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[Campbell, Robert](#)

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# A House on the Lake

Robert Campbell



Good Morning.

I will not be showing any images. Those who wish to leave may do so now.

What I am going to do is read you two poems, both of which I wrote some time ago.

I want also to remind us of Donlyn's two keynote quotations:

*Places are spaces that you can hold in the mind, care about, and make a part of your life.*

*Places instill the choreographies of society.*

Above: The house on the lake. Photo by author.

Each of us has once inhabited, I believe, usually in childhood, a place to which we return continually in memory and imagination. We replay scenes from our time there. The place is, for ourselves and no one else, the navel of the universe, the center against which all later places are, to some degree, peripheral.

The most important place in the world is one I think of almost every day. I spent all my summers, when I was growing up, at a house on the Canadian shore of Lake Erie, a short distance from my native city of Buffalo. It was a house owned by my grandparents.

I'm going to read you first a poem that I wrote about that house and place. The poem was published in the *Atlantic* some years ago. But first I

have to describe the scene.

Imagine a bay on Lake Erie, a bay lined with sandy beach. (*Holds out arms in shape of a bay.*) The bay is maybe two miles across. We can barely see the other side of the lake, because Lake Erie is almost as big as an ocean, but sometimes we can see freighters creeping along the horizon.

At the far tip of the bay, on the left, is an amusement park called Crystal Beach. An excursion boat arrives there every two hours from Buffalo across the lake, puffing black smoke. The park with its roller-coaster towers, and the periodic boat with its smoke, are two things that are deeply recorded in my mythical consciousness.

The right-hand side of the bay is enclosed by Point Abino (rhymes with cabin-oh). A single lonely tree

stands—or so it appears—at the end of the point. So you have Crystal Beach on one side and the lone tree on the other—except, when you drive or hike or bicycle up Point Abino, you can't find that tree. From the bay it appears to be the end of the point, but in fact the point curves away from it and continues on. This small mystery also is among my mythic icons.

### The Screened Porch

A chorus upon the pure  
formal fling of myself,  
projectile, arrow, bird,  
on the axis of the world  
out of the dark and brown  
bookshelved living room,  
the catapulting feet  
tiny, naked, pounding  
the Navaho rugs, the call  
of gulls, the shuffle of oaks,  
the blade of threshold brass,  
the porch air bright and warm,  
smell of the sun, a figure  
shadowy on the swing,  
or creaking in the wicker,  
the smash through the screen door,  
the stone path chilly, the pierce  
of acorns, the downward leap  
through the wall and the hot steps,  
the pale and yielding sand,  
the lake, the far dissolving  
horizon of New York State  
the screen door slam behind.

Okay, the house. It was a big house, gray stucco, white trim, ivy, with a broad screened porch across the front, facing the lake across a lawn with a big old oak tree. I am telling you this because the house is referred to in the poem. There are actually two poems, but I'll start with this one. It is a nar-

cissistic poem, so take it as you will.

I am imagining myself racing, as I often did, from the living room to the lake. The living room is relatively dark, very much an arts-and-crafts room, with a stone fireplace and walls paneled in dark wood, and book-cases filled with the likes of Mark Twain, who was a pool-playing pal of my grandfather's uncle in Elmira. Imagine that I am running through the screened porch out onto the lawn, down through the stone wall, across the beach, and into the lake.

When I wrote that, I was thinking about nothing other than having had that experience. It wasn't until some time after I'd finished the poem that I realized it can also be read as a metaphor for the cycle of life.

I begin in a dark and cozy living room, with the books and Navaho rugs reaching into the American past. Pounding feet, tiny, naked—like a baby being born. I hadn't thought of any of this when I was writing. With each step forward, the world gets bigger, brighter, and more public. From the living room, to the porch, to the front yard, to the beach, to the lake: a series of gates and thresholds. The world is opening out and becoming more bright, more transparent. And I am growing up. We end with the lake, and the lake, if you still believe in Freud, the plunging into water, is a symbol of either birth or death. And the screen door heard slamming behind is something that says, "You can't go back again."

Screened porch—I am fascinated with them, as I think most of us are—a screened porch is neither indoors nor outdoors, and that is the magic of it. It is a space of a unique kind, and I wish everybody had one, as they do in California, I guess, but we don't where I live. In my grandparents' house I often slept on another screened porch,

a sleeping porch higher up among the rustle of leaves and patter of rain, with the crunch of gravel in the driveway below and the smell of sunshine stored in the blankets.

Some other footnotes to the poem: "The call of gulls..." Something pulling me forward and outward.

"A figure shadowy on the swing or creaking in the wicker..." Mysterious grownups, I guess. I encounter them right after crossing the brass threshold.

"A smash through the screen door..." I was always being told not to slam through doors and make a racket. I suppose this is also some kind of angry declaration of escape and independence.

"The pierce of acorns, the downward leap through the wall and the hot steps, the pale and yielding sand..." As with everything else, the metaphors here are not intentional, but I can't help reading these lines—hot steps, pale yielding sand—as being, in part, a sexual metaphor. I think it has to be understood that way, but I wasn't conscious of it. So I am maybe a teenager by the time I get to the beach.

"The far dissolving horizon of New York State, the screen door slam behind..." My future and my past?

*(Reads the poem aloud again.)*

Now what does that have to do with what Donlyn said? "Places instill the choreographies of society." Well, places also instill the choreographies of one's individual biography, not only those of society. And as we play out against these game boards, the architecture enriches us with all kinds of images and metaphors.

The second poem is titled "Bay Beach, Ontario, 1941–1949." It was published in *Croton Review*, and it's about the same place. What happened is that my mother sent me a clipping from a Buffalo newspaper about that excursion ferry that once went back and forth between Buffalo and

Crystal Beach. One of those Proustian moments: the newspaper photo was my Madeleine.

Okay, some footnotes to this one: “Lightnings slapping...” Our house was five houses down the beach from the largest Lightning club in North America. Lightnings are sailboats, and you could see them racing up and down the bay all the time.

“Collie chasing an airplane...” The collie was Terry, who lived next door. Collies need life work. They’re supposed to herd sheep or whatever. To be happy, they need a job. Terry decided it was his job to make sure no airplane ever landed. So if an airplane appeared, he would go barking down the beach until he had chased it out of sight.

“Highballs and wicker chairs behind screened porches...” All sorts of adult mysteries going on around us.

“Small shouts from the lake...” Are they playing? Drowning?

“Giggles upstairs...” Oh my goodness, what are they doing?

“The smell of oil on the soft dark floorboards of the old garage...” That garage was down the drive, empty except for a rake or two, always hot inside with a rich smell. Smell is for me, like many of us, a Proustian memory evoker. I suppose this image too may have a sexual connotation.

“With a red toy shovel I bury a blue matchbox deep in the wet sand beside the steps in the stone wall Boppa built...” Boppa was a family term for my grandfather. I actually did bury the box. Perhaps I imagined that some day I would come back and dig it up. It felt very important, very secret, when I was doing it.

*(Reads the poem aloud again.)*

Just yesterday I heard someone, it was Daniel Libeskind, quote a definition of architecture by Marcel Duchamp: “*Architecture is sculpture*

### Bay Beach, Ontario, 1941–1949

They’re running the film again—  
the Crystal Beach Boat puffing, turning too slow,  
settling to dock grainy and jumping—  
the lone tree at the end of Point Abino—  
the compass legs of the known world framing  
the bay, the Lightnings slapping, a collie chasing an airplane,  
highballs in wicker chairs behind screen porches,  
small shouts from the lake, giggles upstairs,  
the smell of oil on the soft dark floorboards  
of the Old Garage.

With a red toy shovel I bury a blue matchbox  
deep in the wet sand beside the steps  
in the stone wall Boppa built.

*with plumbing.*” I think this is a useful definition because it is, characteristically of Duchamp, precisely and brilliantly wrong.

My own definition of architecture is different: “Architecture is the art of making places.” It is certainly an art. But it is the art of making places for human habitation, whether these are rooms or streets or gardens or cities. It is not primarily an act of sculpture, plumbing, image-making, politics, or philosophy.

*Places instill choreographies in societies.* I hope I have helped illustrate that. You’ve been very kind. Thank you.

*Editor’s note: Robert Campbell asked to append the following comment, which was made later in the symposium by Harrison Fraker:*

I thought the two poems that were read this morning were really appropriate. I was moved by how well those poems, through words, captured two fundamental ways of perceiving and constructing experience.

The first one was a serial, linear

portrayal of this sprint into the lake. It summarized an understanding of place as a sequential event. The second was simultaneous, layered, and nonlinear in its evocation of the totality of that place. These two ways of being in the world—a serial experience and a simultaneous experience—are critical to how we understand places. They are near the core of one of the things the magazine has done over its history. They reflect the difference, for example, between early and late Cubism, so-called analytic Cubism versus synthetic Cubism, as in the distinction between Duchamp’s “Nude Descending a Staircase” and Picasso’s “Three Musicians.” I just want to remind you all of that. It was beautiful poetry, but those are two fundamental ways of being.