Placing the Academy

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May 2003. I’m sitting on “Winter-Tea Rock,” looking down on the Cub River canyon as it descends into Cache Valley. In the distance, the Wellsville Mountains rise steeply into sheer, vertical peaks and ridges, Teton-like, blue and snow draped, forming the western rim of the valley where Jennifer, my wife, and I live and teach. At an elevation of 4,700 feet, Cache Valley sits between the Bear Mountains on the east, a range of 9,000 foot peaks, where I now sit, and the Wellsvilles to the west, a spur of the Wasatch range, which separates our valley from that of the Great Salt Lake. North to south, Cache Valley lies athwart the Utah-Idaho border in ecological defiance of political division, and like the valley itself, our lives too lie across the border. Teaching at Utah State in the southern end of Cache Valley, we live in the northern end in south-eastern Idaho. We’ve been here for four years.

Krishna, our new puppy, is exploring the mountainside meadows. It’s early summer, early June, the fields shot through with sunflowers (mules ears), avalanche lilies, yellow fawn lilies. Since spring began, Krishna and I have climbed this trail three times a week to Winter-Tea Rock, a narrow path rising steeply above the river, a small clear stream tumbling through the Bear Mountains over rocks covered with moss or ice. Jennifer and I discovered the trail snowshoeing. Over five feet of snow, we climbed the path for an hour until it opened onto a high sloping meadow, a shelf or bench above the canyon. At the high end of the meadow lay a large flat-topped boulder. We stopped and made tea in blowing snow and twenty-degree weather, warming ourselves from the inside out, and
named the place “Winter-Tea Rock.” Rangers have since told me it’s not an “official trail,” not “maintained,” making it all the more inviting. In the last three months, I’ve encountered a solitary hiker on it with his dog and one group of horse riders. Rising steeply, it discourages weekend campers and, being narrow and unmaintained, wards off the ATVs in summer and snowmobiles in winter.

Breathing hard after the climb, I sit on the rock and take a look around. The dark green of junipers mixes with the new yellow-green of aspens and the red, smokelike blush of the red maples. Yellow warblers flit about, singing among the branches. Krishna, who knows she’s on her own now for an hour or so, explores the woods. She flushes some grouse and then tears off across the meadow toward the next ridge where she’s heard a deer. Part black Lab, part Australian shepherd, she has a shining, jet-black coat, longer than a Lab’s, soft and feathered over her sleek body. With one brown eye, one blue, she looks a little otherworldly, so we named her Krishna, for the incarnation of God whose body was a beautiful blue.

I close my eyes and practice meditation, watching my breath, listening. Chickadees fill the air with chatter, and their occasional high lonesome cee-be, cee-be rises up from the gorge. A towhee sings out, drink your teeeeeeaa, drink your teeeeeeaa. Before long, the quork of a raven passing over. After twenty minutes or so, I open my eyes and look out toward the valley, out across the tumbling rims of the canyon. The mountains to the south roll out like surf, descending into blue foothills, flattening out into the valley floor. Sunflowers cover green foothills like gold dust. The valley was once the bay of an inland sea, an arm of the great prehistoric Lake Bonneville. I sip green tea and read poems from the T’ang dynasty—Tu Fu, Li Po, and the fourth-century Hsieh Ling-yün. I’ve also carried up here a book by Stephen Levine, a Buddhist teacher who works with the terminally ill and those in chronic pain. Levine describes a meditation that works to reawaken repressed traumas associated with parts of the body that have been psychically deadened. Gently letting the attention move through the body, allowing awareness to come to these hurt places, the meditation reawakens old wounds and often initiates deep grieving. The breaking up of frozen emotions that facilitates healing and the awakening of the body trigger a profound, global awakening of perception. One woman, a victim of childhood sexual abuse, began the practice twenty minutes twice a day and found it exceedingly difficult. After two and a half months
of practicing, she reported, “A miracle happened the other day. I walked into the kitchen, sat down at the table, and looked up and saw the wall. I just saw the wall! I was just here in my body, in the world, in my heart. I saw the wall as if for the first time. I was just here. It was the most wonderful experience of my life” (138–39).

Emerson said, “Few adult persons can see nature. Most persons do not see the sun” (10). I think about the heightened, sharper quality of seeing that opens out for us at particular moments, taking us into a deeper level of “being-in-the-world,” in which we become more present in the body, more present to the landscape, more awake, more alive. In such moments, seeing (and by “seeing” I mean to refer to all of the senses) becomes something more than perception. We feel things though our eyes. We participate in a tactile communication with things described by Thich Nhat Hanh as “interbeing” (54). The wall, the sun, the hawk, the stone, the flower are no longer inert objects, but presences in whose life we participate.

When I consider the theme of “landscape, work, and identity,” I keep returning to this question of seeing—for landscape can inform our identity only to the extent that, day by day, moment by moment, throughout our ordinary lives, we truly see it. Yet how do we cultivate the kind of clarified seeing with which the woman in Levine’s book saw the kitchen wall for the first time? Such moments seem to come rarely, almost as if by chance.

A hawk passes below me, twenty feet above ground, cutting the dew-drenched air above the meadow, checking us out. Krishna takes off after it. Silly dog. I feel the warm sun and the cool breeze. When it’s time to go, I call for her, and she comes bounding. Realizing we’re heading back, she’s wild with joy and streaks through the meadow, head down, ears back, full speed into the woods, running in wild circles, leaping over logs, under bushes, thrilled we’re going home, thrilled she knows the way. How I love this dog.

One summer evening in Athens, Georgia, years ago, I was sitting in the car with my wife, Anne, in the midst of a divorce. Two years of separation, two years of heartbreaking talks, accusations, anger, and tears behind us, and I was still trying, yet unable finally, to leave—paralyzed by ambivalence, self-recrimination, and fear. That evening, she asked me directly if I felt I really had to leave. I was silent. I looked inside myself and tried to speak truthfully. I looked out the window.
A tall stand of grasses not far from the car was moving in summer air and evening sun, long green spears holding gold seed tips. *I just saw them.* Crickets chirred in the pines behind the house, fireflies beginning to blink. I was seeing through a clarity that felt like a kind of intimacy, centering, and waking up, which seemed somehow to say to me, “Yes, this is who you are.” I felt anchored in a moment where the terror that kept me caught in endless ambivalence seemed to flow away. This was it. I said, “Yes, I do.”

Paying attention to *what is* is simple. But not easy. It is difficult, as it was for the woman in Levine’s book, to sit and look out at the world for more than a few minutes without distractions like lunch, a drink, a book, a friend, some TV, or sex. We get uncomfortable. Start to itch, worry, fidget. Memories rise up. In a poem called “Black Oak,” Mary Oliver stands in a forest looking up at the oak, as it starts to drizzle. She wants to stay and look but feels the itch to get going: “Listen, says ambition, nervously shifting her weight from / one boot to another—why don’t you get going?” I too want to get up and get going. But if we can sit through the itch, the boredom, and the anxiety, which may come in a storm of feelings or a great wave, these also pass through us, returning us to the moment, to the landscape around us with a little more clarity. More space opens within us for seeing *what is*. We stop running away from what’s inside of us and can begin to really start to have a look around.

September 2003. I’m sitting in the living room of an empty house, reading Thomas Merton’s essay about the rain. His voice moves in a deep interiority, a calm reservoir of solitude. When I finish the essay, I go outside. Fall is coming. The trees are turning. Crickets sing with a hollower, lonelier sound. The air is cool. The sky a darker blue. A red-tailed hawk, resident of a neighbor’s spruce, is crying out. Behind the neighbors’ house, the land drops off into farm fields that spread off into the distance and then rise up into the mountains. The high-pitched screech seems more like that of a tiny bird than this winged monster who makes us fear for our cats when they’re out too long. I get the binoculars and study it. Soon I hear another cry, off in the distance, answering.

I love the spring in this land of fierce winters, love the slow March melting of three-foot-long icicles. I have feared beautiful fall days like this as the gateway to the coming ferocity of cold. Burning
fingers, sliding tires, winds that can blow a tractor-trailer off the highway. But today I love the fall again, that excitement in the blood that must hark back to our kinship with the great migrating animals, ancient nomadic days. I may yet learn to love the hard austerity of Idaho winters. But now, the wind in the maples has a different, a deeper sound. The barking of a dog, far off, comes out of some deep hollow. I think of wolves. The hawk’s cry seems more insistent. It will not stop now. The horn of the valley train calls out of some forgotten memory.

Though I’ve long been enraptured by landscape, I’ve been a fickle lover. For while the woods were my childhood playground and the mountains and rivers have formed my sense of self as poet and writer, I’ve been harried, like many, by a sense of never having had any home ground, a place to stay. Having lived in twenty-one houses or apartments in eleven geographies—from Cincinnati to Birmingham to Charleston to Seattle to Athens and Atlanta to Ann Arbor to Idaho—I’ve followed a peripatetic life of my own mapping. I’ve tried to see my rootlessness in the best light, considered myself a “saunterer,” a term Thoreau—that rooted Transcendentalist—defined in his essay “Walking.” Finding it derived from a word for idle people who roved about the country in the Middle Ages asking charity under the pretense of going à la Sainte Terre, he thought of himself—and hence, I thought of myself—as wandering toward some Holy Land. That’s what I was up to wandering the American landscape. Alternatively, he thought the word may have come from “sans terre, without land or home, which, therefore, in the good sense, will mean having no particular home, but equally at home everywhere” (657). Socrates said the same thing. He was a citizen of the world. I adopted this rationale as well. I was cosmopolitan, not of any provincial locale. But today, Webster’s derives “saunterer” from a Middle English word meaning “to muse,” and to be honest the musing I’ve done in my wandering has risen out of a hunger for home.

Fueled by a struggle to find my right livelihood—a calling to worthwhile work—I’d begun four wildly disparate careers: classical guitarist, yogic monk, lawyer, and now poet and teacher. Being unsettled in work kept me from settling in a place where I could be still enough to begin to take a look around in a more sustained manner than itinerancy allowed. Two of these careers took me particularly far away from landscape and a sense of place. As a yogic
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monk, a sanyassi in a Tantric tradition I was pursuing during and after college, I would have been an itinerant teacher, traveling constantly, without a home, again ostensibly at home everywhere. But after several years I came to realize that this lack of rootedness only reinforced a focus on transcendence of the world, a belief that the phenomenal world is a trap—illusion, *Maya*. And the poet cloistered in my heart felt Frost's phrase was right, that “earth’s the place for love.” To be cut off from the earth was too high a price to pay, and so I never took my final vows.

My second career, lawyering, was little better, its rationalistic language rarely connected to the earth, rarely connected to feeling. For ten years I fought Atlanta traffic and at work wielded verbal abstractions, while on weekends I sought refuge in the north Georgia mountains, trying to get the kindling relit beneath a buried poetic life. I read Studs Terkel's *Working* and saw how few people of any race, class, or gender found truly fulfilling work. I read J. R. Krishnamurti, who maintained that the purpose of education is to help young people find what it is they love to do. And when one finds what one loves to do and does it no matter what the cost, he promised, one's work brings deep satisfaction. Now, years later, having found work that I love, I am just beginning to understand how much this settling down, this satisfaction, this sitting, allows us to move more deeply into the world. Feeling secure enough within ourselves allows us to be able to see the world more fully, more compassionately, to face its wounds as well as its beauty.

May 2003. Jennifer is working in her study. It's evening. We've had dinner. The dishes are done. I am out back putting in an herb garden. The sun lingers, saffron at the ridges of the west. The air cool. Krishna helps me dig. With her paws, she digs furiously, buries her nose, snorts, jumps up, runs around, barks, comes back, and digs again in the same place. I've turned over the dirt of an east-facing slope, taken out the grass, made three terraces, carried white river stones to support the terraces and make a border. Now I am breaking the earth with my hands. It is dark, cool, soft, and crumbly. I let it run through my fingers. A warm breeze moves through the garden, through this warm-cool evening in half-light drenched with some sweet ungraspable memory from childhood.

June 2003. I have hiked high above Winter-Tea Rock to the high ridges of the Bears. After a half hour of meditation, I open my eyes
and look out over the valley. I realize I am beginning to think of this place, this valley, as home—beginning to accept the possibility that my transient life may have come to rest. I see how my finding home has been a molting—shedding false selves, false-hoods, cowls of one kind or another, letting go of fears. This molting reached a crisis one December night before we had Krishna. Jennifer and I were driving home late from a party in Pocatello, an hour’s drive on two-lane Highway 91, mourning the loss of a close friend, Ford Swetnam. I had been teaching at Idaho State University and had become close to Ford, a fellow poet and hiker of the mountains. His death affected me profoundly. We were descending the long hill to the bottom of the Bear River canyon, beneath the otherwise flat plain bordered in the distance by Oxford Peak. The land was snow covered, the road relatively clear. As we started across the Bear River bridge, something leapt into the headlights. Before I could hit the brakes, it thudded against the front bumper and ricocheted against the rail of the bridge. We were stunned. Jennifer started crying, “We hit a dog! We hit a dog!” We pulled over, turned around, and drove back. It was still in the lane. I got out. Another solitary car stopped. We walked up to the dog. It was obviously dead. A big black Lab, already stiff.

“I hit it,” I said.

“It must have died instantly,” the couple reassured.

We pulled it over to the side of the road, and the young couple drove off. There were no houses in sight. A dirt road led to a cluster of trailers in a distant stand of trees, but it was dark over there. We decided not to go knocking on doors in the middle of the night. We drove home.

As I drove home, as we pulled into the garage, as we got ready for bed, as we lay together, the sense of the violence in the event grew inside me. The dog wore a red collar. When I was a child, we had a black Lab named Blackjack. I began sobbing. I lay on my side, Jennifer holding me, and I began to let out huge breaths, huge sobs. I cried and cried for that dog, and before long I was crying not only for the dog, but for Ford and for my divorce, for my abandoned careers, for friends I’d made and left, all the leave-takings I’d done. A channel of feelings broke open, and years of stored up grief came pouring out. I’d not felt tears pour out of my eyes like that since childhood. Today, I think these deadened feelings resurfaced and broke out as a result of the growing sense of security I was beginning to feel in finding a home here in Cache Valley. Feeling I’d found my home, I felt safe
enough to release this powerful wave of feelings. And in turn, releasing such blocked emotions cleared out an opening in which I could really begin to see the place I’ve begun to call home, like the woman in Levine’s book who finally saw the wall for the first time.

The next day I went back to see the dog. To see if I could find its owners. More snow had fallen. The morning was gray and chilly. I drove down the hill to the bridge. The dog lay there by the side of the road. Still wearing its collar. No tag. I pulled it farther off the road to an open place where it could easily be seen. A deep rawness moved inside me. A car pulled up. Someone from the trailers. I ask if he knew whose it was. “No. Sorry, Son.” I felt hollow inside, yet a feeling of peace was there, too.

Standing by the bridge, I looked across the river and saw a historical marker I’d driven by almost daily for three years but never stopped to really take a look at it. The monument commemorated the Bear River Massacre—a massacre of a band of Shoshone Indians by the U.S. Cavalry in 1863. Today, however, I went over to see it. Under the command of a Colonel Patrick Conner, the cavalry committed one of the largest massacres of native peoples in the West, though the event received little attention because of the nation’s preoccupation with the Civil War. I went home and began to do some research.

Cache Valley, this green jewel resting above the vast desert-wilderness of Utah, had long been home to the Shoshone. They called the Logan River “The River of the Cranes,” and then, as now, sandhill cranes, along with a great population of resident and migratory birds, made the valley a permanent or temporary home. Mormon settlers began arriving in the 1850s, taking over the valley, cutting trees, irrigating, carving up the land on the strict Mormon grid of horizontal and vertical lines, building fences, farms, towns. Soon the settlers had appropriated all the land and all the water. The Shoshone were pushed north, out onto the less fertile, more desertlike northern end of the valley. Before long, some of the young Shoshone men began to strike back. After a number of raids and killings, the settlers raised a hue and cry, and the government sent Connor in to pacify the “hostile Indians.” It is well to remember that here, as in other places in the West, military actions against native peoples were often not top-down government affairs, but actions initiated by the settlers, by ordinary folk.

At 6:00 a.m. on that cold January morning of 1863, Connor’s troops attacked the Shoshone village. When a straight-on attack
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was repelled and twenty-three soldier casualties were suffered, the army circled, shooting indiscriminately into the village. Eventually the Shoshone ran out of ammunition. The soldiers moved in, slaughtering men, women, children, the elderly. Raping, mutilating, murdering. Afterwards, the settlers gave thanks, seeing “the movement of Colonel Connor as the intervention of the Almighty.”

In Levine’s book, a woman in chronic pain said two kinds of people came to visit her. One kind could never sit still, would keep moving about, shifting things around, sitting down, getting up, opening and closing the window, inquiring what she needed. “But they couldn’t stay long with my pain.’ They had no room in their hearts for her pain, she said, because they had no room in their hearts for their own.” Another kind didn’t try to fix her or give her anything or take anything away, and if she were so uncomfortable she couldn’t even be touched, they could just sit there with her silently. “They had room for my pain because they had room for their own” (10). Looking back on the night that I killed that dog, I can see how letting out that reservoir of grief I’d carried inside began a healing that opened my heart and enabled me to see other, greater losses around me. As the grief I’d carried was released, I had room in my heart to see the wounds in the land around me. When I stopped running away from my own pain, I could begin paying attention to the place where I was living, to open to what is—its pain and loss as well as its beauty. And once I started to see that pain, I started to ask how to care for the place I was beginning to call home.

June 2003. I close my eyes as Rae Ann reads her poem. The soft timbre and the falling cadences of her voice lull me to a place of great peace, and her poem as always ends with a powerful turn. The women around the table listen attentively. All praise when she finishes. Rae Ann is the best poet in the creative writing class I teach at the Pocatello Women’s Correctional Center. She’s been coming to the class for three years now. The first day I went to teach at the prison, she walked in wearing flat shoes, a long gray ponytail, and introduced herself, looking into my eyes with her bright, serene, gray eyes, and I thought to myself, “This woman must be a Buddhist priest.” During the last three years, she has written powerful, moving, healing poems. She and the other women share horrifying traumas, terrible losses of children and family, conflicts, rages, bringing to the surface their grief and injuries, bearing
witness to their lives, clearing a place for healing, for creativity, for seeing. There are many tears in the class.

I am learning that finding a right livelihood and a place to be may finally end in what we have to give. Making a home and doing one’s work can meet in how we care for place. I become interested in how to protect the quiet trail to Winter-Tea Rock from the menace of machines, in how to protect the Bear Mountains, Cache Valley, Idaho, Utah, the Rockies. The arc of caring widens. Places to act appear everywhere. Frederick Buechner said, “The place God calls you to is the place where your own deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet” (95).

November 2003. Krishna and I have hiked the trail to Winter-Tea Rock in seven inches of snow. Light comes late, and we have hiked under stars through moonlight. From above the Thorne Spring watershed, I see far out across the valley, the Wellsville Mountains in the distance white and blue. To come again and again to the same mountains, to take the same trail over and over, is new to me. I’ve watched the progression of wildflowers through spring and summer and fall. Now the aspens etch the blue peaks with gold, and the maples run red and orange down the nearly vertical streambeds. Snow lies around us, blue and white, and now that the sun has crested the mountains, it glitters with prisms in all directions. The sun warms my feet and body. The river roars. Clouds break on the high ridges like waves rolling in, cling to the canyon walls and cliffs—Tu Fu scenes, I think. The sky is clear to the north and west and shows blues of many hues—royal, pastel, seashell, blue jay, kingfisher. The whole world seems a great blessing of the dawn. I look right at the sun. Apollo crests the peaks, Aurora already fled. All is silence except for puffs of snow falling from a cedar. Our first sun in weeks. Krishna runs through the snow with joy, black against the white, then sits in the snow looking at me with her one blue eye, mysterious, lupine.

January 1, 2004. We are pulling into a rental car return at the Atlanta airport and get a call on our cell phone from our housesitter, a graduate student who’s been caring for our house and animals for a week while we’re in North Carolina. As I pull into the car return queue, Jennifer exclaims, “What? What? Krishna got hit by a car!” She starts to cry. “Is she dead? Oh, my God! Oh, my God!” She looks at me with desperate eyes. She gives me the phone. She gets

An Avis employee, a kind woman, offers to take us to the terminal in her car so we won’t have to ride the shuttle. Jennifer cries the whole way. I’ve steeled myself, holding back my feelings, waiting through the long hours until we get home, until I have a place. On the way home from the Salt Lake City Airport I start to cry. We both cry for days. Remembering, naming all the things we loved about her.

The month before, I’d read The Mind on Fire, a biography of Emerson. After the death of his son, he said, “Home is where your dead are.” But we can’t even bury Krishna in our yard because she was disposed of in a local landfill before we could return.

June 2004. I’m home alone with Aidan, our three-month-old son. Pippin, our new border-collie, black-Lab mix, who “Four Paws,” the adoption center, said was Krishna’s brother, sleeps at my feet. A different dog. Krishna would get inside a UPS truck and happily wait to be driven away. Pippin, having been abandoned, mistreated, and picked up by the pound, is sweet beyond reckoning but fiercely protective of home. He stays by me twenty-four hours a day, unless Jennifer is nursing Aidan, and then he’s there beside them, no matter where I am. If Aidan cries in his swing or crib, Pippin goes and lies down beside him, licking his face if we don’t get there first to say, “Pippin. No licks.”

I’ve warmed the milk Jennifer left for me and fed Aidan. When he’s taking his milk, he stares into my eyes without looking away. We play for half an hour. Now he’s tired. He’s crying. I think he cries too much. Then, I remember how recently he’s come from the womb. I remember how Terry Tempest Williams said our mother’s womb is the first landscape we inhabit (50). I think of how Aidan was connected to the landscape of his mother, a place of utter interbeing. How our own connection to our landscape is really no
less total, if less visible. I hold Aidan to comfort him. I think of how we learn to be accommodated to isolation, separateness, aloneness. How we then have to unlearn this alienation on our path and open the gates of healing, to resuture our bond with the earth, with each other.

August 2004. I watch my breath. The morning air warms slowly, returning from its thirty-degree diurnal swing. Aidan sleeps on his blanket beside me and Pippin beside him. I watch my breath, entering the space that opens out within, breath poured into the universe like milk poured from a pitcher to a bowl. A vast place beyond the limited self, a place of healing, of pure being, union, of ecstasy. Words fall apart. After a time, I open my eyes, see the world, and write in my journal.

Above Bear River

High among canyon cliffs, sunflowers follow the sun, sway against junipers, sage.
Early summer air. Mountain bluebirds, yellow warblers flit above us.
On his fourth hike, Aidan, three months old, sleeps on a blue blanket. Pippin, our border collie, stretches out beside him after his puppy chow. Already we’ve seen a doe with fawns, swallows arcing down cliffs, white pelicans on the Bear River, heard coyotes on the pass.
Aidan starts to cry. I change him, then read him some Hsieh Ling-yün.
The Tao opens, like a sunflower and we are floating, three feathers through canyon splendor.
I gather up our things hoist Aidan up in his backpack and we pick our way
down the rocky, dusty slope,
Aidan’s temple at my chest,
new eyes bright toward a new world
of orange cliffs, blue peaks,
blowing clouds,
his little ears learning
the sound of the Bear roaring below us.

Bibliography