

When my father was very old, I asked him where he wanted his ashes to be scattered when he was gone. As far as I could tell, on this subject, he simply had no feeling at all.

“It doesn’t matter,” he said. “Makes no difference to me at all.”

It startled me how little time he took to consider, just enough to gather himself into a shrug, to look away, drawing in a breath.

No bitterness or despair, no sadness or regret.

He was perfectly content.

I have come to wish that I had asked for something more.

My father died of congestive heart disease and kidney failure on December 5, 2005. He was ninety-three years old and had lived what he described as a long and happy life. I spent his last night alone with him in the hospital in Port Angeles, Washington, the window in his room affording a view through lightly falling snow of the Strait of Juan DeFuca. When I wasn't sleeping on the cot the nursing staff brought in, I sat beside his bed in silence or carrying on a one-sided conversation or mangling Norwegian songs he'd taught to us as children. He was unconscious when I arrived and stayed that way to the end, but I'm sure he knew that I was there, had waited for me, in fact. I have no doubt because of how easily it came to me what to say throughout the long hours of the night, and I have no doubt because of how he murmured when I stroked his forehead and how agitated he became when I stopped, and I have no doubt because, well, there are just some things about which you have no doubt.

A few days after he died, I went to the funeral home to pick up his ashes. They came in three brown plastic boxes, one each for me, my brother, and my sister, with labels on the front listing the name and address of the funeral home and below that:

*This package contains the cremated body of  
Valdemar N. L. Johnson  
Cremated December 7, 2005, ID Number 20051912  
Olympic Cremation Association*

One side bore a label warning NOT SUITABLE FOR MAILING OR LONG-TERM STORAGE, making it clear this was not to be his final resting place. And yet, here it is, the little box on the table beside me now, more than two years later, the cover dusty from sitting on a

shelf in the laundry room. Nora has told me more than once that it is no proper place for him to be, and yet, from what my father told me when I asked, one is no better than another. I know she's right, but something keeps me from moving him until this morning, taking him down to open him up. Maybe he has thought it over.

There is a rubber band around the box, although just why I've no idea, since it opens from the top. It takes a screwdriver to get the lid off. Inside is a large wad of white batting and beneath that a clear plastic bag of what remains of my father. He is reduced to a grainy powder, olive drab, and the texture through the plastic reveals some tiny rough pieces, what I imagine is left from the grinding of his bones. The smooth plastic of the bag reflects the morning light coming through the window. It is spring. Maples have set their buds and fiddlehead ferns are about to unfurl and violets are coming up along the path leading down into the woods behind the house.

*no difference to me at all*

Only now, three years after he has died, does it come to me, the depth of disappointment and the truth of what I wanted him to say. To name a place, any place, not so much for his own sake but for mine, to name the place from which he came, a place of origin, of ultimate belonging, of going forth in the beginning and coming back in the end, where the fine end tips of his roots, spread out over a lifetime across the world, would always be found. *Take me back to Norway* would have been good, very good in fact. To sprinkle him in the deep waters of Hardanger, in springtime when melting snow in the mountains spawns thousands of waterfalls tumbling down into the fjord as cherry trees come into bloom.

*take me home*

Yes, I would have said, and gladly. I have imagined it more than once, the train from Oslo to Bergen, my father's remains resting on the seat beside me, renting a car to make my way to the ferry that would take both of us *home*. His word, not mine, or at least the word I have him say on my behalf, since it has never been home to me. *Have* him say, because he did not say it, not to me or to anyone who bothered to repeat it, did not pass on the blood secret of belonging before he died.

I also would have taken him to South Dakota, where he grew up, or to Minnesota, where he was born, or to Iowa, where his grandfather Nils Måkestad (mawk-eh-stad) changed his name to Johnson as he turned himself from a sailor into a farmer and a Norwegian into an American. But my father did not ask for that, not so much as a hint, as if it never occurred to him to even think about. No gentle but irresistible tugging at his heart, no longing to return, no sigh of tender resignation to know his children would honor a father's dying

wish. Because there was no dying wish. He just kept on living until he stopped because he was old and his heart didn't work anymore and then his kidneys shutting down. The body goes until it doesn't. But a wish is something different, unless you keep it to yourself.

The only thing he asked was that we burn him up, which we have done.

I do not understand how you could be close enough to death to see it coming and hear your son ask such a question, setting up one of those unforgettable moments out of which comes a story passed down across generations—I'll never forget the day I asked your great-grandfather where he wanted his ashes to be spread, how he looked at me for the longest time before he spoke—how you could hear such a thing and manage only a shrug and what you said. I have seen you show more interest in a piece of lemon meringue pie than what I saw in your face that day, but you may not have known what I was really asking. Even so, I find it hard to understand. Yes, I know, I didn't know what I was asking either, but you were the father and fathers are supposed to know such things. You were supposed to look me in the eye as if it wasn't you at all, but some ancestral presence coming through, a voice of wisdom that surprised even you, not knowing it was there until just this moment had arrived, the singular moment of passing on—*Here is who you are, no mere extension of me, but of the same stuff that I am of, from the same place, where I am going now and where you will follow in your time. And when I am gone, you will take me there and you will know what it is.*

Something like that.

The place would have a name, by which I don't mean *heaven* or *Valhalla*, but Dubuque or Hardanger, because I am still alive and need a place where I can go and close my eyes and smell the earth and tell myself that this is who I am, where I am from, which I would know because this is where, after your long life of wandering the earth, I brought you and only because you asked.

I have put the box on the shelf behind the place where I write. I do not want to look at it just now. I do not want to think that this is all I've got to work with.

The last thing you are supposed to do, if it has not been done already in one way or another, is lift a finger and point *over there* so the rest of us will know. But to leave as if it meant nothing at all is to jump from a boat adrift in the middle of the ocean and take with you not only the compass and the rudder but also the map and then pass your hand across the sky to wipe out the stars. That's the way it feels.

I have a good mind to take you out back and dump you in the woods, but that would just be a permanent reminder of what you were supposed to tell me and did not.

Dad, I *asked*.

I will have to find something better to do with you.

My family held a memorial service at Nora's and my house in Connecticut the autumn after my father died. My sister did not want her share of the ashes and so we buried some of them at the points of the four directions at the base of an old hemlock standing by a stream running through the woods behind the house. The rest I ceremoniously sprinkled into the water, imagining his remains making their way down to the Farmington River and from there into the Connecticut and eventually to the sea and across the ocean to Norway, born along on a Viking funeral barge brimming with flowers.

The fantasy felt good enough for a while, although I knew all along that I had just made it up and what a poor substitute it was for what I really needed. Now when I go down to the stream in the morning with our old Lab, Elsie Bean, I sometimes remember the spoonfuls of ashes we deposited there, but, honestly, it does almost nothing for me to think of it. This ground has no particular meaning beyond the limits of my own life, going back just the sixteen years since we came onto the land and built the house. It is uncommonly beautiful and quiet here, and I have said how much I would like to be scattered in these woods when I have died. I don't know anymore why I said this. Now it feels like a romantic lunge toward something larger that I cannot see, much less have, and even if it's more than that, I have no illusion that it's anything like what I imagined my father might have said to me and did not.

My brother tells me that he is saving his portion of the ashes for when Geraldine, our stepmother, dies, so that we can mingle their ashes together as she has asked. I don't know where he intends to scatter them, since her answer was the same as my father's right down to the shrug. "*I don't know,*" she said offhandedly, with a note of

exasperation mixed in, as if put out that I expected her to know, and then just staring out into the air, which I have grown used to with the progress of her Alzheimer's and the fact that she cannot see.

That leaves my own portion. I did not understand at first my sister's aversion but may have a better sense of it now. What was she to do with it, after all? What am I?



Each morning before breakfast, I go down to my writing room and sit in meditation for a half hour. Today I place my father's ashes on the table in front of the couch where I sit. I don't know why. Perhaps I imagine he's going to say what he did not when he had the chance. I sit and stare at the box with its label and rubber band and then I'm thinking that I should be feeling something profound, but what comes over me is disappointment in myself, the sense of something lacking in a son who gazes at his father's ashes and sees only a plain brown box. The meditation timer on the table beside me softly gongs, and I close my eyes, noting the disappointment, breathing in, breathing out.

Somewhere in the middle I also note my anger that it did not occur to him that it might matter not so much where he asked to have his ashes put but that he would ask at all. That someplace is better than no place. If he had asked me to spread them along the spit by the water in Sequim, a place we often walked, I could have drawn some message from it—the importance of being anchored in a love of place, a familiar view that resonates deep inside the soul. See how I can make it up, fill in the gaps? I don't need much—a clue, a few notes in a line, and I can hum the rest. He didn't have to say that it's because he loved the view or the sound of the sea, but only enough to indicate his soul's being drawn in some earthbound direction before heading off into the ether,

breathing in, breathing out

or, *lay me down beside my mother and father*, but then he would have had to tell me where his parents, my grandparents, are buried, which

I just now realize I do not know. Somewhere in the flat landscape of the upper Midwest.

I was in Fargo, North Dakota, once and when I remarked how flat it is, so unlike New England, my host laughed and said that if the ground were as smooth as a table and you dropped a marble, it would just sit there. I don't know why I thought of that just now, something about inertia, the tendency of a thing to stay where it is unless something comes along that is powerful enough to set it in motion.

Scatter me anywhere, anywhere at all. Anywhere except nowhere, which pretty much describes the view from inside a plain brown plastic box.

I am making breakfast when it comes to me, the memory of my father saying he wanted no marker for his grave in the event that he had one. Which I take to mean there should be no way for anyone to find him, nothing to stand over or beside as they remember him, no tablet with words inscribed that might evoke a memory.

I do not understand this. He lived a happy life. He died loving his wife and children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren. And yet, *I want no marker*, going out of his way to make the point, leaving no room for whatever we might feel moved to do or have for ourselves. As if he had died alone in a far-off land or the middle of the sea.

And once again I did not think to ask why not. I did not think to ask because I felt no need for something more, as if he were only expressing a personal preference having nothing to do with me.

When my mother died thirteen years ago, she asked to have a portion of her ashes spread in her garden, being careful to spread them thinly so as not to clump and to maximize the horticultural effect. Another portion she thought it would be nice to spread nearby the graves of her parents in West Salem, Wisconsin, along with a small stone to mark the spot, which my brother's daughter did some years ago. The rest was up to us to scatter as we wished. It pleased me then to sprinkle them about the base of the hemlock down by the stream behind our house and to pour the rest into the water, as I did with my sister's portion of my father ten years later. As it turns out, being pleased isn't all it's cracked up to be.

What does it matter where a body's ashes lie? Into the question steps my busy mind to push away the nagging sense of something lost and missing in my heart. *It is just a body*, I quote my mother to myself, a pile of ashes, good for the garden or to put on an icy walk, but not much else. Ever practical, the farmer's daughter, who

by the time I came along was so isolated from any sense of place or kin that I grew up barely knowing aunts or uncles or cousins, who spent her winters in Mexico and the rest of the year in her house in Massachusetts, always alone. She owned the house, but, except for the garden, she acted like a transient with no interest in settling in or leaving her mark. She left everything exactly as it was the day she moved in—the wallpaper, the ugly carpeting, the old linoleum in the kitchen and bath, the chipping paint on the woodwork. She liked to quote the Buddhists on the perils of attachment and desire and the liberation of wanting nothing, by which standard she seemed to be truly free unless you noticed how she might give something away in a moment of generosity and then years later show up to take it back. Or you knew about her losing her mother when she was just a girl and happened to get a look into the inner desolation and the broken heart and the depth of longing she carried with her to the end. Or received her advice to never complain to the neighbors lest they know what matters to you, which they might use against you later on.

My father was the son of a Lutheran minister who served the people of small towns dotting the Great Plains of Montana, Minnesota, and South Dakota at the turn of the twentieth century. My father had little to say about his father in the memoir he wrote some years before he died, but whatever is the truth of it, being the son of John Lewis Johnson was enough to turn my father permanently against religion. He had little patience for the idea of God or some reality beyond what his physical senses could detect. He was tolerant of other people inquiring into the spirit and the unknown but showed no interest in it himself. And although he was an affectionate man, at least in his later years when he seemed to have suddenly discovered the power of a hug or saying, ‘I love you,’ he had no emotional curiosity that I ever saw. Not once in the almost sixty years that I knew him did he ask me how I actually felt about anything. He was interested in history and politics and people, but only in collecting their outward

stories—their wealth and worldly accomplishments in particular—and not their inner lives, of which he seemed strangely unaware.

All his life my father moved from place to place, from the Midwest to California to Washington, D.C., and then to Norway and Poland as an officer in the Foreign Service, to Iceland and Canada before retiring with Geraldine to the Pacific Northwest. He never lived in a house that wasn't owned and largely furnished by someone else until he was almost sixty years old. He took to his change of status with a vengeance, becoming a gardener and planting fruit trees and flowering bushes surrounded by great expanses of black plastic covered with wood chips and landscape stones, not a slip of green showing except by his design. The impression was of a tiny island conceived from the obsession with detail of someone possessed by the peculiar coupling of urgency and a surplus of time.

He installed a sprinkler system with an elaborate timer for when they were away, which turned out to be quite a lot. They spent months sailing around the world, went to Africa and Russia and up and down the Alaskan coast. They took to spending winters in Arizona in someone else's house or apartment with someone else's furniture and dishes and someone else's artwork on the walls. All the while, the interior of their own house stayed exactly the same year after year, like a museum that never goes beyond the permanent exhibit. Whatever was in a particular place on the previous visit—the picture of Iceland on the wall, the Dutch figure on the mantle, the extra toiletries in the guest bathroom—could be counted on to be there on the next.

And yet for everything staying the same, they were, inside themselves, transients to the end, vagabonds setting up camp each night with everything just so, arranging around them their collection of precious possessions like amulets against the night.

And how ironic it is that the last surviving parent should be my other-mother, Geraldine, and that her chief complaint should be that she doesn't know who or where she is. Or who I am to her.

What does it really matter where we are? My mind goes blank, unable to grasp the question. But my heart is not put off so easily.

When I was a student in college and people would ask where I was from, I used to say it was wherever I happened to be. I don't think I was trying to be evasive or coy or clever or even in-the-moment Buddhist. I simply didn't know what to say and yet had to come up with something to put them off, and this was the best that I could do.

*Where are you from?* Am I the only one who finds the question difficult? Beyond the social ritual of *hi how are you I'm fine blah blah where are you from?* what does it mean and where does it go? People aren't wanting to know where I was ten minutes or an hour ago, so how far back do they mean? When I went to college in New Hampshire, I came from Massachusetts, but when I lived in Massachusetts, I was from Norway, and in Norway, from Washington, and in Washington, from my mother, and in my mother . . . which is where it gets easier to be from wherever I am right now.

I don't need such ruses anymore, being grown up with fully developed social skills. When people ask where I'm from, I say what is expected without letting on that it might be untrue or less than true or other than true without being false. Not exactly.

*I am from the northwest hills of Connecticut* is what I tell them now. Literally true and geographically accurate, but not in my heart, in that seat of longing and loneliness and feeling lost that shows up in my dreams and drifts through my mind as I stare out the window of one more airplane taking me to and from one more speaking engagement, taking me away or returning me 'home,' suspended in the air, none of it seeming real enough to quiet the disquiet inside me.

Figuring this out—source and origin, the who or what or where that I am from—is more than a puzzle, a scientific question, and

inseparable from the problem of what to do with my share of what remains of my father.

And it is a problem. I could not keep that box in the laundry room forever. In fact, the moment I took it down, I passed a point of no return, knowing that until I find a proper place for it to be, it will remain in the open, where I cannot help but see it every day. I cannot just get rid of it. And I cannot leave it for my children to come across when Nora and I are dead.

No, my father's ashes must *go* somewhere that I *intend*, must be *placed* in a way that gives meaning not just to him but to me—whatever that means—and to my family, to my brother and my sister and all our children, such that if they should ask, I could tell them and they would nod and smile, *good, I'm glad, just so*.

My father's ashes must go to what or wherever he is from, and yet I say 'what' and 'where' only for want of something better, because I don't know exactly what I mean beyond a feeling that draws me to the words—which is, after all, the problem, the lack of more to go on. And while I'm at it, I might as well add *to whom*. *Who what where* is my father from? And when I ask the question for him, is it not also for me?

To know the *where* includes some idea of *who*. What leaps to mind when I hear that someone's from New York or Kenya or Japan is not only geography or scenery but also varieties of human beings. People and place are inseparable, which is why a person who claims to be from nowhere is so mysterious in a disturbing and even frightening sort of way. I cannot know who you really are without knowing who and where you are from.

This should be easy. My father came from Norwegians who lived in Norway, on his father's side from Hardanger and on his mother's from somewhere north of Oslo. I know this from an old book written in Norwegian that shows a portion of my father's lineage going all the way back to the fourteenth century. And if that isn't good enough, there is this: several years before he died, I asked my father if he thought of himself as a Norwegian—a Norwegian—and he said *oh yes* but then was quick to add that, of course, he was also American. I asked him what it was about being Norwegian that meant so much to him, and he glowed as he spoke of the people and the culture and the land. But when I asked him if he thought of being American in the same way, he did not hesitate to say *no*, it was not the same at all.

That would seem to mean that somewhere in Norway is where his ashes ought to go, except that he made no mention of it when I asked, this man who grew up speaking four dialects of Norwegian.



And he was so careful to reassure me that he was American, as if worried that I might think badly of him if he did not. But why would he worry about that, a white man whose ancestors came here generations ago, who spoke English with no discernible accent, who served in the U.S. Navy during World War II followed by a career as a diplomat with letters of appointment signed by the president of the United States? In spite of this, was he telling me that his love of Norway and his sense of himself as Norwegian exposed him to an accusation of disloyalty that he felt a need to defend himself against? Was the appearance of indifference a ruse to cover up ambivalence? Was he actually afraid to let it be known that he wanted nothing more than to be scattered across the deep waters of Hardangerfjord below the village of Måkestad whose very name—*home of the seagulls*—his grandfather had abandoned in order to become American?

Perhaps ‘ruse’ is putting it too strongly. He may not have been consciously false to me. It would not surprise me if his longing and fear were buried so deep that even he did not know how much his answer to my question mattered after all.

Then again, after decades of living all over the world, my father may have ended his life as a man without a place, a displaced person for whom the price of being able to fit in anywhere was to wind up being from nowhere, routinely singing the praises of whatever country he was posted to, the diplomatic version of loving the one you’re with if you can’t be with the one you love.

Or to be from wherever you happen to be.

The better you get at this way of being in the world, the more likely you are to forget what and where it was you loved in the first place, or how much, how irresistibly, right down to the end, drawing you back, everything else falling away for what it was, a temporary distraction, a wandering detour off the path that always leads you home.

I will never know the truth of what went on inside him unless, perhaps, he comes to me in a dream. And there is still the problem of not knowing where *I* want him to be. I am not indifferent or ambivalent to that, because I am still here, and what becomes of me is yet to come.

Almost twenty years ago, when Nora and I were building the house we live in now, in the foothills of the Berkshires in the northwest corner of Connecticut, I would drive down Route 44 going west from Hartford and then turn onto a road running north through a gently sloping valley. The moment I turned the wheel in that direction I could feel a sinking down inside myself, as if I'd been holding my breath in anticipation of a long wait being over at last. The road winds past houses and then through Canton Center with its old general store—a historic landmark—with a tiny post office on one side and a Congregational Church on the other, whose tall white spire from a vantage point farther off would poke through the trees in one of those sure signs of being somewhere in New England. Across the street from the church is a small one-story wood-frame building that used to be an extension of the town library. A hundred yards farther on, as you turn left onto Barbourtown Road, only a few miles from our house, is the elementary school and then the fieldstone house of Peg Perry—who has since died, the town's cantankerous, chain-smoking librarian who was also sister to Katharine Hepburn—and then the Perry farm, the dairy cows grazing in the field close by the road as I drive by.

I do love this place, *our little piece of heaven* I like to call it, with its woods and hills and quiet stillness and white-tailed deer and red foxes and black bears. I love coming home to it, to see the ridgeline of the hills along the valley rise out of the trees. And to judge from the tears coming into my eyes, it touches something more than a simple love for what I have, but also a sadness and a longing this place has the power to evoke but not assuage. I wish I was *from* this place, I *should have* been from here or someplace like it, or from Norway, *I should have been Norwegian*, the words sounding in my mind, awkward, ridiculous, and strange.

Sometimes when I've had enough of the news and imagine myself living somewhere else, a country whose government makes me feel less frightened or ashamed, I think of Norway, of Oslo in particular, where we lived for two years when I was a boy. I imagine living there now, an aging ex-patriot writer finding a more appreciative audience. But the fantasy dissolves as quickly as I can do the math, Norway being the most expensive place to live on the planet, because the government, true to its socialist tendencies, shares the wealth from its North Sea oil with all its citizens and not just a wealthy few. And then there is my not speaking Norwegian and the fact that I would be utterly alone, knowing no one except a few relatives in Bergen, and that not one iota of my longing would find release in that place where the only thing that truly belongs is my longing for it.

When people ask me now where I'm from, I name the place where I live, which is technically correct but not quite true to the question that I often hear in my mind. Because to live in a place and to be from a place are not the same. When I was younger, I didn't mind living out the difference. I was restless and preoccupied with family and work and figuring out what I could have and what I could not, and so being from nowhere didn't seem to matter. But now it does, because I am getting older and my parents are dead and my mind is more available to such things as death and regret and the nature and meaning of a life. And, of course, there is the little brown box.