

# A Space Filled with Moving



by  
*Ben Cosgrove*

Little Dipper

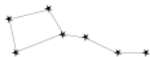


Edition II

Dedicated to all the people who have helped me learn to feel  
so completely at home in so many different places.

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*Many thanks to Rebecca Siegel and Shari Altman for their hard  
work, thoughtfulness, and care with this project and all their others.  
It was so much fun to work with them on this.*



*Designed and published by Literary North 2019*





In late March of 1964, a fault ruptured between the Pacific and North American Plates beneath Prince William Sound in Alaska. The resulting earthquake registered a staggering 9.2 on the Richter scale, caused death and destruction throughout southeastern Alaska, and utterly decimated the city of Anchorage. As far south as Crescent City, California, four tsunamis swept ashore and erased most of the city: nearly 300 buildings and businesses were destroyed, along with a thousand cars. Sixty city blocks were inundated with mud, water, and debris.

My friend Frank, an artist from Oregon, was in his twenties at the time and on a solo journey down the Pacific Coast Highway. He had slept peacefully that night in his car in the hills above Crescent City. “I wandered down in the morning to get a doughnut and some coffee,” he told me some fifty years later, remembering a general feeling of vague and sleepy confusion, “and for some reason the whole town seemed to be gone.”



The first time I drove across Oklahoma was in 2011. It was only the second time I had driven across the country, and as I hit the Great Plains I remember being stunned by the flatness, noting that, as the land stretched away, tiny little houses in the farthest distance seemed to start at the very same level as the buildings just off the road, floating on the very edge of the curve of the earth. It was disorienting: I found I had no real sense of how fast

I was moving, or of where I was in relation to any given point along the enormous horizon.

Years later, when I found myself on a ship on the open ocean for the very first time, ringed by a hard horizontal line with no land in sight, I would find the situation startlingly familiar to this one. I'd describe the feeling in both places by saying that it isn't necessarily one of being impossibly small, but, rather, a sense that your size is incongruous and irrelevant. The only major difference that I could perceive between driving across the plains and standing on that ship was that in the first situation, I knew, at least intellectually, that the ground was standing still and I was moving across it. In the other, even the water—the impossible vastness supporting and surrounding the ship—was moving too, and I found it all the more difficult for me to maintain a sense of where I was relative to it, or really to anything at all.



I have spent basically the last decade driving around the country as a touring musician. For a long while, I traveled more or less constantly, performing along an ever-changing route that included stops in 48 states within alarmingly short intervals of time. Early on, at a gas station, I bought one of those folding road maps of the US, on which I would record all the paths I'd traveled by tracing them with a Sharpie; after just a few years of constant travel, it began to look either impressive or insane. I also have a little book in which I record the basic events of each day,

and, using it as a reference, I can verify that, with vanishingly few exceptions, I never spent more than three consecutive nights in the same place between 2011 and 2016.



The first time I ever drove across the continent was to work as a researcher-writer for a travel guide during the summer between my sophomore and junior years of college. For all the stress and exhilaration the trip involved, the feeling I remember most is the looming specter of crushing loneliness that would overtake me every afternoon as my day's work of confirming addresses and hours of operation with hostel managers and restaurateurs would slowly wrap up and the desolate expanse of another solo evening would yawn intimidatingly before me.

I found that if I kept moving I could usually outrun the existential dread, so I landed on a strategy of going on long runs in the evenings, both to orient myself in a new town before I left it behind the next morning and to burn off some of my excess hours and anxiety. In Ottawa, Ontario, I finished my work well before the daylight ended and so I went sprinting off around the city to get a sense of where all the roads went and to keep my thoughts from catching up with me. I wound up in a park on a bluff behind the National Gallery, overlooking the Ottawa River and the Alexandra Bridge and opted, uncharacteristically, to sit still for a few minutes while the sun went down.

I was alone there except for one other man, who was feeding seagulls out of an enormous trash bag full of old bread. At first, there were only a few birds, but as I watched, more and more appeared from nowhere. They swooped in and joined the throng, gradually forming a chaotic galaxy of wings, beaks, and noise. The man stopped sprinkling crumbs from a seated position; he stood up and started flinging them forcefully to one side and then another, like a sorcerer.

Before long, the birds numbered in the hundreds, and they moved in the air around him like a living, feathered cloud. He'd toss some crumbs in one direction and the storm of gulls would move that way too; he'd throw some in another and it would shift accordingly. The birds—they seemed simultaneously like a million discrete things and like one amorphous organism—had all but become the air around us and he was conducting them like a symphony, constantly reshaping the whole conglomeration by keeping it moving, like he was blowing glass. The sound was deafening.

Eventually, he ran out of bread. He turned the garbage bag upside down with a kind of shrug to show the birds that the celebration was over, and, improbably, the mob dissipated as quickly as it began. In what seemed like an instant, all the seagulls simply left. The man folded up his bag and trudged off down the hill back into town, and I watched, alone but less lonely, as the flock disintegrated back into individual birds, scattering back out across the river and flickering off into the gathering night.





One of my favorite landscapes in all of America comprises the vast, damp floodplains that fan out from the banks of the Mississippi River in the area between Memphis and Baton Rouge. One January I was passing through this area in the early evening after a dramatic rainstorm between shows in Mississippi and Arkansas. The light was low and the rain-soaked land was shimmering. Suddenly, up from the smooth and saturated ground rose gigantic murmurations of birds, not unlike the one I'd seen up close in Ottawa. This experience was more peaceful but no less otherworldly; I glided across the floodplains on long and curving roads, watching these enormous, shapeless forms lift from the ground, contorting and rearranging themselves like three-dimensional kaleidoscope images in the flat sunlight.

The fact that beneath them I was also moving—or maybe that I was moving so smoothly, in such a broad path, across such a flat place—made their abstract and inscrutable shapes seem all the more surreal and unknowable. They twisted in the air above me, completely out of scale with the flat, open land around them, like some computer-generated art projected incongruously into an empty, white room. I moved along my own discrete trajectory, straight ahead on the damp, whispering road, while the murmuration stretched, breathed, and contracted like a glob of oil dropped into a pool of water. Finally it reached across the road between me and the sun, and I came to a full stop to watch it—arcing over the highway, reflecting off the shimmering ground, aiming at nothing, bathed in light.



The town of Carter Lake, Iowa, sits on the Missouri River and is surrounded on its other three sides by Omaha, Nebraska. The town is a strange polyp on the Iowa border, no longer connected to the rest of its state by land or bridge. It's the consequence of a flood in 1877, when the Missouri overflowed its banks and buried the town. When the water receded, the river had chosen a different path, one to the east of its original course.

It was ultimately left to the US Supreme Court to determine whether the border between Nebraska and Iowa—explicitly set at the Missouri River—should change when the river did. They decided that it shouldn't. So Carter Lake remains a town in Iowa, but is now utterly unique among Iowa towns in that it is located within Nebraska.

There are several other towns like this, particularly along the lower Mississippi, where the river swished back and forth across the landscape for centuries before the Army Corps of Engineers stepped in to try and hold it in place. There's something I find strangely compelling about places like this, land that has emerged damply from a flood to find itself born again on the other side of a river. There are edges to every place in the world, but it's easy to forget about their fuzziness or impermanence.

When I went to sea on that ship I mentioned earlier—a research vessel on which I was working as the artist-in-residence—the thing that struck me the most was the realization that I'd always thought of the ocean as a boundary between places, and never, really, as a place itself. It was the thing beyond where the land stopped. So it was humbling to think, as we crashed across the sea

with no land in sight, that of course the same ground I'd stood on days before was still there, continuing along far below us the whole time. In the port, we'd merely arranged to keep ourselves at an altitude of zero feet. The land kept going and we floated above it, aloft, with an incomprehensibly gigantic pool of churning, shifting water between us and the ground.



The Quabbin Reservoir of western Massachusetts, created in the 1930s, necessitated the erasure of four little towns: Dana, Enfield, Prescott, and Greenwich. Most of all four towns lie deep beneath the waters of the reservoir in what was once the Swift River Valley, but Dana's town common, where the town's main roads all met in a cluster of buildings and a green, sat at a much higher elevation and so remains narrowly above the shoreline. Today, you can walk out to Dana Common through one of the reservoir's access roads and marvel at an array of cellar holes and other artifacts of what now seems like an ancient civilization. Water laps just a few feet behind them, where the land slopes down the sides of what used to be the ridge on which Dana's village sat.

"To speak it clearly," wrote Jim Harrison, "how the water goes / is how the earth is shaped."

When a place like Carter Lake, Iowa, slides under the water and emerges on the other side, it doesn't simply become the

same place somewhere else. Its contours have been altered; it's somewhere new. But several of the small islands dotting the Quabbin are still referred to as hills and mountains.

It can take a while in a situation like this, after water settles into a dramatically new configuration, to learn the topography of a transformed landscape. It can take even longer to accept those details as qualities of a new place rather than as insults to the old one. The first time I saw the Quabbin Reservoir, it was difficult for me to imagine the vast lake as a populated valley, but a former resident of Dana looking at the same view would probably not see a reservoir but a flood.



During the years when I was driving around constantly, I rationalized the lifestyle as one strategy for having access to enough performance opportunities that I could remain financially viable as a fledgling musician. And since I was playing music that was explicitly about landscape, the lifestyle I landed on seemed like a natural fit. These were my stated rationales—and they weren't untrue—but, with the benefit of hindsight, it has since become uncomfortably obvious that the realest, deepest reason for this period of my nomadry was different: by refusing to commit to one place, I was simply trying to keep my arms around all the people and places that I loved. It wasn't that I was running away from anything. It wasn't even that I was chasing anything; I didn't have a goal other than not to lose the things I had.

Consciously or not, I'd subscribed to the idea that if I could just keep running fast enough, I could effectively be everywhere all at once, and wouldn't ever have to let anyone or anything go.



Most winds are referred to by their point of origin. A north wind comes from the north; a westerly comes from the west; a sea wind comes from the sea.

But other winds, it turns out, have more specific names and qualities. I stumbled recently upon a book that contained, on a spread of several pages, a list of the names of various winds from around the world. I cannot recommend it highly enough. Some names were familiar, but most were new to me: the Mistral blows from the Alps down to the Mediterranean, and the Squamish up the fjords of British Columbia. The Vendavel comes east through the Strait of Gibraltar. Knowing about the violent whirlwind near the Faroe Islands called the Oe is at least as important in navigating the North Atlantic as it is in playing Scrabble. During summers in Australia, the cities of Sydney and Perth are cooled, respectively, by the Southerly Buster and the Fremantle Doctor.

Southwestern Newfoundland is routinely battered by the Wreckhouse winds, which funnel through the Long Range Mountains before blasting across the wide valley with a ferocity sufficient to blow trucks from the road and train cars from their tracks. In the mid-twentieth century, after losing one too

many train cars in the Wreckhouse region, the Newfoundland Railway began to employ a “human wind gauge” to notify them of especially fierce conditions so that they could delay their trains if necessary. The gauge they ended up hiring was a trapper named Lauchie MacDougall, who insisted until his death in 1965 that he had the ability to “smell” the Wreckhouse wind before it even arrived.



The region of the upper Midwest known as the Driftless Area is a loosely bounded swath of land that roughly surrounds the Mississippi River as it passes along the borders of Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa, and Illinois. Its name comes from its geologic history: the glaciers that had so thoroughly ironed out much of the Midwest by sliding around for eons skipped this area completely, leaving it with a distinctively and bizarrely beautiful array of steeply rolling hills, towering bluffs, and precipitous cliffs. If not for all the exposed limestone, it would look a lot like Vermont.

Through all this runs the Mississippi River, bigly and sloppily. Though it is held in place by a vast infrastructure developed over decades by the Army Corps of Engineers—there are twenty-nine enormous locks and dams on the section of the river between Minneapolis and St. Louis alone—the river surges between Minnesota and Wisconsin like the overzealous, oversaturated paintbrush stroke of an enthusiastic toddler. Islands dot the

river's course, some of which occasionally rejoin the shore; land dribbles out into the river, and the river dribbles out into the land. Much of the Mississippi's path is lousy with a shifting array of little inlets, swamps, lakes that are separated from the river by just a few feet of ground, and other vagaries of fluvial caprice and general topographical ambiguity.

Despite the extensive series of dams locking it in place, the river changes size, shape, and intensity rather frequently. In the oft-flooded area immediately south of the village of Trempealeau, Wisconsin, the street that runs along the river's labyrinth of irregular shorelines is flanked by dozens of houses that are all built on 12-foot stilts. In the most recent flood, about a decade ago, the river swelled to include this whole neighborhood, merging the Mississippi's main course with the Trempealeau Lakes, a set of oxbows ordinarily set apart from the river by a few narrow strips of shallow, porous land.

When I was last there to play in town, I asked a resident what that had been like and he shrugged disinterestedly. It happens. That's why they put the houses on stilts in the first place, he told me. It's a big river. Sometimes the land is there and sometimes it isn't.



The wind moves the way it does in part because of topography. The shape of the land has an effect on the temperature of the air just above it, and those patterns whirl around the planet,

ensuring that no part of the sky is ever exactly the same from moment to moment. It's worth wondering about what happens to a particular pattern of wind when the ground below it changes—when a mountain collapses or a valley floods, the atmosphere must react accordingly.

For wind to have a name and an identity like the Wreckhouse or the Oe, the air has to move in patterns that are noticeable enough to be predictable, and predictable enough to be perceived as one distinct, coherent thing. When we start to refer to one of those patterns by name, we're really saying: this is how the air tends to rearrange itself in this particular spot, and, when it does, this is what we call it. What is so thrillingly odd about all this is that wind is defined exclusively by movement: if frozen at any one instant, it would cease to exist at all.



For a couple of years, I toured with a band who had a very different strategy than the one I landed on for making sense of the blur of landscape that constantly rushed by: instead of seeking out obscure places and small roads like I did, they stuck to interstates, stayed in chain hotels every night, and otherwise stopped primarily at big truck stops and the venues we played at. I found this streamlined system to be frustrating, but also strangely peaceful; it's certainly true that one way to find comfort and ballast in an enormous space is to focus on the things that remain the same across it, like a nationwide chain of identical motels or



gas stations. There are certain spaces that you can find everywhere if you want them, and not unreasonably, many people are able to navigate the wide, alien world without distress by depending on these islands of blank familiarity within it.

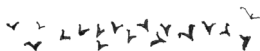
I never felt that way, but I did—and do—enjoy noticing how these boxy, uniform landscape features can illuminate the differences between one landscape and another while fading towards invisibility themselves, like common tones in a harmonic progression. There's something both thrillingly weird and bizarrely reassuring about noticing hundreds of identical fast food restaurants and Days Inns rising up from the desert, crammed alongside coastal highways, jutting up awkwardly from the plains, and built out into former wetlands. They are a useful common denominator in a huge and various set of environments, like a quarter included in a photograph for scale: their sameness can function as a visual template by which one can measure how the wildly different spaces in the broad cornucopia of American landscapes are all related. I found I got far less comfort from inhabiting all those nodes than I did from watching them highlight how all the places we traveled through were just different parts of the same thing, all constantly changing into one another.



In its early years of wild growth and urban congestion, San Francisco sold lots of water just offshore in its harbor, correctly

anticipating that the buyers would fill their new territories with anything they could find that would lift the ground up above the height of the water. Viewed from above, the peninsula bloomed gradually outward into the bay as this landmaking process was repeated. A century later, construction workers would regularly stumble upon furniture, fill, and the hulls of sunken ships, all entombed beneath the city streets, as they excavated tunnels for utilities or transportation.

Similarly, a considerable portion of the landmass comprising the city of Boston is made up of fill: earth that came from dredging marshes or toppling hills was pushed into the water in order to lift the land above its surface and broaden the city's girth in the process. Today, in some of Boston's more touristy areas, this quaint piece of trivia is celebrated in places where the path of the former shoreline has been painstakingly etched upon the streets and sidewalks. Some maps projecting the effect that rising sea levels might have on the Boston over the coming decades look strikingly similar to these maps of the city's footprint in the early 1700s.



“Any way you may look at it, you must needs conclude that the great Leviathan is that one creature in the world which must remain unpainted to the last,” Herman Melville has Ishmael claim in *Moby-Dick*. “True, one portrait may hit the mark much nearer than another, but none can hit it with any very

considerable degree of exactness. So there is no earthly way of finding out precisely what the whale really looks like.”

Once, in Ohio, I stayed with an artist who had spent a year painting the sky every single day. “It’s like holding water in your hand,” she explained to me. “The sky is never the same; it changes from minute to minute, and it’s way too big and too inconstant to know or understand, but this felt like a way to try.”

There’s another artist who did a project like this—a painter in Maine who has painted the view from his cottage every day for years. The variance between the images in the series serves to illustrate both the striking variety of different, ephemeral environmental conditions included in that holistic view of the place and the surprisingly reassuring set of elements that remain the same under all circumstances. Any place seen honestly through time must include both the things that remain the same and the things that pass in a second.

In the same conversation, the Ohio painter mentioned that she had recently decided to take up swimming, and had found that it didn’t seem unrelated to her sky project. The water moves all around in unknowable patterns, but what a swimmer must focus on is the relative motion of her own body through it. Everything around you moves and changes, and in order to move through it with any grace, efficacy, or intention, you have to embrace that flux: it’s the only way to engage with the water.

Driving around an impossibly huge and constantly shifting landscape—or navigating one’s life, in which people, places, and things can enter, leave, and transform without warning—is in this

sense a bit like swimming. As she talked about her sky project, I couldn't help but think of all the Sharpie lines I'd carefully traced out on my road map.

"And the only mode in which you can derive even a tolerable idea of [the whale's] living contour is by going whaling yourself," Ishmael continues, "but by so doing, you run no small risk of being eternally stove and sunk by him."



"It is a uniquely American thing," wrote Gertrude Stein, "to conceive of a space filled with moving."



In Anchorage today, the part of town most fundamentally altered by the seismic events of 1964 is now a conserved area called "Earthquake Park," where cyclists and hikers can meander through the bizarre folds of land that now slump down to Cook Inlet from the high, flat area near the airport. Beyond it are mud flats—acres of them. Google Maps renders these decisively in blue, as water, but its satellite imagery shows them as a rim of soaked, tidally dependent land arcing all the way up from the airport to downtown, where Ship Creek empties into the inlet.

They're etched with rivulets that are erased and then reinforced multiple times daily, as the landscape is swallowed by the tide and then rises back up above it, over and over, again and again. At low tide, huge flocks of birds zip around on the flats plucking food from the mud. They scatter away when Cook Inlet swells up to smother the land again, and then return to mine the newly saturated ground when it recedes. When I was in Anchorage a couple of years ago for the premiere of a piece I had written, exploring the town on a borrowed bike in my down-time, I looped back through Earthquake Park several times daily to watch this process from up on what was still the high ground at several different tidal moments. The land kept coming back, of course: slightly different each time, but near enough to be predictable—always roughly the same.



At first, when you're in motion, other objects seem still—think of when you see a passing train on the highway—but then gradually you begin to perceive that they may just be on trajectories unrelated to your own. We can assess our own speed, vector, and position in space by comparing the changes in our views of other planets and stars, and the resulting information can seem overwhelming. In other situations, however, movement can be orienting: I have a friend who can tell in which cardinal direction we're facing on a hike based on where he feels the wind coming from.

Why, I sometimes wonder, don't we think of ourselves more like birds in a murmuration, or like electrons in an atom, instead preferring to project a degree of stillness and order onto the world that may exist only in our minds? It seems strange that we live on an irregular, imperfect hunk of rock that shifts, morphs, belches, and floods, incessantly and shudderingly rearranging itself as it spins wildly through space, and yet we feel it's more appropriate to sit still and hunker down on some piece of it instead of sprinting deliriously around on its surface.

We live in a world of constant growth, collapse, confusion, asymmetry, and chaos: in the scheme of things, nothing lasts, no story is completed, and no narrative is perfectly satisfying. People and things drift, gracefully or suddenly, in and out of our lives; we move between places that will have changed, subtly or dramatically, every new time we see them; and every person, thing, and idea in the world moves forever along irregular, incongruous, unrelated, and uncontrollable trajectories. It falls to us to try to find meaning and stability in a world like that, and maybe the best way to do that is to constantly examine and embrace all that change and all that movement itself.

I'd been in a relationship with the same person throughout my first several years on the road, and when it eventually ended, miserably and decisively, I was left fairly shipwrecked: I hadn't realized the unreasonable extent to which I'd depended on one person for my senses of home and stability, and in this way, the profoundly disorienting effects of the breakup forced me to also reckon with those of my itinerancy. To try and make sense of everything, I made a record called *Salt* by writing music about

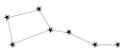
landscapes in flux, where the phenomena I was experiencing emotionally seemed to be literally, physically true: there are songs on the record about salt marshes, earthquakes, and estuaries; about lakes that you can stand on during one season and drown in during another; about rivers that change direction twice a day; and about finding ballast and orientation in the middle of the ocean. These were landscapes where hardly anything could be depended on except the very fact of their fluctuation, inconstancy, and impermanence, but which can still hold identities, associations, and meaning to a human observer. They all still feel to us like places—and in a way that perhaps they wouldn't if they weren't changing all the time. By writing about them, I hoped I would find it was possible to make meaning from all the things I couldn't hold onto, or discover that a person didn't need to sit still to find his or her footing.

And I think I did. You may never be able to be everywhere at once, but maybe that's not the point. There seems to be something much more valuable in learning how to move gracefully even as the world shifts, churns, and changes around and beneath you.

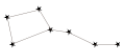
It is oddly reassuring to remember that the ground moves too.

## *Colophon*

The text of this chapbook is set in Goudy Old Style, which was created by Frederic W. Goudy in 1915 for American Type Founders. Goudy Old Style's letter forms are inspired by the printing of the Italian Renaissance. The cover is letter pressed using Emerson, which was designed by printer and book designer Joseph Blumenthal in 1930. The typeface's name comes from its first use: in a privately printed edition of Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay *Nature*.



We want to thank everyone who has helped us make this second edition a reality, particularly Sarah Smith and the staff of Dartmouth College Book Arts Workshop, whose patience, humor, and skill are indispensable; Jane Steger-Lewis, who can draw a murmuration as beautifully as she can draw a sperm whale, among a multitude of other talents; and Ben Cosgrove, who has been nothing but enthusiastic about every aspect of this project and has entrusted us with his beautiful essay.



Little Dippers are printed in limited, signed and numbered editions by Literary North. [www.literarynorth.org](http://www.literarynorth.org)



