

## Geographies of Feeling

by Susan Jeffs

I don't know which I felt first - the strangeness of the French words swimming around and inside me, or the images of this new terrain in northern Quebec. I wake to murmurings of *le petit déjeuner* and *crepes avec fromage et saucisse*. I wake to the fjords that rise out of dark water, windswept marsh grass, and an occasional peregrine falcon banking off a cliff. Every morning here is an opening to new sounds, sensations, and images. My senses are heightened even as I sleep. Morning is a crawl out of the tent onto grass and a breeze off the Saguenay River, the mist drifting along the sheer granite fjords with their tufts of balsam and fir. Sometimes the dark head of a seal or the white back of a Beluga whale flashes in the water.

Morning is an opening to new words in a french accent – *cafe au lait*, *bluettes et frambois*, and *rivière*, and less familiar words such as *cerf rouge* and *l'eau salee*, the words for red deer and salt water. There is *L'anse*, meaning cove, and *embouchure* for mouth, as in the mouth of a river. My boyfriend and I are in L'anse Saint Jean, 50 kilometers northwest of the mouth of the Saguenay. We are at the end of a mile long road that runs down from the two lane highway that brought us up here from Tadoussac, where this river meets the St. Lawrence. Like some other remote mountain places I know of, there is one road in and one road out and it leads to one place and the sea. This road leads to a French village called L'anse Saint Jean and a wide bay with fjords alongside and across. And deep black water that runs in two directions, one of them to the sea, the other northwest to the freshwater lake it flows from.

In Saint Jean, which lies in a valley surrounded by mountains and the Saguenay River, there are a few *auberges*, *bistros* and artisan shops, and a covered bridge over the Salmon Brook that flows from a remote mountain pass. The village road ends at the bay, where there is a kayak outfitter and a cafe called The Quai, a community gathering spot offering a variety of crepes and dinners that feature local foods such as red deer, mushrooms, cheeses, and duck. There the road ends and beyond that are only woods and a footpath, *La Piste du Poète*, which continues 20 kilometers to the next village. There is nowhere else to go except by kayak or on foot, and something about that appeals to me. With so few options, I begin to settle in - and in so doing, I open more each day to what surrounds me. And what most immediately surrounds me is language.

I think that words, especially foreign ones, can be openings to a more visceral experience. For me that includes the French language, but also the language of this region's geology and ecosystems. I learn about *grabens*, which formed this river thousands of years ago when a great force pushed the land mass below the higher glaciers surrounding it, causing the deep chasm that is now the river. The word *graben* has a very physical feel and sound, and I can imagine a bit of the heft of gravity that must have pulled the earth to the thousand foot depth that became the river's bottom.

I learn that *l'omble de fontaine* means brook trout, which are found in the local streams, and which I have not been able to figure out, since *omble* on its own means char and *fontaine* means fountain. But I sense a metaphor at work here, and perhaps a linguistic relationship we can't directly know. The words have a sound and rhythm that conjures for me images and sensations of a tumult through rapids, over rocks and around hanging tree limbs. I feel a little like that, stumbling through my limited French to communicate my thoughts with the people I meet and to find homes for these words inside me.

Along the fjord lined Saguenay River and throughout its surrounding mountains, there is an abundance of *les passages a troit* and *les ouvertures*. These words for passageways and openings sound gentle and inviting, quite in contrast to how they appear. I have often wondered if we are born into or attach early in life to certain physical geographies that we follow throughout our lives until they reveal themselves in the fabric of our interior. All of my life I have been drawn to long glacially formed lakes with high steep terrain on both sides: Lower Ausable Lake in the Adirondacks, the Highlands region of the Hudson River, the lochs of Scotland, and now the Saguenay Fjords of Quebec.

I find that words become openings into new facets of the familiar. The simple word *bluette* makes me think of blueberries in a different way. I feel the sweet gentle nature that they are, as they release willingly into my hand, but am reminded how fragile their small bushes can be. *Rivière éternité* is no ordinary river. It is one that runs down from the mountains into the Saguenay which runs 50 kilometers to the wide Saint Lawrence and then continues its relatively short path to the Atlantic. Whoever named that river knew something of its endless reach – and so we begin to know it too.

Words are also an invitation to expand into fuller awareness. Initially into my love for the French language with its music and movement through my body, and later into a growing awareness of what the words are showing me: this new terrain, this new part of the earth. It's a kind of all-encompassing *terroir*, one of terrain and soil, but also of place, sound, and feeling. *Terroir*, that word of French origin which refers to how the geography, geology and climate of a place interact with plant genetics, expressing itself in the wine, meats, herbs, hops, cheese and other products of that region. We have experienced much of this in Saint Jean, but *terroir* here feels like more than this; it is the sum total of a place but also the many subtleties and nuances that a place holds. When those influences are strong, it seems that a deeper experience of our surroundings can happen - something I think of as a geography of feeling.

In his essay "Landscape and Nature," Barry Lopez describes the idea of an inner landscape as, "a kind of projection within a person of a part of the exterior landscape." I feel that words, even as separate from sentences or stories, are a way into the landscape. Perhaps they are part of the glue, to borrow the words of writer Gregory Bateson, that holds together all elements of the biosphere, "the star fishes and the sea anemones and red-wood forests and human committees." Maybe words are part of the glue that connects us to the land.

I first felt this *geography of feeling* as a child, growing up surrounded by the mountains and waters of Lake George in the southern Adirondacks, a place I have always felt intimately connected to. Certain mountain contours, especially in the soft light of day's end, could elicit

strong emotions from me or bring forth partially buried ones. The French Mountain range at the southern end of the lake with its low gentle slopes comforted and consoled me when I felt alone or anxious. Shelving Rock and the Tongue Mountain range halfway up the lake – at a point called the Narrows – provides a passageway, bordered on both sides by steep rugged terrain. Viewing this part of Lake George instilled in me, and still does, a sense of adventure and of entering the unknown, both physically and psychologically. It was not every day that I could go there in my heart, but I loved that the invitation was there.

After college and many years spent living in cities, I found upon returning that much of what the mountains and waters of Lake George elicited in me as a child had not changed. But over the years, my emotional geography expanded to include Lake Champlain, much of Vermont, and most of the Adirondacks. While Lake Champlain has never felt as safe, intimate and nurturing as Lake George, it has expanded my internal horizons. My emotional geography is no longer limited to what the mountains of Lake George reflect. Lake Champlain flows into Canada, then into the Richelieu and Saint Lawrence. The mountains of the Adirondacks are connected to the Laurentians, which extend far into Quebec. A joy or sorrow once shared with French Mountain or Fifth Peak on Lake George now has farther to go.

From having expanded my experience of my home terrain, I have been able to experience more fully this new place. On our second day in L'Anse Saint Jean, we paddle out onto the Saguenay. I am struck by the darkness of the water – a deep molten like black that reaches to depths of a thousand feet. This is in great contrast to the Adirondacks waters I grew up with, especially those of Lake George, which, while close to two hundred feet deep in places, tend to be a gentle blue green in summer and a slate gray to dark blue in winter. It is all fresh water, softened by a blend of many minerals, while the Saguenay is an exotic blend of salt and fresh water, fed by large amounts of iron and tannin.

At Lake George, light dances above and below the surface. The clarity is such that you can see down forty feet or more. The trout, bass, and tiny minnows swim at your feet and seem, like we humans, to seek light. On the Saguenay I wonder how anything survives in its black depths, but the river is full of nutrient rich plankton that feed the Belugas, salmon, monk fish, and other *poissons d'eau froide* that live there. And there is also something called bioluminescence which happens in dark cold water places like this; certain organisms are able to create their own light without the presence of any heat or light source. Sometimes this becomes a magnificent glowing light that allows them to see and be seen. Perhaps we not so different from each other after all.

Maybe it was a kind of luminescence I was experiencing all those years at Lake George. A way of filling up from within by connecting with what is from without. The Iroquois described Lake George as a sacred place, and its waters as healing. The first name of this lake was Andiatarocite, meaning “where the lake is enclosed by mountains.” I can hear in this name the hardness of rock and feel a sense of being held by all those consonants and the long resonance of sound they create. The lake was later named *Lac du Saint Sacrement* by Father Isaac Jogues. This name feels apt as well, but much softer in sound, suggesting a blessing from above rather than from the earth. Perhaps the lake's true name should be words that reflect a marriage of both.

In the Saguenay region, many of the villages have the word Saint before them. Perhaps this land and water has been blessed too, by the Catholic missionaries who passed through and by the indigenous groups, such as the Mi'kmac who made their homes here. This river and its surrounding terrain carry a sense of balance of earth and sky, light and darkness, rock and water. Perhaps what places like the Saguenay and Lake George have to teach us is about paying attention, of living fully in our bodies through our five senses, but also with our less defined senses that remind us we are not just our bodies. That we are connected to the *land, the waterways, and skies* that surround us. *Le terre, l'eau and le ciel*. Or in Mi'kmac: *Maqmakew, samqwan, and musigisg*. Everything has matter and spirit, and we move in our lives among the elements finding patterns and rhythms, currents and passageways, rewriting the world as we go and how it feels to be part of its story.

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