

INDELIBLE

One dusk, I squinted across the land where I was growing up and saw that the prairie had ~~changed~~ ^{TURNE} into a seascape.

The wind was blowing, as it did day and night that summer, and the moving waves of rich-yellow wheat could just be seen in the settling dark. A harvesting combine cruised on the far side of the field. I had never been within a thousand miles of an ocean, but I knew that the combine, with its running lights just flicked on, was a freighter bound through the night for Singapore. Bench hills rose to the north, surely a fair coastline. The expanse of it all, hills and fields and wind in the wheat, ran out far beyond--oceanic--to where the sky and the flat horizon fitted together.

IN THE SUDDEN SHADOW-PLAY OF MY MIND, I COULD SEE

✓ The magic of place is indelible. I was seventeen, a restless farmhand with my nose in a book whenever I wasn't atop a tractor or grain truck, there at that found sea which was both fictional and real, and now at sixty I still write about both the rim-of-the-prairie along the Rockies there where I grew up and the GREEN JIGSAWED Pacific Northwest coastline where I LIVE NOW. ~~have spent the majority of my years.~~ Perhaps because I'm thought to have dual citizenship in those two high, wide, and handsome territories, I've been freighted in here tonight to talk about "place"--a Western writer's "sense of place," ✓

, I CAUTION YOU,

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a set of words which--if we don't watch out--will become as commonplace a term of geographic determinism as "damn Yankee" or "moved-here-from-California."

No, I don't believe we want to let a map-oriented "sense of place" say it all for us, those of us who grew up in the sagebrush and somehow ~~became~~ TURNUED OUT TO BE writers. What's needed, in our sense of ourselves and what we can become, is a little pluralism, and for my time here tonight I'd like to think out loud at you about more than one sense of our part of the world, and for that matter, try to explore "place" in a few different directions than usual.

THE GEOGRAPHIC CIRCUMSTANCES

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INDEED

Fairly often these days, contemporary writing about the West of America is called a literature of place. A literature, I suppose that means, which focuses on the land, rather than on people. Often the book titles themselves have seemed to say so: *The Big Sky*. . . *Wolf Willow*. . . *Winds of Morning*. . . *A River Runs Through It*. (Put them together right, you could make a kind of sagebrush haiku out of these titles of Western literature.) The critical notion, as I savvy it, is that the immensities of the West, its extremes of landform and its powerful weather and the distances which flabbergast travelers from elsewhere in this country—these immensities overwhelm the fact of the people thinly salt-and-peppered across the expanse.

“Place,” in terms of landscape, backdrop of mountain and of plain and of hard weather, *does* figure large in the work of a lot of us who are trying to write about the West. But I don't particularly think it's at the neglect of the people, the human stories, the Westerners who carry on their lives against the big bold landscapes of those books. Norman Maclean's flyfishing brother of *A River Runs Through It*; no one who has read that story and has any imagination at all can wet a line in a trout stream now without seeing, in the shadow on the water, Paul Maclean making his powerful, beautiful cast.

Annie Proulx's burrlike little bull-rider, Diamond Felts, in her recent collection of ^{WYOMING} stories, **Close Range** --who in his every battered bone knows that when "you rodeo, you're a rooster on Tuesday, feather duster on Wednesday" and keeps on paying his entry fees.

James Welch's ^{HARD-USED} men of the reservations, Lame Bull and the never-named narrator of **Winter in the Blood** and the dumb shrewd hayhand they work with, Raymond Long Knife--"He had learned to give the illusion of work, even to the point of sweating as soon as he put his gloves on." I've worked with him, too.

I hope, maybe also on the list, Charlie Doig and Bessie Ringer of **This House of Sky** and Angus McCaskill and Anna Ramsay of **Dancing at the Rascal Fair**--all of them, characters of modern western literature who seem to have found a continuing life in the minds of readers.

/The shorthand notion that merely where we happen to come from on the map accounts for books and characters such as those ^(AS YOU CAN SEE) has sometimes made what hair I have left stand straight up--as in the television documentary "Westwords" when a reviewer noted that I seemed a ^{TRIFLE} ~~little~~ gruff when I pointed out that "we're not just sitting around out here writing travelogues--this stuff is hard."

To put it a little more judiciously, here in public:

~~However~~, a geographic sense of place is a flavorful ingredient in Western literature, but let's don't think it's the whole supper.

For there are other senses of place than the merely geographic. A bunch of them. The word *place* has so many meanings it takes up about three-and-a-half pages in the Oxford English Dictionary—and in my own American Heritage Dictionary that I instantly retreated to, thirteen different definitions of *place* as a noun, twelve usages as a verb. A word that sprawls all over the place—which is a phrase I didn't find anywhere amid all those definitions.

So, you bet, when we start following the paths of
words rather than ^{THE} contour lines of maps, I do have my
own senses of place, both as a writer and as a
Westerner, and let me now try to bring out a few of
them.

FAMILY

Begin with the beginning. I come from a place. I originate, as an American, from a place in a specific Montana ^{AND WESTERN} sense of the word—another usage which doesn't seem to have reached the dictionary-makers of Oxford and Boston. Place, meaning an abandoned homestead. Small ranch or farm, either one, but abandoned, given up on, because of the winter of 1919 or the bank failures that rippled through Montana in the early 1920s or the Depression, or death or disgust or any other of a hundred reasons.

THIS

I tried to explain this locally prevalent use in this passage of *House of Sky*:

PLACE

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By the time I was a boy and Dad was trying in his own right to put together a life again, the doubt and defeat in the valley's history had tamped down into a single word. Anyone of Dad's generation always talked of a piece of land where some worn-out family eventually had lost to weather or market prices not as a farm or a ranch or even a homestead, but as a place. All those empty little clearings which ghosted that sage countryside—just the McLoughlin place there by that butte, the Vinton place over this ridge, the Kuhnes place, the Catlin place, the Winters place, the McReynolds place, all the tens of dozens of sites where families lit in the valley or its rimming foothills, couldn't hold on, and drifted off. All of them epitaphed with that barest of words, place.

OF SOUTH-CENTRAL MONTANA,

The Doig place, in the Big Belt Mountains ~~not all that many miles north of here,~~ is where my Scottish grandparents seeded this family into America. My father and four of his five brothers, and his sister, *all* were born on that homestead—the last of them in 1910—and being careful, slow-marrying Scots, most of them were around there, off and on, through the late 1920s and even on into the 1930s. Part of my own boyhood on ranches was within a few miles of that original Doig homestead. So, in my growing up, what history the family had was mostly of that place. By now, nobody has lived there for ~~forty~~ ^{FIFTY} years or more—yet it perseveres in ~~ME~~ **ME** —

--as my family's first step on the ladder called America. That homesteading experience, which did for the rural West what the tenements of the immigrant ghettos did for city America--provided landing sites, quarters to hold people until they were able to scramble away to somewhere else--that particular American saga, shared by my family and hundreds of thousands of others in Montana alone, gave me the plot and impetus for my novel **Dancing at the Rascal Fair**. Early in that book, I tried to write of what that dream of coming to the great American land pantry/to find your place/must have been like to a pair of young men, Rob Barclay and Angus McCaskill, as they left from Scotland in 1889:

“Like the duke of dukes, Rob patted the deck rail of the steamship and proclaimed to me: ‘See now, Angus, this is proper style for going to America and Montana.’

America. Montana. Those words with their ends open. Those words that were ever in the four corners of my mind, and I am sure Rob’s, too, all the minutes since we had left Nethermuir. I hear that set of words yet, through all the time since, the pronouncement Rob gave them that day....

intense;
whispery

For with the steamship underway out the Firth of Clyde we were threading our lives into the open beckon of those words. Now we were on our way to be Americans. To be--/what did people call themselves in that far place Montana? Montanese? Montanians? Montaniards? /Whatever that denomination was, now the two of us were going to be its next members, with full feathers on."

And although the setting of **Dancing at the Rascal Fair** is in northern Montana, rather than my own family's chosen acres southeast of Helena, and residents of the fictional valley I call Scotch Heaven are not my own forebears, the historical hard truths that weather and economic climate brought down on the experience of homesteading I thought could be summed up in the book's epigraph from my own father:

"Scotchmen and coyotes was the only ones that could live in the Basin, and pretty damn soon the coyotes starved out."

To me, this is an instance of “the story in the bloodline”--the accumulating power of detail and speculation and wondering and questioning that pulsed in me from knowing of my own homesteading ancestors’ hard work and harder knocks and those of that ghost population, all those other “places” where families hung their names on the wind of time.

When writers from Charles Dickens' London to Tom Wolfe's "Bonfire of the Vanities" New York fuel their creative processes with such accumulated actualities, it is called drawing on what they know. When those of us with fencelines instead of Picadillies and Wall Streets as our boundaries write about the territory we know, it gets called "regional."

I've always liked Paul Horgan's saying whenever he got too tired of always getting called a Southwestern writer--"Everybody is a regionalist," ^{HORGAN} ~~he~~ wrote. "Tolstoy is a regionalist."

One of the challenges--one of the whetstones of creativity--for those of us writing "out here" is that the larger society has long had its own mythic notion of life "out West." Whether embedded in celluloid or paperback pulp, that myth has compressed a large and complicated chunk of America into what I call--as neutrally as I can put it--"guys and their horses."

Before the West began to hear from its first couple of generations (:

of writers actually born and raised out here, literary tourists pretty

much had their way with us. Books set out here on the west side of

America didn't give much attention to the workaday life and the valid

voices of our region. A romantic version that one scholar called

"The cowboys without the cows" got underway at the start of this century

with The Virginian, Owen Wister's famous novel. The Virginian began

a lineage of books that might be called Wisterns. In a Wistern,

(NOT MUCH OF AN INSULT WHERE I COME FROM)

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a bad guy insults a good guy--in The Virginian, the actual insult is

(SHRUG)

"you son of a/blank"[^]--and the good guy dangerously draws back, "When

you call me that ~~smile~~[↗]." But that's about all that does go on in a

Wistern. None of the guys, good or bad, seems ever to do a lick of

everyday work--milk a cow, churn butter, plant a potato. You get the

impression that somewhere just out of sight, there must be a catering

service--maybe someplace around Omaha--that comes out West and feeds

everybody and does the chores.

(2)

/ Back at the ranch at Yosnaya Polyana, I'm sure Tolstoy had his own uninvited ghosts to get past as he tried to write of his heartland. But those of us from the West of women homesteaders and male schoolmarms-- the West of people who came to build rather than to gunsling, to work but to dance and laugh along with it-- we've had to write our way past the Wisterns and then the Westerns--such stereotypes as "The Virginian" and ^{THEN} those later heftier cohorts of his, Louis L'Amour and John Wayne.

Bear in mind that it was only yesterday, historically, when the cultural images of the West were those two guys, with a pound of belt buckle trying to hold up 25 extra pounds of gut. Something had to give way.

Blessedly, it has. In place of those Wisterns and Westerns, we have a number of recent books where, as the historian Richard Maxwell Brown puts it, "nemesis and tragedy, bitterness and beauty" and other "universals of human life" meet, out here in the sage and the section line roads and the windworn ranks of fenceposts.

William Kittredge's memoir **Hole in the Sky;**
Refuge, by Terry Tempest Williams; **Rain or Shine**,
by Cyra McFadden; Mary Clearman Blew's brilliant set
of books, **Balsamroot** and **All but the Waltz**;
Teresa Jordan's **Riding the White Horse Home**,
and Kim Barnes' remembrance of coming-of-age in a
logging family on the Clearwater River of Idaho, **In the
Wilderness.**

~~ANNICK SMITH'S
HOMESTEAD~~

~~These~~ ^{SUCH} "grassroots" works by born Westerners, Richard Maxwell Brown contends, constitute "a meeting ground of the literary talent and the social history of the West." So, I think that's where a lot of us are trying to ^{get to}, from those rural home "places" we've known ever since--as our literary godfather Wallace Stegner once put it--"our legs were long enough to reach the ground."

✓ A second sense of place, this one from my *own* growing-up years in the West, rather than my family's. Which place is mine? Any of you who have worked on a ranch or farm crew may recognize this one. The first day on the job, the first meal you go to there, breakfast most likely, you are fifteen or sixteen or seventeen, plenty big enough to hire out to pile bales of hay or pick rock or summer fallow, but awfully young socially, and you troop in with the rest of the crew, who begin seating themselves along the twenty-foot table, and you stand there with your face hanging out, until the cook or the boss's wife finally points to a certain plate and set of utensils, and says, "Why don't you take that place, there?" And you do, you go ahead and sit down, and it's yours for the summer, unless somebody gets thirsty and quits, and you are moved up into that place. The places, of course, get more and more permanent toward the head of the table. The cook's place, the choreboy's place—you would have to go to the Holy Land to find more sacred spots than those.

And then came the years when I was twenty and twenty-one, and coming home from college to a ranch where I had a different place at the table every time. My father and my grandmother were hired hands on that ranch—my grandmother was the cook, they lived in half of the cookhouse—and so I would come to stay with them between quarters at college, and work there in the summers. I never liked that ranch, didn't like the way it was run, didn't like being around purebred cattle that were worth more than my father and grandmother and I were being paid in a year, didn't even like that part of Montana after having lived my high school years up in the ^{TWO MEDICINE} ~~Dupuyer~~ country. And as a summer hand there I was a bit of a perplexity. Whenever we were rained out of haying, for instance, I'd head on into the cookhouse and read a book, instead of standing around in the machine shop watching it rain. But the rancher put up with me, for the sake of my father and grandmother, and he granted that I did have enough common sense to be able to pile bales of hay.

emphatic

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Through all this, the visits and the summer jobs, I was pretty much a floater at meal times. It was a kind of a hectic ranch, there seldom were the same number of people at any two meals—the rancher himself ate breakfast with us, maybe he and his wife would come down from the big house for supper or dinner and maybe they wouldn't, there might be truck drivers or cattle buyers or mechanics on hand. And so it helped my grandmother to cope with all this by me fitting in at the table wherever there was a place left, after everybody else got sat. I didn't mind—I'd been to college, I knew what the word "peripatetic" meant. And I found it kind of interesting, to have so many different places at that table—to be switched around at random that way. Wondering before each meal, which would be my place?

At the time, I laughed with everybody else. (~~And none of us even knew that someday I'd be over here getting a degree we'd never heard of.~~) But I know now what was happening, in those meal times at that ranch, with the constant question—which place is mine? I *did* get a Ph.D.—but I did *not* go back and ask to drive that tractor. Those places among the hired hands at that table—none of them were mine, or ever going to be, if I could possibly find any way to be on my own in life.

No, for better or worse but certainly for good, those years of taking my place here and there in the seating hierarchy of the ranch social structure fed my ambition to be a writer. Yet, like that sly smile of the Cheshire cat that lingered after the cat had gone away, portions of me kept hanging around those tables of memory. My ears must have stayed there for passages such as this one, from the novel **English Creek**, where my 14-year-old narrator, Jick, has just taken his impromptu place at the supper table with the haying crew of the big Double W ranch:

“The cook came in from the kitchen with a bowl of gray gravy.... She was a gaunt woman, sharp cheekbones, beak of a nose. Her physiognomy was a matter of interest and apprehension to me. The general theory is that a thin cook is a poor idea.

Plain Mike--this haying crew ~~has~~^{HAD} three guys named Mike, differentiated as Long Mike, Mike the Mower, and Plain Mike--Plain Mike was sitting at my left, and at my right was a scowling guy...As I have always liked to keep abreast of things culinary, I now asked Plain Mike in an undertone:

(IN ACTUAL
LIFE, MY
GRANDMOTHER
WAS AMPLE
TESTIMONY
TO THE
TASTINESS
OF HER
MEALS)

“Is this the new cook from Havre?”

“No, hell, she’s long gone. This one’s from up at Lethbridge.”

The scowler at my right had overheard my question and muttered: “She ain’t Canadian though, kid. She’s a Hungrarian.”

“She is?” To me, the cook didn’t look conspicuously foreign.

“You bet. She leaves you hungrier than when you came to the table.”

People who are poor in all else are often ^{THAT WAY} rich in language. The everyday dance and prance of the imaginative tongues I grew up around must have drilled that into me, because from my very start as a book writer with **This House of Sky**, I've always tried to attain a language which makes a shimmer behind the story--the appeal, the wonder, of the vernacular of people's lives--those lives around the table that I was not cut out to live but that I might be a translator of--
their vernacular poetry, I hope, coming through behind my ^{PROSE} words.

As to the other end of the table, the owner's end, the end where the money always ends up, that stays interesting, too, to me. My latest book, **Mountain Time**, takes place partly in Seattle, as well as the northern Rockies, and so there is this passage about the latest cybernaire, Aaron Frelinghuysen, whom I made up--if you're writing current fiction in Seattle and doing your job at all, you probably can't help but make up a latest cybernaire--this way:

“The guy had more money than most nations. Frelinghuysen had piranhaed his way into the techieville food chain with a bit of wonderware called ZYX, and from Silicon Valley to Silicon Alley, the deals had lined up for him.”

Frelinghuysen’s idea of a good time, it turns out, is to take the stage at a party at his cyber mansion and plink out the **Chariots of Fire** theme on a synthesizer, producing this:

QUICK

“The **Chariots of Fire** music suddenly conjured a wall of runners behind Frelinghuysen, the movie’s familiar slow-motion frieze of British distance runners training on the beach for a flannel-era Olympics. Except, everyone in the room caught on within nanoseconds, these were not those ancient Brits in frumpy shorts; these were younger and Lycra-clad and led by a significantly familiar figure.

The guests roared and applauded as the golden head rhythmically bounded along at the front of the pack and its still-golden current version bobbed over the keyboard.

“Fre did cross-country at Lakeside,” Mitch--my
portagonist ^{WHOSE “PLACE” IN ALL THIS IS AS} ~~who is~~ bartending ^{ER} for this cyber shindig--
Mitch overheard. “High school state champion.”

The theme music underwent another electronic
metamorphosis and abruptly another wall ^{OF THE ROOM} turned into a
stadium with a cinder track, this time a newsreel-gray
figure striding and striding in gawky detachment. Roger
Bannister at Oxford in ‘54, breaking the four-minute
mile. But the runner at his shoulder nobly setting the
pace for him was no longer Chris Chataway, it was
Frelinghuysen.

KEEP
IT
QUICK

Fascinated and appalled, Mitch suffered the realization that he was the only person in the room old enough to remember when Bannister's historic mile happened, rather than having it cooked into his mind by television's backward glances. He peered as hard as he could at the spectacle playing out over Frelinghuysen's fingering, but the simulation, the templates or whatever they were--the mask of Frelinghuysen shouldering history along before he was born--looked utterly seamless.

Just as Bannister burst his historic tape, a mountain came into the room and two figures were loping its African slope, Kip Keino training with the playful and predatory cyber-Frelinghuysen shadowing him up/through/the thin air/of Kilimanjaro.”

HELD BY THE WORLD'S FRELINGHUYSENS

The levers of wealth, and power, produce many things, but they have seldom produced memorable writing.

MY NOVEL

I had the great good luck, back when ^{MY NOVEL} **Dancing at the Rascal Fair** was about to be published, to be interviewed by Wendy Smith when she was doing a profile of me for Publishers Weekly. Wendy ^{SMITH} is an acute ^{YOUNG} social historian, the author of a very fine book about the Group Theater of the 1930's which turned its talents to plays about the social and moral issues of the Depression... and in the course of the long interview, when she asked me some version of that question "Where do you get your stuff?" I said something about ^{LOWLY} my [^]vantage point down there toward the foot of those long supper tables.

And Wendy said, "Hey, it was an advantage point, for you. The great work has always been done by outsiders. Shakespeare. Christopher Marlowe. Joseph Conrad from Poland. Tom Stoppard from Czechoslovakia. They weren't the guys born to the head of the table."

The company Wendy ^{SMITH} cited is too fast for me or nearly anybody else to keep up with, but it was a lasting reminder, if I needed any, that in asking "Which place is mine?" the answer had always better be: "There with the sharp end of the pencil pointed [↗] up [↗] the table."

Now to the third and last sense of place I'm aware of in myself, the one that has been making itself known to me ever since I sat down to write something which turned out to be **This House of Sky**.

DELIBERATE

Trying to place it. To place it, first in the sense of identifying--as my dictionary helps out here, "to recollect clearly the circumstances or context of." As in the phrase, one that I myself have to resort to dismayingly often, "I remember your face but I can't place you."

Time and again, as I worked to create a fictional ranching valley called English Creek, I've sat at a keyboard trying "to recollect clearly the circumstances of" portions of the western past that I'd personally been through. Some comes easily enough. I haven't been around sheep full-time for about forty years now and yet when I start to write about how sheep ranching was, I know at once--who can ever forget?--what a sheep rancher's mood was, late in lambing, when his feet were aching from all those weeks of living in overshoes.

But memory is not always enough. In fact, seldom is your own memory enough when you're trying to write accurately. I make it a habit to check details with people who know more about something than I do. Old forest rangers, for the scene of a forest fire blow-up in **English Creek**. Damworkers and engineers, for details of working on the gigantic Fort Peck Dam, in **Bucking the Sun**. Hayhands and homesteaders, photographers and grizzly bear movers--and yes, a Webmaster for the scenes in **Mountain Time** where WebTV and the Internet make their pixellated appearance.

All this, I've never known what to call, except "the slow poetry of fact." The arithmetic of particulars, which creatively get added up into story.

That's the first side, of trying to place it. And then the next, trying to place it in the sense of putting something into [→] place. Setting. Arranging. Making it be where it ought to be. This is the carpentry part of writing. Building a book the reader will want to live in. Hammering together a solid basic structure, then taking care with the finishing-work.

The rhythms, the verbs, the sentence patterns, the word choices, the adjectives, the adverbs, even the prepositions...

Remember that cunning one in Wallace Stegner's story "Carrion Spring" (part of his classic book **Wolf Willow**)--the young ranchman who modernly might be described as suffering a lack of communication with the young wife he has brought to the prairies of Saskatchewan, but who when they meet up with the hard-used son of the local wolf hunter can say to the boy the perfect-pitch sentence, "How've you been doing on wolves?"

48A follows →

All those daubs of language--I believe storytellers have worked at making magic out of those from the very start, when art began to dance off the cave walls to us.

Literature perhaps begins there, with the painted bison running in the tunnels of time, and the hunting

escapades they represent being told around the fire. I think that's what we're still [↑] up [↑] to, in the white canyons of paper and now the nebulae of cyberspace...

I think stories 'still can be our way of sharing light--of sitting together around humanity's fire with the universal dark all around us.

/Our work, our words, of course ^{have} ~~has~~ to start on the cave walls between our own ears.

And that's the spot, the home neighborhood, the address of the imagination, ~~THE PLACE~~ that ultimately shapes our books. The ^{MENTAL} magic shop, call it, where a prairie turns into a seascape.

Let me give you one last example, of two quite different western "places" consciously put together there in the attic of the mind.

The first is San Francisco, on any Friday night of recent years when roller-bladers take to the streets on their weekly celebratory loop through the city:

“The horde on wheel^s kept thickening as more skaters pumped across the Embarcadero and glissaded onto the sidewalk in front of the Ferry Building. Several hundred, Friday-nighted to their pierced eyebrows and gaudy fingernails, already had congregated beneath the building’s clock tower and were milling around in various states of balance. ‘How rav!’ and ‘Dressed for excess!’ sang this tribe of recreational outlaws.

“We rolling!” someone bellowed in echo of the tower clock’s first deep note, and by its eighth chime, were they ever. In one single accelerating commotion the massed rollerbladers let themselves loose, each of them a polymer marble in the spill that rolled toward Fisherman’s Wharf. Tourists in rental cars wildly pulled over at the sight of this meteor shower of get-ups,

the closets of San Francisco airborne on low-flying nyads and masquers, leftover Wavy Gravys and incipient Courtney Loves, seasoned exhibitionists and heart-in-throat first-timers alike borne on boots as speedy as midget locomotives. Skating the rim of the city, the rolling multitude hung a left at Bay Street and aimed its thundering wheels toward Fort Mason.”

A solid snarl of tumbleweeds lay jammed against the barbwire fence of the nearest hay field. One geodesic weed evidently had skittered over the top of the others like an acrobat vaulting the backs of his cohorts, and it sat now against the gravel, rocking as it waited for the next ride from the wind. He went over and thoroughly tromped it into milk-colored straw."

Different as they are, both those evocations of place are FROM ONE SOURCE - YOU'RE LOOKING AT HIM mine, in Mountain Time. San Francisco, observed rather than lived--there isn't very much chance you'll see me out there on roller-blades. The you-have-to-go-home-again small-town experience, lived--of course, of course--rather than observed. But in both cases, "places" that were put together--put into place-- detail by detail in the workshop above my keyboard.

PLACE

So, if “a sense of place” is to be our hymn and marching song across this West, let’s allow some jazz into it. “Place” as something to work from, sure, but also to work on, and work
 →
 toward.

We diminish neither ourselves nor our old loved West by doing so. ^{FOR} I’m reminded of what another writer, who lived and worked far from the supposed literary centers of the world, once said about what he hoped was the worth of his own writing. He was an African novelist, gone now some twenty years, named Camara Laye. Born in Guinea, he lived the last part of his life in

exile in Senegal--a writer twice-removed from anyplace where the world's lenses of fame would have searched him out.

Camara Laye once told an interviewer, who was asking how it was to work so far away from other writers, from the literary power centers, the Parises and New Yorks and Londons--the usual insular suspects--and he responded that he thought the cultures of the world, as expressed in their writers, were all participating in one vast dance, each with its own special movement, each contributing something significant to the total world rhythm.

LOOK UP

I can hear that, in our own western pages. To me, that is the ultimate "place," the true home for a writer--that vast dance of

language. For if we dance them right, our words and stories, they

~~transform~~ ^{TURN} into something more than words and stories about the ^{AMERICAN} West--they become heartbeats of the world.