

Home State

by Joanna ES Campbell

Dennis's first act when arriving at our new home is to strip naked in broad daylight. He climbs into the backyard hot tub and stares into a canopy of oak and pine trees. "Honey," I say, "The neighbors might see you."

He lets out a relaxed sigh. "Who cares?"

"Yeah, but you're the vicar," I say.

He smiles and closes his eyes, settling into the effervescence.

And then I remember we have moved to a town where it would not be so odd for the vicar to be seen skinny-dipping in his hot tub. When parishioners took us to breakfast the day after Dennis's interview, one woman asked, "Now, are you a misfit? Because that's how you fit in this town—if you're a misfit." I wanted to wave my arms in the air and shout, "Yes! Yes! I'm a misfit!" Instead, I kept my hands in my lap and nodded and smiled and spoke in a calm voice, "Yes, I'm definitely weird."

Friends in Seattle ask what made us decide to move back to the South. "There's a tug," we say, "there's that calling to return home." My brother-in-law mysteriously collapsed the day after Thanksgiving, and then my only uncle died the day after Christmas. In truth, I broke down in tears a few months before these heartbreaks. Dennis and I were driving from Asheville to Nashville, and we pulled over to eat lunch at a strip mall barbecue joint in Middle Tennessee. I cried in the parking lot of a chain restaurant. "What's the matter," Dennis asked. "I don't want to leave," I wept. Marrying a man from eastern Arkansas hadn't yet clued me in that I was outgrowing old stereotypes about identifying as a southerner. After nearly forty years, the chip on my shoulder was softening, and I was coming to the slow realization that I could not escape my roots. Dennis's Delta drawl, in fact, was a lure during our courtship.

When he curled his words, I felt curled up inside them. "I like the way you talk," I said. "I like the way you talk," he echoed, only with more syllables.

After a three-day stretch across the Rockies and the Badlands, Dennis adds extra r's and tells me to point the car true South. It is as if there is a magnet pulling us closer to our native home as we follow curvy oak and pine-lined highways to the Arkansas Ozarks. There is iron in the soil. Maybe that is what is drawing us home. Our first stop in our new town is the title company. Once we've penned our signature dozens of times and promised to pay a portion of our bank loan every month, the realtor hands me the keys to our historic Victorian home built in 1900.

After Dennis soaks in the hot tub, he boils gourmet coffee candies, reducing them to syrup and pours the tawny liquid over shaved ice, sprinkling ginger crumbles for garnish. The snow cone machine is a surprise gift for me, for our new home. I let the sweet slivers linger on my tongue and decide the treat would be even more delicious in the hot tub.

All change, even the good kind, is a form of psychological free fall. Living out of our car for the better part of a week and then living out of boxes for over a month dropped me down to bare bone realities. Moving across the U.S. pokes at a marriage. It stings. I'm fabulous at sitting by my husband for five intensive care weeks while he fights to live. Hand me a family crisis, and I'm your model for calm. Scramble my possessions into a city of cardboard and mess with my nest, and I get tired and mean. And then there is the mystery question that I can't shake. I've spent decades trying to flick it away, but it keeps sticking to my fingers like a Saltine cellophane wrapper. What does it mean to be a

southerner?

Embracing my southern roots is a process of asking what I know about myself. In truth, I may be asking the question as I approach turning forty. I want to know what I am turning toward. Or perhaps the question sticks because this is the first move back to Arkansas that springs from desire rather than the need for a temporary resting place before leaving for somewhere far way, somewhere different. I've never allowed myself much space to answer the question, too clouded by ugly stereotypes. Arkansas may have an embarrassing habit of kicking and screaming as it marches toward progress, but it also raises role models I've not encountered elsewhere, or it draws good people from outside its borders, people who see beauty beyond media headlines. They see this place as home. I've traveled most corners of the continent and made four states and one Canadian province my home. When I think of the people holding me in prayer, people I confide in or seek advice from, the majority are Arkansans.

The forester in me wants to believe there is something in the land that makes us who we are. And then there are those who care about terroir, the taste of place, whether in their wine glass or coffee cup. Maybe people are shaped by place. Maybe there is something in the rivers, hills, and fields, making us who we are without us knowing. An old Montana logger told me years ago, "Once these mountains get hold of you, you're not good for much else." It hadn't occurred to me the same could be true for a small nubby state to the right of the middle US.

It wasn't until I moved to Seattle that my question about southern identity pursued me in earnest. I expected strangers to make eye contact when we passed each other on sidewalks. I adjusted to not hearing another person's opinion when discussing a contentious topic. Then there was the unexpected shock of total anonymity. In my twenties, I would have welcomed this privacy as I struggled to differentiate from my family. In my late thirties, it was strange to meet people in Seattle and not have

the who-do-we-both-know conversation. Maybe I didn't live in Seattle long enough. In our first year, a therapist told me it would take three to five years for people to warm up to a friendship. "Whether or not it's the Norwegian heritage, it's just the way people are," she explained. Dennis and I enjoyed our four years despite the cultural dissonance. And then I cried in the parking lot of a barbecue chain restaurant in Middle Tennessee. The only strong emotions I witnessed in Seattle were when we announced Dennis's call to Arkansas. Several people made a point to express their disappointment. Some reactions made it seem like there was a grave loss in our leaving. I did not understand the source of their feelings.

There are strange and wonderful coincidences about our move to Eureka Springs, Arkansas:

~ Our furniture matches the house, as if we had been acquiring possessions over the years for this particular home.

~ My middle initials are the town's short-hand initials. I see part of my legal name everywhere—on the cover of the local paper—on marquees—in emails—ES everywhere. People want to know about my name.

~ I fantasized about living in the hills, in an old house, a funky old house with charm – with a fire place, a hot tub, a claw foot tub in the bathroom, and a place to build a tiny house—a place to plant a garden—a place with birds and deer—even coyotes. Now I do. There's a pond spotted in spring peepers pitching their chorus at full volume. Yesterday, I watched a groundhog scamper through our backyard and climb up a tree. He or she contentedly nibbled young green leaves for half an hour.

The truth is, the claw foot tub will need to be removed. It is a trap waiting to spring on both our clumsy selves. A quick walk in the backyard leads to exciting discoveries of early century rusted tools half buried in the ground along with scattered glass. Barefoot walking is out of the question. Indoors, Dennis steps on a wasp. There's a flicker woodpecker busy on one

side of the house, the side where I set up my writing desk. The hole the flicker made is now occupied by a starling, which I also discovered yesterday and nearly panicked at the thought of a giant rat chewing the insides of our walls. Not a rat—just an invasive bird brought to America because an enthusiast wanted all the birds from Shakespeare. Cardboard boxes lean toward me as I write. Each room looks like a storage space. If I never see another piece of cardboard, it will be too soon.

On Maundy Thursday, I walk to an historic hotel and spa. A colorfully tattooed stylist massages my scalp, releasing the tension that had taken up residence in my neck weeks ago. On Good Friday, I wrap myself in a silk robe and try to read and focus on printed words, but my body aches—a cold I'm coming down with, perhaps—or maybe allergies from the impending spring or the dust we carted from Washington to Arkansas. There are towers of possessions around me, and I want to crawl into bed and hide.

Dennis and I snap at each other. We also try to have mature conversations about our aesthetic differences. The sight of boxes littering the backyard is exasperating. It grates against my artistic sensibilities for our yard to fill with empty castaways. I know it was a rainstorm that blew the boxes into the grass, but the sight of them tipped to their sides, muddy and soggy, didn't seem to bother Dennis. He, on the other hand, is irritated with the wood floors. "I'm a floor snob," he says. He can see where the floor was not properly sanded. He can see mistakes staring him in the face each time he enters the house. Unless the floor is obviously damaged, like the splintered, nail-ridden one in our previous home, I don't have an eye for this aesthetic. I'm happy that it's smooth and wooden. "Refinishing the floor will renew my spirit," he says. We both agree that we want our home to be a sacred space. "You realize," he pronounces, "we have different definitions of that."

I ask him to say more.

"You see potential for things I would never

imagine, whereas I see that oak dresser in the corner, and I want to work with the wood to help the grain stand out more."

I can't pick and choose the kinds of grains and textures that I want to stand out. I don't know which bits make me southern and which lines are not bound by land or culture.

Dennis has a talent for furniture and floors—for reupholstering chairs and finding the beauty beneath poorly varnished surfaces. I care more about what the neighbors will think of suitcases sitting on the front porch during a thunderstorm and the cardboard village aggregating on the lawn.

I don't express my irritation when I see the cardboard because I know my grievance is petty, and while it would be nice if he understood my exact sense of things, I know our bond does not hinge on this trait. I know from previous relationships, this trait is entirely superficial—it does not bring a couple closer together. An identical view on housecraft is not the well we draw from when one of us reaches out for the other. Our domestic economy pivots on the less tangible—on things we cannot touch with our hands or harmoniously arrange on a shelf.

The simple fact of the matter is we are both worn out, worn down, ragged and shaky from this move, a move we both yearned for in our own ways. Prayed for. Perhaps this is similar to what couples feel when they finally have their long awaited baby. I am trying to be a good mother to this beautiful, entirely unique house, and sometimes I want to throw boxes, kick walls, slam doors. Instead, I sweep like a ticking time bomb until I have the good sense to step outside and speed walk to the spa. Maybe this is part of being a southerner.

I remember the words of writer and poet, Mark Doty. "I want to live with my lover and my animals in a house stratified with our collective histories. And of course I carry, permanently, the contradictory desire—to be free, open to the winds, awash in light and air, unbordered."

Dennis and I have been married four years.

We are still learning how to argue. Rather, I'm still learning how to have conflict. Maybe this is a trait specific to southern women or simply to adult children of southern alcoholics.

Dennis's first day at work is Easter Sunday. My toes are painted red, and though I don't have an Easter dress in mind, I wonder about first impressions, about what it will be like to be a clergy spouse in this artist town made for misfits. I wonder about identity. I am only beginning to understand how I've been shaped by this state. I'm looking to the land for answers – answers as elusive as the pileated woodpecker I hear in the backyard but never see. Eureka Springs is nothing like Little Rock, where I grew up. Little Rock was river valley. This is hill country.

We moved here just in time to register to vote. Two months ago, the city council passed a nondiscrimination ordinance, one that violates new state legislation making it illegal for communities to pass antidiscrimination ordinances. I sign up to volunteer on the campaign, making calls and asking registered voters if they support the ordinance. Some tell me I have no business calling with such a question. One person tells me my inquiry is illegal and actually calls the police. Most of the people want to talk longer than the allotted five minutes. I indulge because the conversations flow, effortless, as if we have known each other for years. They spend less than a minute indicating their support for equal rights and more than ten minutes telling me about their child who went ultra conservative or the mother who died and now the siblings are fighting over inheritance or the gay couple who has lived in Eureka Springs for thirty years, and there was never an issue.

There is one clue I must give proper attention—my desire to be in relation with others. It is as if we are one body, and when I interact with Arkansans, even if we are new to each other, it feels as though I'm gaining sensation back in a leg that has fallen asleep. Maybe I am someone's arm. Some days, it feels like my heart

is carried in the eyes of the person praying across the aisle. Small gestures are vehicles for empathy, and this empathy is the thing with feathers that wants to be seen. Ms. Dickinson taught the world about home. Small gestures help to craft belonging. Intimacy. I spend an afternoon delivering campaign signs to people who can't make the drive to historic downtown. I met one couple as a result of dialing the wrong number. They were still interested in talking about the ordinance, and though they did not live within city limits allowing them to vote, they still wanted a yard sign. I drove miles of backcountry roads, in a place where geographic positioning systems do not work, and found them waiting in the front yard. "My son is in the military," the man said as he took the sign from my hands, "and he is gay."

To move between two places—one utterly selfless, ready to give everything away—the other, utterly frustrated by the facial hair caked into my razor. It takes me a few weeks to note the disarming humor of my husband using my lady razor. Before this realization, we are preparing dinner in the kitchen. Dennis seals steaks in plastic and cooks them using his favorite method, *sous vide*, words meaning under pressure in French. "The next time you use my razor," I try to say without judgment, "would you turn it upward so the strip doesn't get gummy?"

"Well, yeah, but I don't use them very often, and I always clean them."

"Um, I've got a razor full of your facial hair that tells me otherwise." Dennis's face takes on a smile most parishioners don't get to see, the smile of a playful smartass.

"Just bear in mind, honey, that someday you'll want that razor full of hair long after I'm gone."

My God, he's right. I would long for the lavender razor with the salt and pepper evidence of our life together.

To move from Seattle to Eureka Springs. I hadn't realized the blues were spreading through my body in the Pacific Northwest. I

thought it was seasonal affective disorder or a vitamin D deficiency. One week in Arkansas, and I see that it is my DNA coming back to life. I belong here. I belong in a place where we all don't get along—where most of us are not hip though many are progressive—where we are a big mess of community, bumping into each other's religious and political beliefs, where our commonality is making eye contact, doorways, searching for the essential self in each other. Some of us live in fear of what we do not understand. Some are consumed by anger or sadness, words crumbling onto the limestone

sidewalks of our town. A few speak from a hateful dwelling place, though I have only seen these words on a billboard near the county line. Many, it seems, are filled with the Holy Spirit each new day.

Grace arrives in the shape of a snow cone, a lavender razor, a hot tub—in the sound of the letter r rolling off the tongue. Sometimes, you find part of your true self after driving to a leafy place off the digital map where iron, sand, and clay stratify the soil, and you stare into the eyes of a stranger. One body. ▲▼▲

Editor's note: *An earlier version of this essay appeared on the blog processphilosophy.org.*

Three Poems

by John Belk

Floodplain

Undercurrents
are buried, out of sight
from shore or sandbars
where people play,
grill burgers, talk
away the weekend over
beer. I swim out and
get sucked under—no
sound except the pulpy
drawl of water sloughed
around my head.
A kingfish, carried
to a delta throne of gold—
a god. I sink
away from Mother's voice
and Uncle's drunken laughter.
The river makes a fickle
lover—calm top
and turbid underbelly,
like a blues song
or a drought-starved
sleeping wolf.

Baptism

I am duckweed
and delta silt—
Mississippi clay
from a sticky-bottomed swamp.

I am slouch-backed,
slough-legged,
muddy insides straining out
soggy-lined psalms.

I am mispronounced prayers—
reworked on the wheel.
I am growing thin-skinned
in the heat,

sick with myself,
Shadrach-without-faith,
stone, rib, and dust,
char from the kiln.

Look, Father!
I am made in your image—
look at me. I am made
an unforgiving god.

Fishing

The cypress knees can rip a prop to shreds.
Some rise above the water—most stay sunk
below. I know the things that lurk beneath
the murk and mired muddy top—turtles,
tires, fallen logs, and stumps. They skulk,
the old clichés—the boots and cans that snag
your line below the rippled skin of the divine.
I know what waits in recessed coves: bluegill,
spoonbill, channel cat. I cast myself
before the gods of alligator gar—
the priestesses of sac-a-lait, the holy hosts
of dusky lakes. I offer fate unto
the wake. Be still. Sit still upon your boat
and pray like mother taught you to. And wait.

