and no more powerful than a reproduction. Atmosphere is what gives a place its identity. It might change for each of us, yet that is no bad thing – it doesn't need to be consistent, but to communicate with us as to where we are, as to who this place is. Atmosphere is the voice of place.

We all have moments in our life when we are more alert to our surroundings than others. My particular circumstances during lockdown were strange and would set me off on a weird life I had not planned; a search for a new home at a time when I hadn't been looking for one. My walks made me more in tune with the landscape I loved and comforted me like an invisible blanket. However, this solace-in-place wasn't a fresh need, but a quest that had been alongside me the whole time. With the enforced introspection of lockdown, I realised I had been strangely dedicated to my craving to *feel* the world around me for years; to feel alive in a place; to sense its atmosphere; to feel at home within small corners of the world.

Even as a child I was in thrall to atmosphere. As a teenager too. Then in my twenties I took flight and travelled. Relentlessly. Peculiarly so: at a time when my friends were settling down, moving in with boyfriends, building careers, I was either ill at home or saving up through working in not-so-great jobs, to fly, to be in the world, to feel free and excited and open to everything. I did not realise it at the time, but I think now that I was in thrall to the same impulse

PART ONE

I'd had on the Maypool, the same quest to experience places, to inhabit places in a heightened state of feeling, to experience the world emotionally; not to collect, but to *feel* as many places, as many atmospheres, as I could. The woods in lockdown reminded me that atmosphere is not mere background, but all around: it made itself known.

As I looked back at my own travels and realised how urgent but unexplained this search for atmosphere was, I wanted to understand better what atmosphere actually *is*. It was both the most unknowable yet most powerful thing I had experienced, and it influences everyone. I wanted to explore how others responded to it – to search through history, writing and art; to see how people have tried to show it, to illustrate, understand and explain it. I wanted to search through my travels and other people's travels and the places that linger as an atmosphere in our heads. I wanted to know if – when something is so alive and in constant movement – it can ever be caught, fleetingly embraced in a net of words.

As I started this journey, I had a single conviction: that being open to atmosphere was key to the creativity of being in our world. A place's personality is mapped through our feelings. We create it, tenderly, together.