Al has given me no more than five minutes to try to express my gratitude for this award from this jury of my peers, which gives me a chance to at least show you that I know what a deadline is.

Let us begin at the beginning, when art began to dance off the cave walls to us. Literature perhaps begins there, in 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 to start on the cave walls between our own ears--the everyday life of the writer, if that's what you can call sitting around in your own head all the time.

The patience of one of the odd patron saints of our trade, the late Flannery O'Connor, has always guided me in the long devotion of the writer's backside to the seat of the chair where he or she sits and works. Flannery O'Connor was ill, most of her short writing life, but her collection of letters show her to have been a
dedicated professional. This is what she had to say about a writer’s necessary state of patience:

“I’m a full-time believer in writing habits, pedestrian as it all may sound. You may be able to do without them if you have genius but most of us only have talent and this is simply something that has to be assisted all the time by physical and mental habits or it dries up and blows away... The fact is that if you don’t sit there every day, the day (the words) would come well, you won’t be sitting there.”
Ultimately, Flannery O’Connor’s advice does add up. Art comes by way of craft, of working and reworking those sounds that come off the page. The heart of the language must beat there. Three hearts, really. The rhythms and tides of the bloodstream we all share, words, constitute the first. The Pacific Northwest poet Richard Hugo once did a splendid book on the craft of using words on paper--The Triggering Town, with alloys of common sense and revelation such as this paragraph:

“A student may love the sound of Yeats’ ‘Stumbling upon the blood dark track once more’ and not know that the single-syllable
word with a hard consonant ending is a unit of power in English, and that’s one reason ‘blood dark track’ goes off like rifle shots.... The young poet is too often paying attention to the big things and can’t be bothered with little matters like that. But little matters like that,” Hugo concludes, “are what make and break poems.”

The second vital pulse on the page, I don’t know what to call except the blood-sum of the writer. Magical, inexplicable, whatever it is, but the literary quality by which a writer manages to write better than he has any right to. By which Faulkner, who
could barely rouse himself to sort mail in a somnolent post office, had somewhere in him the ambition as a writer "to put everything into one sentence--not only the present but the whole past on which it depends and which keeps overtaking the present, second by second." By which Yeats, his pince-nez eyeglasses perched on his uppercrust nose, somehow--somehow--could see deeply/"to where all ladders start/ in the foul rag and bone shop of the heart." Call it drive, call it dedication, call it luck but only in Branch Rickey's finely honed definition that "luck is the residue of design."
The third heart of writing is geographical: where we speak from. "They call it regional," my late great friend Bill Stafford wrote in his telling poem, "Lake Chelan"--

"They call it regional, this relevance--the deepest place we have."

For my part, as someone who tries to speak from the Rocky Mountain slopes where I grew up and the blue-watered Pacific Northwest where I’ve spent the majority of my years, I’ve always believed that writers of caliber can ground their work in specific land and lingo and yet be writing of that larger country, life.
(alternative ending)

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For my part, as someone who tries to speak from the Rocky Mountain slopes where I grew up and the blue-watered Pacific Northwest where I've spent the majority of my years, I can testify that these are truly heart-deep places to speak from.