

Townie: A Natural History

Kathleen Stewart

I was a townie north of Boston. One of those born before the sticks became master-planned fields of McMansions. One who could walk to the town center (post office, school, churches, market, drug store, hardware store, package store). My parents were known by one-word nicknames: “Punky” and “Dric”. Town accents called out, interrupting our play or the path to the library. We shared a physical aversion to having the heat on at night; our noses would swell and fill with blood. Clothes had to be hung out on clotheslines and, then, in the winter, pulled in frozen stiff to finish drying in the basement; dryers destroyed socks and underwear.

We had a loyalty to the expressivity of things. Materialities swelled into modes of address. It was as if whatever there was to notice was already scored onto matter. We felt the bony truth in the mantra that the beach is cold and gray in the winter, and windy in a bad way, that the woods are dark, that isolation is dangerous. The ancient graveyard was moody; the catholic school and its cement playground loomed over kids and adults alike, uncontested; the decorative flurry of American flags on light poles and front porches was a directly felt collective fantasy of enduring cheer. We knew when a few pansies stuck in a window box was a failed gesture at spring, that a front porch cluttered, or too bare, was not just a bad sign but an actual slackening, as if the plastic siding, long-ago layered over the wood, was itself necrotic, the skin of the house detaching from the relations of a world.

Buildings, trees, uncurtained windows, the eye contact that pinged around at the Dunkin' Donuts were elements of townieness. Ambient and therefore atmospheric,¹ townieness seeped into "the inconsequential ...odors, exhaustions, sounds of voices, errands, changing light...."² It pulled hard matter and gesture together in an energetics the flooded up and receded like a tide. The seasons magnetized tones of voice and brought bodies to attention. The winter was a dark tunnel. The men slid off the roofs. The voices carried over the muffled surfaces – "Hey Joe, what happened to ya lights?" "Hey Bob, where's ya tree? What happened?"

When my father's heart burst on a Christmas Eve, there was an ice storm so intense it killed forty percent of the trees. Through the cold night, the trees bent under the weight of the ice; the death snapping beginning in the early morning hours. To the men up listening, it sounded like the gunfire in Vietnam. To us it was about his now broken attachment to the trees and the neighborhood of men doing things to them together. That morning, he had nodded, as usual, to his neighbor John across the street as the two men sat on their stools at their kitchen counters drinking coffee long before dawn.

A year later, just back to the area to live for a while, I woke to a perfect composition of air, light and sound. I heard men working on trees in the street, calling out in the joking intimacy of felt competence and the foolishness of the human condition: "Hey Joe what happened to ya tree?" It was my father's voice. The timing, the phrasing, the barely suppressed giggle, the way that voice lived in light, with trees.

Being a townie pulled things into the consistency of a laugh. A townie had timing, a taste for Pecan Sandies, raised an eyebrow for emphasis. We apprenticed in laughing and mourning at the state of the world. We perked up in a story, jaws slackening into townie attitude. And then, as if in compensation or guilt, we were propelled into a retreat, a little exhaustion, a flatness, as if a private introvert suddenly remembered itself in the midst of performing the barely external extroversion of being a townie.

We carried the weight of a world. Picture-perfect scenes dropped into the wake of what happened to people over time, none of which was ever good in the end. The beautiful lake we walked our dogs around was also where suicides were found hanging from trees and the place of estranging (or not) teenage first times, and rapes, and years of young partying gone

unchecked into self-destruction.

For us, place was a corporeal mantel, a glacier of impatience, a high desert of anxiety dissected by fault lines of rage. “In such a place, there are stories. The stories are as if in the air – did it happen to your father or to someone he heard of, did it happen in his generation or another? It was as if the stories are alive, and the people temporary containers, which is to say like a form of possession by the dead.”³

Kathleen Stewart writes ethnographic experiments to approach the composition and decomp of worlds. Her books include *A Space on the Side of the Road: Cultural Poetics in an ‘Other’ America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), *Ordinary Affects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), *The Hundreds* co-authored with Lauren Berlant (Duke University Press, forthcoming) and *Worlding* (in preparation). She teaches anthropology and writing at the University of Texas, Austin.

Suggested citation:

Stewart, Kathleen. “Townie: A Natural History.” *World Picture* 13 (Summer 2018): 1-3. <https://www.worldpicturejournal.com/WP_13/Stewart_13.html>.

Notes

- 1 Brian Massumi, “The Autonomy of Affect,” *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation, Post-Contemporary Interventions* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).
- 2 Roland Barthes, *Incidents* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 7.
- 3 Robert Pinsky, “A Provincial Sense of Time,” *Writers on America*, ed. George Clack, U.S. Department of State, International Information Programs, online. Accessed 16 April 2018. <https://photos.state.gov/libraries/korea/115197/pdf/Writers_on_America.pdf>.