Wherein the Author Ruminates on RV Life

The cab is great, CD player, weather-band radio. The seats are comfy. They tilt. They’ve got the big captain’s arms. I’m Kirk on the Enterprise. We have a handheld GPS unit that tells us where we are and, more importantly, which upcoming exits have a gas station or a Taco Bell. We have a twenty-six-inch TV with DVD and VCR and an automated dish that pivots and twirls until it locks on a giant satellite that floats above the Texas Gulf Coast.

We have the microwave, a nice refrigerator, three burners, and an oven. The bedroom in back has a queen-size bed with room to walk around both sides. Storage is good. The living room has a four-seater dining-room table and a full-length couch. When the sun’s up, we have all the windows open, and the views are almost always pretty spectacular, given where we’ve been traveling.

The shower is located about halfway back and to one side. It’s an efficient space. Imagine a phone booth. Then think of something smaller than that. With running water. The toilet is across the hall from the shower and includes a stool, washbasin, and enough storage for two toothbrushes, some soap, some towels, and the medium-size tube of Crest. If your belly wasn’t as big as mine, you’d think you were in a phone booth. Or something that would fit inside a phone booth. With a little chair.

By day we drive, stopping absolutely whenever we want, making sandwiches at rest areas or scenic overlooks. Sometimes I take a cigar out and stand there, like today, staring out at the swelling Columbia River at a roadside stop outside Vantage, Washington, as we pushed west on I-90. Sometimes we just sit inside, slurp our soup, make phone calls on one of the cell phones, marvel at the gas receipts, count semis as they pass on the highway.
Mark Halperin
Ellensburg, Washington

Mark Halperin is a delightful guy, who greets me on a chilly but sunny day. He and Dasha, his sweet half-Husky, half-Malamute, are walking through a light dusting of snow as we arrive. We start by going around the house and through the backyard to see one of Mark's writing areas, this one in part of a finished shed. I meet his wife, Bobbie Halperin, a painter. Bobbie spots my wife sitting out in the driveway—paying bills online—and brings her in to see her own studio. The four of us and Dasha stand around a bit and chat like we’re all pals.

Our wives disappear with Dasha, and Mark takes me to the warmest room in their long, charming house, his study.

We talk about the standard items from this project but also get around to Mark’s love of fishing. He’s a serious fisherman, a fly fisherman, who can see the edge of his beloved Yakima River from any of a number of windows on the south side of the house. When fishing doesn’t take up his time—and he fishes all summer in lieu of writing—he can reach over and pick up one of his treasured banjos or acoustic guitars. He has a Gibson acoustic, an L series from 1913. He picks it up at one point and fingerpicks a sort of Leadbelly-style country-blues.

He’s a great interview. He listens to the questions, recognizes the answer I’m probably looking for, then spins his answer a couple of ways. He says he doesn’t mean to be contrary, but it lights him up to do it. He is animated and fun to listen to. We fill one side of a tape, and I pop another in and keep going.

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How has place affected your poetry?

It’s a big question. On the one hand, when I write, I look out the window, and it has an effect. If I lived in the South, I’d have one kind of climate. I remember living in Tucson for one year. The weather didn’t change much, whereas here, that changing is part of your sense of time. In the summer I fish, and in the winter I ski, different activities at different times. So maybe in a place with four seasons you’re more aware of the passage of time.

In the summer I fish a lot and don’t write much. The river is right here (pointing across the road). I’ve gotten to the point of tying flies, making rods, the whole thing. But I doubt I’d fish the way I do if I lived
somewhere else. If you’re interested in listening to classical music, there isn’t a lot for you here: the university, Seattle, which is a long drive and far from a classical music capital. But fishing? Where I live is a great place to fish.

During the numerous times I lived in St. Petersburg (Russia), I’d go to Shostakovich Concert Hall weekly. Tickets were inexpensive, and the music was great. I think in a city you should do city things. In the country you should do country things. When I moved here, I asked myself, “What should I do? What’s here?” I wanted to see if I meshed with any of them.

How does fishing mesh with your work?

Well, I write about it, so it becomes part of my subject matter. Then too, it’s a way to divert myself. People who write probably have noise going on in their heads continuously. You follow out thoughts. You track things. It’s a pursuit occupation. You don’t write things that you know. You write in order to know things, as many people have said. I’ve come across the idea in so many variations that I’m pretty sure it’s true.

I’m a fly fisherman, which is a complicated pursuit. That means it takes you out of yourself; it’s another form of being, like speaking Russian, which has also taken me a long time to learn—and I’m not done. When I talk Russian, I’m a different person—or have an opportunity to be a different person. Different assumptions begin to operate. I have to use different approaches because the language is constructed differently. On the water it’s like that, too. You can’t outthink fish because fish don’t think. You have to move into a different mode. It has a physical aspect too, how you hold your mouth when you speak another language, the rhythm to casting, to observing, to picking things out. You have to adapt, which is very exciting. And it’s exciting when, in writing, you stumble across things you don’t know or didn’t know you did. Even at the level of words, even making them work together. Like when you get the right fly and fish start taking it, or when you don’t know if you can land a fish because you’ve got a number twenty fly in its lip.

Here, something about fall starts me off writing. Place has that kind of influence. Whatever window you look from, the view is never the same. The colors change all the time; the trees look different. Imagine what happened when I looked out of the window of my room in Moscow at the sixteenth-century church across the street.

There’s a widely held belief that place is reflected in writing, that you have to be tied to place in some way. And I understand that and believe it’s true in some respects. But I also reject it. When Jews were persecuted in the Soviet Union, they were often accused of being “rootless cosmopolitans,” which became a code term for being Jews. Connections and loyalties were being questioned. Russians have an idea
of nationality, which differs from ours and is independent of citizenship. It has to do with “coming from a place” and being a part of its history, religion, et cetera. Everyone, supposedly, has a nationality, and if you’re not “us,” you’re “them.” I’m sensitive to that, being Jewish. There’s a part of me that says, “Yes, isn’t that nice, but everybody writes his or her own poems.” What’s nationality then?

Or to take it in another direction, when I’m in Russia, I tend to write about here. And when I’m here, I frequently write about Russia. In both cases, you might say, I’m drawn to the exotic. Don’t people write as much about the past as the present? When you’re calm, don’t you rummage about in what you’ve been through, and when you’re at loose ends, don’t you write about the present?

Someone recently told me you have to write about blue herons to be a Northwest poet. And I said, “I’ve got one!” But I didn’t really believe he was right. I’ve lived here for thirty-five years, more than half my life. If I’m not from here, where am I from? It’s a consciousness that some people cultivate, and some fall into: being an outsider. Writing poems is being an outsider; so is being a Jew. It can be uncomfortable at times, but the view’s great.
Accident

Are you okay? When I answered yes, adding I’d already called it in and was waiting for the tow-truck, she blessed me from the cab, then Jesus for preserving me, then got down. You’ve no idea when the tow truck will show up; you might stand in the cold for hours, she said, moving beside the truck, which, like her, had been around, rummaging in her sacks of groceries and pulled a bagel out. No thanks, I said. She insisted. It was easier to accept than fight with her, and beside, there was something so natural, so direct, for all the bless Jesus-es, the bagel, so soft, topped with burnt onions, garlic chips, so bereft of any yiddishkeit . . . I took it, like her benediction, with a nod, a Jew, ankle-deep in snow on a rural road in eastern Washington, car down the steep embankment, cradled by cattails. How had I come to be there, hand around a roll as much a bagel as I was a Jew, I wondered? Only a deity who delighted in far-fetched scenarios could have concocted a delivery like that. Before I took a bite, rather than a motsi, I peered at my precariously balanced car, then into the shimmering distance from whence the wrecker would come. Hat on, I blessed her and my good fortune.

—Mark Halperin
Jana Harris
Sultan, Washington

With cold temperatures threatening the finicky plastic plumbing, we’ve been without running water in Winnie Cooper for a few days. We’ve been lugging water back and forth from campground bathrooms in big pots. But this morning the sun shines brightly, we turn the water on, fire up Winnie Cooper, and get back on the road.

As we have traveled outside of the urban areas of Washington State, we’ve found the towns a little tougher, a little more wild. People are more independent here, especially when compared to the reserved folks we know from our time in the northeast U.S. Hippies and rednecks live happily next to ranchers, methamphetamine entrepreneurs, the ever-present militia folks in their cammo outfits, loggers, and fruit growers.

We wind through some narrow roads outside Sultan, Washington, and up into some pretty ranchland. Mountains crowd the sky, and we drive between orchards and pastures until we get to Jana Harris’s farm on a spacious and quiet piece of land with a barn, a long house, and a pond.

Harris lives on a working farm, and before we see the house, we see four beautiful horses in separate paddocks on a clear and sunny chilly late morning. Jana welcomes both of us into the house. She is whipping up some food in the kitchen. She talks about her land and horses while she cooks, and we drink in the smells.

After a feast of food and conversation, we go with Jana outside as she brings the horses in from the fields for some hay and carrots. The horses are gigantic, but Jana hooks them and hauls them in easily, all the time talking to them, catching them up on these new visitors who are suddenly in their barn.

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How have the places of your life had an impact on the work you do?

I’ve lived and worked in New Jersey and New York, where there was very high energy. That was great. As far as the West, I’ve lived and worked in California, Washington, Oregon, and Wyoming. I get a tremendous sense of place. I write a lot about pioneers, primarily women and children, who came some distance on the trails to get here. Lately, I’ve been writing about the women and children who didn’t make it all the way to the Pacific, but who got stranded along or settled by the
trail. Between here and, say, Missouri, you can still see the ruts of their wagon wheels. And this is a trail that I have a hard time traveling along in a car with air conditioning. In some places in Wyoming you can still see teepee rings.

When you’re writing about these places—Wyoming, Idaho, Oregon, and Washington—does simply going to the place energize you? What is it about the ruts in the road that inspire your work?

Absolutely. I am always stunned by the vast expanse and emptiness of the terrain, the clean clear air, the visible heavens, the silence—especially the silence—the color of the earth, the flora and fauna. It’s about the miles covered on foot in hard leather, usually handmade shoes—and hand-knit socks if they had socks. The rocks in the road. The little hills, those ups and downs we don’t notice in a car. The wind in your face, the rain in your face. The heat, the cold, the smell of rabbit grass and sage grass. The trying to stay clean. Water—how much to save for the cattle? The minute I’m there, I’m there.

I guess one of my themes is survival. And when I first started doing research on these people, it was because I moved to a farm and I take care of horses. You can read about horse husbandry endlessly and go to vet school, but a lot of it is just intuitive. And a lot of the really good horse people—their knowledge is not written down because they’re not particularly literate. It’s like the art of anything. How did the frontier people take care of these beasts? Horses were the way they moved from place to place. There were trains, ships, and horses. If you can control transportation, you control everything. But how did they keep these beasts healthy, sound, and alive? They had no antibiotics; they had no painkillers. So that’s what I was reading for, their basic seminal knowledge handed down from generation to generation. What I noticed was that they were much better problem solvers than we are. Our solution is simply, “Buy another one.” So I was looking for common ground and these little nuggets of things.

I look at those ruts in the road, and I think, “What they have endured!” I first saw the ruts near Baker, Oregon. Then again when I worked at the University of Wyoming. The fact that the ruts of the emigrants’ wagon wheels endured for more than a hundred years struck me at the time. I have a photo of them from the Oregon Historical Archives. Somehow, the ruts became symbolic of their endurance. Of their perseverance and ability to push ahead.
Mr. Elija Welch, First Planting

*Gray Back Flat*

North of Powder River,  
north of the Grand Ronde,  
antelope trail my only footpath. 
Not a tree, not even a rock  
for shade, the stone-strewn  
ash-colored ground grit-  
fine, rocks and soap weed  
the same shade, lichens  
the only gaiety—that yellowing  
green of unripe lemons  
scattered across hills rising  
up to a coppery sky. 
Sun the color of the new  
plow blade pressed  
down, pushed forward,  
breaking in oak handles  
to the curve of hands.

Midday meal taken in the stream-  
cool of a canyon bottom  
while contemplating:  
A hundred and sixty acres waiting  
since before Moses to be  
taught to bear wheat.

Returning, startled two  
salt-hungry antelope,  
tongues caressing  
plow handles.

—*Jana Harris*
Sam Hamill
Port Townsend, Washington

We’re headed for the first of two ferry rides that will take us from Seattle to Port Townsend, where I’m scheduled to meet with Sam Hamill, a masterful poet, translator, and the editor of the much revered—and poetry-only—Copper Canyon Press.

The ferry rides are spectacular. On the first one, a thirty-minute ride from the mainland to the southern tip of Whidbey Island, the sun rises behind us as we disappear into the frosty subfreezing fog that obscures the island from us. Once on Whidbey we drive into a little town that hugs the small two-lane. The sidewalks are dotted with kids headed to school, all of them bundled up in layers, not a serious winter coat anywhere.

The next ferry takes us off Whidbey Island, through a small strait, right to the attractively arrayed town of Port Townsend. Even from a distance, I can see white houses and buildings scattered over the hills. It’s almost enough to make you miss noticing the towering range of the Olympic Mountains behind the town.

Once in Port Townsend we do some banking, check out some antiques, and then my wife drops me at the white clapboard building that serves as Copper Canyon’s home.

Sam greets me, and we get down to business quickly. We pass a wall that contains a monumental stack of books published by his esteemed press over the past thirty years. I spot on the spines some of the names of poets I’ve already seen on the trip. He shows me where he personally hand sets and prints limited-edition broadsides of work from the press on two circa 1900 printing presses. He leads me into his office and settles in. I ask the first question and he answers without hesitation. He’s sure of himself. It’s a sort of confidence, I think, that comes when a writer knows what he’s about and is ready to share it.

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How do you think place has impacted your work as a poet?

I think one’s environment has an enormous effect on how one views the world. In my case I grew up in the deserts and mountains of Utah and Colorado, and then I lived for many years in California; but I migrated north until I came here thirty-one years ago. I cleared my own land here and built my own house by myself. And that has an enormous effect on how one lives. And the fact that I’ve been solitary
and impoverished my whole life has an effect. So all of those things become terribly important. I’m sixty years old; I’m still bucking wood. I like to think of John Haines’s lovely phrase, a “place of sense,” rather than a sense of place. I’ve always liked the way he turned that particular phrase on its head.

What about elements of the natural world? This place is just astonishing, having the mountains and the sea on either side. Are there certain elements of the natural world that work on you more than others?

Well, yes, but I would also point out that there is no unnatural world. There is nothing that is not nature. And when city people come here, they often say, “Oh, it’s so wonderful to commune with nature,” and I say, “So where do you live?” And they say, “Oh, I live in New York City.” And I say, “What part of New York City is on Mars?” So it’s really not a matter of being any closer to nature than anywhere else. It’s simply a matter of being urban, suburban, rural, and in my case, subrural.

I’ve always thought of the Pacific Northwest as being one of the most clearly defined regions in the country. The Midwest can mean a number of different things to different writers—nobody, for instance, can exactly agree with which states make up the Midwest. But I never sensed that with this region. You’ve lived here for more than thirty years; are you a regionalist?

I don’t think of it with exactly that term. But I do think of myself as a westerner. But I don’t think that the political, ecological, spiritual, moral questions of the West are profoundly different than they are east of the Mississippi, or for that matter, east of the Hudson. I brought Copper Canyon Press here specifically to become a northwesterner. I came here with every intention of living my entire life here. And I still expect to do that. There are ramifications to those decisions, just as there are to decisions to pursue, for instance, a life with New York publishing. But does that affect in any serious way the poets that I publish? I don’t think so. Ruth Stone, for example, is a New Engander. Tom McGrath was a midwesterner. Eleanor Wilner is from Philadelphia. Et cetera, et cetera. So the particularities of any body of poetry may be deeply influenced—and probably are deeply influenced—by the environment of the poet.

As an editor, have you noted that the work you see from younger poets is less rooted in a specific place or home?

Given that the average American family moves every six years, it’s not surprising to me that we don’t have a body of poetry from younger poets with a deeply rooted sense of “I grew up on the farm in the Midwest.” Children now migrate. And they have a migratory sensibility. There are
some advantages to that, and there are some drawbacks. But I think it has more to do with an ever-migrating population than anything having to do with poetry.

I direct the Port Townsend Writer’s Conference. Twenty-five years ago I put on a little conference here called “The Power of Animals” with Gary Snyder, Barry Lopez, Paul Shepherd, and a corresponding conference on “Woman and Nature” with Susan Griffith, who had just published her remarkable book of that title. Those things came up over and over again, really in a sort of politically environmentalist sense. But one finds the poetry of place in Bill Stafford. I published a little book of his that was just poems written around the Northwest. Now Snyder, as I do, lives in a particular way, and he chose a particular path that has to do with becoming deeply rooted in a place. I took a similar route. But place means differently to each of us in different ways.