

On Place
Tony Romano

I've probably always been a little obsessed with place since my father decided to come to America when he was 37. I've often wondered what my life would have been like in the old country. I'd probably be worrying whether the irrigation ditches were straight on the farm and how to get water to them.

Place is central in all fiction. One of the great pleasures of reading is approaching a book, turning to the first page, knowing that the world unfolding will be a different one by the end. The place likely won't have changed much, but the way the characters view that place will be transformed.

When I set out to write *When the World was Young*, I didn't have any idea how the book would end. But I did know that I wanted to create this sense of nostalgia for the reader, if that's the right word. Nostalgia is a bittersweet longing for the past, but I think we need a word for the longing we feel for places where we've never been.

I'd just finished Philip Roth's book, *I Married a Communist*, which does what all great fiction does, that is, to create a yearning for the relative innocence of the early chapters of a book. One of my favorite scenes in literature is when Scout Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird* at the very end of the book gets to view her town from the point of view of the not quite so innocent Boo Radley. The novel is narrated by Jean Louise Finch, a woman, but she reminisces, and we feel as if the little girl in her is telling the story. But at the end, on the porch, the two voices become fused, the mature and young voice informing each other, and the interplay is stirring.

Also, I think we all believe that the place in which we grew up is the best place anyone could have grown up in. We preserve that specialness for the rest of our lives. When Flannery O'Connor says that everything we ever need for fiction is in our childhood, maybe that's what she means. We can mine this storehouse of

memories from our old neighborhoods—or not actual memories but sensory freeze frames. When I was writing this book, I wanted to capture that. Even though the events in the novel never happened, they're all true (to paraphrase a line from *All the King's Men*, I think) because they *seem*, to me, a recreation of my past. They evoke for me some of the same visceral sensations I had when I was young.

To put it simply, the main reason I read, and write maybe, is to recreate my distant past. Maybe that's what all great art achieves. It returns us to the pure sensations we knew as children. Maybe that's why when we hear a song or take in a piece of art, it moves us and tears us up. Because it takes us back to a primitive place we once knew, which is joyous, but it also creates a quiet sense of loss. In practical terms, I can drive by a house at night, let's say, and even though I've never seen that house, the speckled siding and the painted window frame and the front door and the blue light of the television bring me back to an earlier time when I occupied a particular space, and sometimes, this quickens my breath and brings me both solace and longing.