Placing the Academy

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Landscape. What one can see in a single view. Drive west toward Seattle at seventy or eighty miles an hour on Interstate 90 and landscape will be a rolling gray blur of sagebrush through the insulation of the car window, the dammed and degraded Columbia River a brief glimpse of silver, a few raw towns bypassed, and then two double-lane highways unfurling upward through inky fringes of evergreens that hide the giant patches where timber is being harvested on the Cascade Range. Never mind the timber. From the warmth of the car, what is visible through a veil of rain on the windshield is the endless interstate and the busy, increasing traffic that nips in and out as double lanes become triple lanes for the descent down the west side of the Cascades—triple lanes and access lanes and underpasses and loops and whorls buzzing with traffic, past towns with names that used to have meanings, Snoqualmie, Issaquah, only a blur, until finally there’s the skyline of Bellevue on the east shore of Lake Washington, great glass and steel towers completely surrounded by residential developments and featureless strips and malls and parking garages and apartment complexes beyond complexes beyond complexes, all looped and overlooped by freeways meeting freeways, freeways passing over and under freeways, serpentine and circumferencing freeways.

Landscape. The single view. Pull over the automobile in one of those trouble lanes, step outside that upholstered cocoon with the string quartet emanating from the speakers and the smell of coffee from the vacuum cup and landscape becomes a stench of heated tires and exhaust and a cacophony of hurtling, shrieking metal, tons of metal, seven or eight lanes of shrieking, speeding metal
like a crazed herd bent only on speed, speed. What is their destination, what is contained in those single human heads so briefly visible through the flash of glass, who knows? Learning whether there is purpose in what looks like chaos is not the task at hand. The task at hand is learning whether there is a way through the labyrinth of freeways on foot. Whether it is possible to walk along what looked from the automobile like a low-lying streak of silver, what now turns out to be a line of buckled and dented metal rails fixed to short posts, whether it is possible to walk here without being struck from behind by one of those crazed, speeding hunks of metal and turned into a sodden pulp. Surely there is a way. Coyotes and raccoons, survivors to the last, find a way along forgotten creek beds and ravines, sneak through brush and Scotch broom, dart openly when they must. But is there a human way, if a life depends upon it, to cross the freeway on foot and reach one of those apartment complexes, clearly visible on the other side of the seven or eight lanes of hurtling metal?

In one of those anonymous apartment complexes within a labyrinth of freeways in Bellevue, there lived, during the winter of 1969, a young woman who lay awake at night and listened to the roar of traffic that ebbed around three in the morning but never completely died away. She had spent the past five years in a graduate literature program in Missouri, but, now that she had successfully defended her dissertation, she had nothing to do and nowhere to go. She had expected to find a college or university teaching job after she finished her dissertation, but there were no jobs, or at least none that she could find in Seattle or its sprawling suburbs. During the days, after her husband had left for the junior high school where he taught and while her children were in school, she obsessively cleaned the apartment and tried to read or sew, and at night she lay awake listening to the buzz of the freeways and wondered where her life had gone wrong.

In later years she wondered why she hadn’t done more to help herself. It was true that she was trapped without transportation behind the loops and whorls of the buzzing freeways, but it was also true that a shuttle bus traveled daily from one of the Bellevue motels to downtown Seattle, and surely she could have learned the schedule and found a way on foot through the freeways to the motel. Another woman would have made the effort, enjoyed the city, wandered along the piers in the heady salt breezes off Elliot Bay, browsed in the shops, bought a few exotic vegetables or spices in
the open air market. But she didn’t. The city wasn’t what she wanted; she wanted a job. Without a job she had nothing to do, nothing that mattered, and still she felt exhausted, dragged down by some strange buzzing force that she didn’t understand, weighted by the effort of getting through another day of small tasks.

Everyone who knew her was baffled by her unhappiness. Here she was, living in a comfortable apartment with a faithful, hard-working husband and two beautiful children. If she thought she had to have a job, she could find one right there in Bellevue. Secretarial jobs, clerking jobs—did she think she was too good for a secretarial job? What gave her that idea? It was 1969, after all, and the women’s magazines were filled with dire warnings for women who tried to pursue careers—she was being self-centered, selfish—and our young woman didn’t disagree. She was willing to accept whatever label anyone pasted on her, but she wasn’t willing to accept the dead end she’d found herself in. Why were there no college or university teaching jobs in English, when there had always been jobs, when she had been told there always would be jobs? Was it some flaw in herself, some inadequacy she had never forced herself to face?

(It was 1969. There was no MLA Job Listing, there were no articles about the sudden surplus of young PhDs in the humanities, hundreds more being churned out by the graduate schools in the next year and the next, and hardly any jobs. It would take some time before the young PhDs would realize they were all in the same boat. In 1969 our young woman supposed that she was the only one who couldn’t find a job, and her sense of failure ate away at her.)

What are we to make of this young woman, looking back at her after so many years? That she was naive—well, to say the least! Tiresomely naive and tiresomely self-absorbed, as though she had no idea how narrow her view of the world was, how scant her experience. She did possess a kind of dumb determination. Endurance was probably her strongest point. She hung on for the long haul, yes she did.

She and her husband had married in a seethe of teenage lust to the lyrics of popular music and almost immediately were disappointed to discover that they were married to each other and not to their ideas of each other. But they were making the best of it. There were the children, after all. Also, they both came from families where marriage was forever. Also, they were both were afraid of what life might do to them without the other as a prop. So they
made the best of it. They did collect grievances like troll’s gold, however, counting coins of resentment in secret and letting them pile up.

But back to the story. What became of the young woman? Did she sit in that Bellevue apartment, weeping and spinning her troll’s gold out of flammable straw until her mind blurred into the inexorable buzz of freeway traffic? Was she finally crushed into some semblance of a teacher’s wife by the weight of all that pavement? Lost within those miles of curving triple and quadruple lanes and loops and interstices, the roaring overpasses and echoing underpasses and the dizzy busy cloverleafs, as tangled and snarled and knotted as though they had become not just the labyrinth, but the very thread of Ariadne, spun into a concrete monster?

No. She didn’t. What she did was pore over the classifieds in the *Seattle Times* as the winter passed and the summer dragged into July, until one day she came upon an advertisement for what seemed to her like the last job in the world. An assistant professor of English was wanted at Northern Montana College in Havre, Montana. *Call Dr. George Craig, Chairman*, the ad read, and listed a phone number.

She dialed. Listened to a faraway ring.

“Northern Montana College,” said a throaty voice, suddenly, from six hundred miles away.

Apparently she was connected with the college switchboard.

“Dr. George Craig, please?”

“I don’t think he’s in the building. Wait a minute—I think I just saw him walk by.”

The young woman could hear running footsteps and the voice calling, “Dr. Craig! Dr. Craig! You’ve got a phone call!” She was trying to visualize what kind of college she had reached, when the phone was picked up again and a man said, hesitantly, “Hello?”

“My name is Mary Clearman,” she began, “and I saw your ad in the *Seattle Times*—”

“You have your doctorate?” he interrupted.

“Well, yes, I defended last December.” She was going to continue, to explain her teaching experience, the subject of her dissertation (*Aspects of Juvenal in Ben Jonson’s Comical Satires*), the journals where she had submitted articles, the letters of recommendation that she could have sent to him, but Dr. Craig gave her no time.

“Would you like to come for an interview?”

“Well—yes,” she said, after a startled instant.
“You do have your doctorate.”
“Yes.”
“We’ll send you an airline ticket.”

Landscape. What one can see in a single view. It’s only her second time in flight, and twisting in her cramped seat to look down at the miniaturized interstate threading its way through the Cascade Range, she marvels at the way her perspective has been so abruptly altered. From the lofty altitude of thirty thousand feet she can see the square patches of managed timber reduced to a quilt in varying green and also the untouched and hollowed peaks that once belched and rumbled fire and lava in a forgotten eon but now hold lakes like tiny mirrors that reflect even tinier clouds and passing shadows until they, too, are lost from her view. The mountains roll back, the gray prairie stretches to the Rockies and the prairie beyond the Rockies that she never expected to be returning to. The flight from Seattle has taken less than two hours.

On the airport tarmac in Great Falls, Montana, the wind hits her in the face and rips off her false eyelashes, which she snatches out of thin gritty air as they fly by, to the momentary astonishment of the passenger walking behind her. Inside the terminal she darts into the women’s room to repair her face and sees—what? A face she’s never had confidence in, hence the ridiculous false eyelashes and the hair stiffened by spray, and now she must take this inadequate face to meet the impatient Dr. George Craig, whose abrupt invitation for an interview she and her husband had puzzled over. She squares her shoulders and forces herself to walk out of the shelter of the women’s room and into the dusty white light where a few rows of cracked plastic seats and a vending machine are the only amenities in this country terminal, and a handful of passengers are still waiting for their luggage, and a short man with a graying crewcut has approached a very fat young woman in flip-flops and a faded sundress:

“Are you Dr. Clearman?”

The flip-flop woman shakes her head, suspicion crossing her face as though he’s made an indecent suggestion, and turns her back, and now there’s nothing for our young woman but to get a grip, step up, and admit, “I’m Dr. Clearman.”

He turns, stares at her. In her high heels she’s a head taller than he is. Forever after she wonders if he would rather she had been the flip-flop woman.
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It takes about two hours to drive down from the airport at Great Falls, through town, and north on Highway 87 to Havre (population something less than ten thousand), which lies along the Milk River, thirty miles short of the Canadian border. Rainfall up here on the high prairie is likely to average about eleven inches a year, and the hot wind is constant, burning off what moisture there is and draining the color out of the landscape. Newcomers, expecting the glamorous Montana of the mountains to the south and west, are likely to be stunned, then appalled, at the endless shades of gray. Sagebrush on low hills and cutbanks, shadows of clouds, emptiness between earth and sky. *People really live out here?*

Yes, but not very many. Montana, with over 145,000 square miles making it the fourth-largest state in the United States, has a population of about 800,000, of which fewer than 100,000 live along that 250–mile northern stretch between Glasgow and Shelby known as the Highline, where James J. Hill built his railroad during the heyday of the homestead movement in 1910 and hoped to transform the desert into a cornucopia of 360–acre family farms. Rain will follow the plow, he promised the homesteaders, but of course it didn’t, and the farms failed during the depression and drought of the 1920s. In the years since then, dryland farming techniques and hybrid seeds have turned the prairie into a cornucopia of wheat, but not in the way Hill imagined. Today the farms are vast, and one man with monster machinery representing a capital investment of hundreds of thousands of dollars can cultivate and harvest the acreage once tilled by twenty men. As the population grows sparser, it grows grayer. The young leave to find work, while the old watch satellite television and drive miles on paved single-lane highways to do their shopping. They worry about the weather and curse the federal government, but when some well-meaning researcher suggests, *Why not turn this prairie back into grazing land for buffalo and antelope? Who lives out here, anyway?* they answer in a thin but sturdy chorus: *We do!*

But we’re trying to cover too much local history here, and also we’re getting ahead of our story. In late July of 1969, the impenetrable clouds float high above their shadows, the sun beats down, and hawks keep watch from the crossbars of power poles for anything that moves. It may be hard for many to imagine moving out there, slowed to the pace of a pulse through the heat and the wheat, but the young woman doesn’t have to imagine. She knows the scent of
sun-baked seeds and the pungency of sagebrush, the scratch of wheatheads on her arms and legs; she knows how sweat feels when it trickles through her hair and how barbed wire sounds when it sings in the wind. The sun weighs down upon her, drags her toward the drowsy earth where the stones and bones are buried. She'll be buried here if she isn't careful. She knows something about a kind of isolation that is different from what she knew in Bellevue: the isolation of distance and weather and the isolation of minds.

Yes, she knows a little of what she's getting into as the car with the State of Montana license plates driven by Dr. George Craig creeps north through ripening wheat fields riven by sage-choked coulees. There's nothing out there but the hawks and the power lines and the white mile markers. Occasionally there's a deserted homestead shack, occasionally there's an occupied farmstead within its dusty and windblown shelterbelt. Nothing else but the same clouds she so recently flew over.

Dr. George Craig knows this highway well, but he keeps glancing at the withdrawn woman beside him, trying to gauge her reactions. The truth is, news of the PhD glut hasn't reached northern Montana yet. Dr. George Craig needs to hire an assistant professor with a doctorate if his college is going to keep its accreditation; he needs to hire a PhD so badly that he'd probably not commit murder for one, but just short of that. Is there any possibility at all that this strange young woman from Seattle in her dark green linen dress and her elaborate coiffure and her eyelashes would come to this place to live?

At last he ventures, “Is this your first visit to Montana?”

“Oh, no,” she says, “I was born and raised here,” and to her astonishment, he lets out his breath in relief.

So you know what you’re getting into.

As they near Havre, George Craig turns off State 87 onto the old highway, which angles past the wheat fields to meet the welcome green of a few willows and box elder trees and the windswept roofs of houses with small watered lawns. The young woman is trying to mesh what she sees with the only other time she visited Havre, with her father when she was in her teens and they were chasing an auctioneer who had stolen a milk cow. Also the story her grandmother used to tell, about driving up to Havre from the homestead with a team and wagon to meet the train from the East and camping overnight on the prairie on the way up and the way
back. What a growing-up she’s had, if George Craig only knew. He’ll never know, if it’s up to her. Not that she’s ashamed of her background, exactly, but it seems too complicated to explain, on the one hand, and irrelevant on the other. She’s a scholar, after all. She’s spent years learning Latin and reading the classics, so what do stolen milk cows have to do with her?

She’ll live long enough to consider the answer to that question, to understand that her scholarship grew from her fear of suffocation, of being buried alive under that blinding sun. Also, to her surprise, she’ll live to see Montana transformed from nowhere to somewhere glamorous (though never the Highline; it will never be glamorous, not the shortgrass prairie up here on the northern brow of the world where the wind blows constantly, and the sun beats down, and the temperature rises to +110° in the summer and drops to -45° in the winter). But the glamorization of Montana and the West lies far in the future. For now, George Craig has driven past the streets of modest houses where the wind has bowed the trees and scoured paint off siding, and he has stopped on a bluff overlooking the Milk River with the town of Havre curled around it. Perched on the brow of the bluff, interrupting endless dusty blue sky, are the few brick buildings of Northern Montana College.

He parks in front of one of the buildings. Two long brick wings support a squat tower that will hold the next eighteen years of her life.

“This is Cowan Hall.”

Place is where we imagine ourselves to be. Juvenal’s Rome of the second century, for example. Who but the wealthy get sleep in Rome? The mobs, the noise, the surging crowds, the dense mass of people—why did the Montana girl ever choose to walk those dangerous streets in the footsteps of the old satirist? Or the equally congested streets of Ben Jonson’s seventeenth-century London—what was she looking for? Yes, it’s true, in part, that she was fleeing the silence of the high plains; it’s true, in part, that she was trying to reinvent herself in a milieu as far removed as she could find from the place she was born or from what she was intended to be. Years later her gorge still rises when she thinks about the dearth of expectations for her, the easy way the ranch girl’s dreams were dismissed. Let her teach in the rural schools until she marries, then let her be a good wife. What? Being a country teacher, being a wife isn’t good enough for her? Who does she think she is?
But to settle for the suffocation theory is to overlook a single truth about the woman the Montana girl was becoming: she loved her scholarship. Loved it. Loved her painstaking translations from the Latin, loved the careful juxtaposition of texts, loved the language, loved the complex tracery of ideas and images that the old satirist passed on from Rome to London. Most of all she loved the timelessness of absorbing herself in her work, the out-of-body experience of dissolving library walls and fading street sounds, the sensation of one mind touching another over centuries through words. Was she perhaps a bit naive in her love, as she was naive in so many other ways? Unaware of how ridiculous she looked, with the dust of carrels and seldom-opened texts filtering down on her stiff-sprayed hair, her make-up? Yes, call her naive, call her ridiculous, but still admit that single truth: she loved her work.

And if she returns? That first moment on the steps of Cowan Hall, she has a dim inkling of the battles she will have to fight if she returns, but how fierce the battles, how stiff the price she’ll pay, she cannot possibly imagine. Who could imagine an assistant professorship costing her scholarship? Or her marriage? Who could have imagined Northern Montana College?

It’s as though a tribe of gypsies camped here one night and decided to start a college, remarked one of her colleagues, years later, but it wasn’t gypsies: it was sodbusters who founded Northern in the 1930s, in the depths of a depression that sent every starved and windblown community scrambling for whatever public institutions might provide a payroll. A college, why not? Havre was two hundred miles over bad roads from the state college in Bozeman, nearly three hundred miles from the university in Missoula, distances that in those days of chugging Model Ts were far greater than they are today, and the young men and women of the Highline needed access to higher education that was closer to home. So a board was appointed, and a president hired, and classes were begun in church basements and whatever rooms the public schools could spare. The president offered a two-year curriculum of Latin and Greek, taught by himself. He hired a young man to teach chemistry, told him to build his own lab, and, by the way, to organize and coach a basketball team, which the young man did. The idea was that the graduates of the two-year curriculum would then transfer to the University of Minnesota (and many of them did). Everyone was so poor that some of the older faculty remembered lending money to their students so they could stay in school.
Eventually, enrollment grew to a whopping five or six hundred students, and money was found to construct a couple of buildings from bricks salvaged from an abandoned military fort. After World War II, a new president arrived with his own ideas for Northern Montana College, which were to junk the Latin and Greek and add vocational programs in everything from automotive transmissions to flight instruction to cosmetology to teacher education. To accommodate teacher certification, the curriculum stretched to four years. By 1969, enrollment had grown to its all-time high of nearly 1400 students. The vocational-minded president had departed, leaving behind his practical programs and part of an airplane, and a power struggle had replaced him in the president’s office with an ex-professor of education. The idea now was to strengthen the four-year academic programs for accreditation, hence the need to hire assistant professors with PhDs.

Our young woman, mercifully unaware of all this history, walks into Cowan Hall for the first time and hears her heels ring on the floors in the still white light that floods through the tiers of single-pane windows. Most of the faculty and staff are gone for the summer, George Craig explains, as he introduces her to a small dark gnome of a woman, who pokes her head from around her switchboard in a closet near the stairs. She turns out to be the possessor of the throaty voice. One of the English professors who is around is a Stephen Liu, who teaches Shakespeare and writes poetry (and will write more poetry, once he moves to the University of Nevada, Reno, and isn’t teaching quite so much freshman composition). There are five or six others in the English department, and they all teach freshman composition courses and the literature courses leading to the BS degree in teacher education and to a tiny BA degree in English.

What can be accomplished in this place, wonders the young woman, whose idea of a college is the University of Missouri at Columbia. What can be imagined here, what will the future hold?

The future: she will often feel as though she has exchanged the myth of Ariadne and the labyrinth for the myth of Sisyphus. As teacher education programs shrink and vocational programs flourish and the job market continues to worsen, she and other liberal arts faculty will find themselves in a No-Exit bastion of curriculum quarrels, campus politics, budget cuts, crises of all kinds. But no! They’ll insist they’re not rolling a rock uphill. They’re fighting for
their programs, for the liberal arts, in the face of ridicule from the other side of the campus: What some people think this college is all about! Where do they get the idea that college is about ideas, when everyone knows it’s about job skills?

While she herself—because the nearest university library is three hundred miles away and it’s the 1970s, with no internet, only a clunky interlibrary loan system that may or may not produce Xeroxed articles after a six-weeks’ wait—without quite knowing that she’s doing it, will stop trying to keep current with her scholarship. Instead, she’ll pick up the threads of fiction that she spun as an undergraduate. She’ll write short stories about the isolated ranches and the silent people who live and struggle against weather and change and bankruptcy; she’ll bare the bones of her people and the bones of the people they displaced.

Confrontation: that’s the word. She won’t let them bury her alive. If her fiction seems light years distant in theme and tone from Aspects of Juvenal in Ben Jonson’s Comical Satires, who better than the old satirist and the university-trained stepson of a London bricklayer to be looking over her shoulder?

But now it’s late July of 1969, and George Craig shows her around the campus and the town, takes her to dinner with his wife, then drops her off at the Havre Hotel, where she can hear the coupling and uncoupling of boxcars while she thinks about the opportunity she’s being offered and the risks that, as yet, are shadows on the margins of her thoughts. Although she knows that what can be seen in a single view is not all there is, she won’t venture into those shadows, won’t ask herself what will become of her marriage or whether she can survive the reassembling of the pieces of herself.

In the morning, George Craig will drive her back to the airport in Great Falls and tell her that they can offer her $11,000 for ten months. He’ll ask her what she thinks.

She says that she’s got to talk it over with her husband.

Yes, of course, he agrees, but his face falls. He thinks she’s going to turn down the offer.

She already knows she will accept.