

Contents

Introduction / vii

- Western Wind (Glacier Gorge)—REG SANER 1
- Chatelaine (Leadville)—KRISTEN IVERSEN 18
- Little Bethlehem (San Luis)—FRED BACA 31
- Mists of the Huerfano—THOMAS J. NOEL 37
- Walking in Yampa—KATE KRAUTKRAMER 44
- Pawnee Buttes—MERRILL GILFILLAN 59
- The Bear (Nederland)—JANE WODENING 63
- Meditación en Dos Ojos: García Lake at Cumbres
Pass*—REYES GARCÍA 69
- Gore Canyon—NICK SUTCLIFFE 87
- Their Place, My Place (Ward)—ALEXANDER DRUMMOND 102
- Pastoral Emergence (Mount Evans)—ALEXANDER BLACKBURN 114
- Written on a Piece of Butcher Paper: El Rancho,
Antonito—MARK IRWIN 129
- Where Form Meets Flux: Soft Eyes and Boulder's Four
Cardinal Directions—JAMES LOUGH 138
- The Road Through San Luis—SANGEETA REDDY 158
- Into the Rawahs—SUEELLEN CAMPBELL AND JOHN CALDERAZZO 172
- Blanca Peak—CHRISTIE SMITH 178
- Lumpy Ridge: Buson in the Rockies—AMY ENGLAND 189
- Belmar Park: Where the Sidewalk Ends—ANITA HARKESS 199
- About the Contributors 217
- Index 223

Introduction

What if it was like an old friend, whom you barely remembered
and you didn't know was near, was eagerly waiting
to whisper into your ear, if only you would turn its way,
sit still for a minute, and listen?

THE TASK OF CHARACTERIZING THIS BOOK reminds me of an ancient Irish legend about the god Lugh, also known as the Many-skilled, or the Shining One. One day, Lugh wanted to attend a big feast held by a local tribe. But it was a private affair. The skeptical gatekeeper who guarded the walled banquet hall asked Lugh what he could contribute to the tribe that it didn't already have. Lugh said he was a blacksmith. The gatekeeper replied that they already had a blacksmith. Lugh said he was an athlete. The gatekeeper said they had plenty of athletes. Lugh went on to list all of his other godlike talents: musician,

warrior, poet and historian, physician, sorcerer, and more. The gatekeeper again insisted that they already had all of those things.

Lugh then asked, “But do you have a single person who possesses *all* of these skills?”

The gatekeeper thought about it for a minute. Conceding that they did not, he allowed Lugh into the feast.

Like Lugh, *Sites of Insight: A Guide to Colorado Sacred Places* has multiple aspects. First, it serves as a nature guidebook of sorts for readers who already know the value of wilderness but want suggestions on where best to experience it. Second, it proves a handy travel guide for tourists, or those new to Colorado. Third, *Sites of Insight* contributes to this country’s great tradition of philosophical writing about nature. Writers such as Thoreau, Aldo Leopold, and Annie Dillard have focused on specific locales—Walden Pond, Sand County, or Tinker Creek—to remind us of the significance of wilderness to our lives, to encourage us to rethink our relationships to the wild and, by implication, to civilization. Fourth, this book deals with nature’s relationship to spirituality. For about long as there has been writing, there have been writings rooted in the perennial philosophy, writings as ancient as those of Lao Tsu, or as relatively recent as those of Emerson. These works have explored the spiritual dimension of wilderness, or at least regarded nature as an apt setting from which to lead a spiritual life. And finally, *Sites of Insight* reveals facets of Colorado history.

The world already has writings on each of these aspects. But, we respond confidently, how many books cover all five? How many focus on specific places and their histories, plus reflect on environmental issues and consider nature’s value to a life of spirit?

Most of you probably already appreciate nature. So the first aim of *Sites of Insight* is not to help you find a greater appreciation of the natural world, but rather to help you find a deeper one. I’ve asked the contributors to choose a particular location in Colorado that is meaningful to them in a deep way, and to explore that spot in relation to their own lives. So although the essays are about specific places in Colorado, they are also about the writers themselves (not to mention their friends and family, and animals both domestic and wild) and what the locales mean to the writers on a very personal level.

I hope you will identify with the authors' attempts to move beyond nature that is merely pretty, a photograph on a calendar, and into a natural realm that is also meaningful. This kind of depth requires an exploration not only of the place and its nuances, but also of the person and his or her own subtleties.

Just as interestingly, the writers in *Sites of Insight* reveal how our views of nature have been shaped by personal and cultural assumptions. These days, we have many views to choose from. For some, such as Nick Sutcliffe, nature is a serious playground, an arena for extreme sports, where we put our strength, skill, and courage to the test. For others, such as Amy England, nature is more of a forum to explore aesthetics: who decides what is beautiful in nature and by what criteria? In his essay, Reg Saner doesn't ignore nature's beauty, but neither does he ignore the hard indifference of wilderness to our survival in it. Sangeeta Reddy, Mark Irwin, and I myself explore nature as a crucible where, lacking the distractions of civilization, we are forced to face ourselves.

And is it so easy to define nature apart from civilization? Anita Harkess's essay explores her relationship to a private urban park that had gone feral, and then was returned, or reconstructed, to civilization. In addition, can we even look upon a locale and see its natural features separately from the people who live there? The essays of Christie Smith, Fred Baca, Kate Krautkramer, Kristen Iverson, Tom Noel, and Reyes García pose this question.

And where do animals fit in? Are we committing the sin of anthropomorphism when we presume to guess what animals are thinking, or even *that* they are thinking? Or, as Jane Wodening explores in her essay, can we presume some of these things intuitively? Are animals in touch with a more essential form of being that we humans, made soft by civilized life, have forgotten? Do they remind us of our own more primal, savage sides? Or is Darwinism sufficient? Is nature nothing more than a hierarchy of hungry, competing, sharp-toothed mouths, chosen at random to out-power and outlast one another?

In the eighteen essays gathered here, you will find eighteen unique visions of what that connection between person and place means. Some authors express their experiences in terms of religion and theology. A few hold skeptical or even atheistic views, but still see in Colorado's

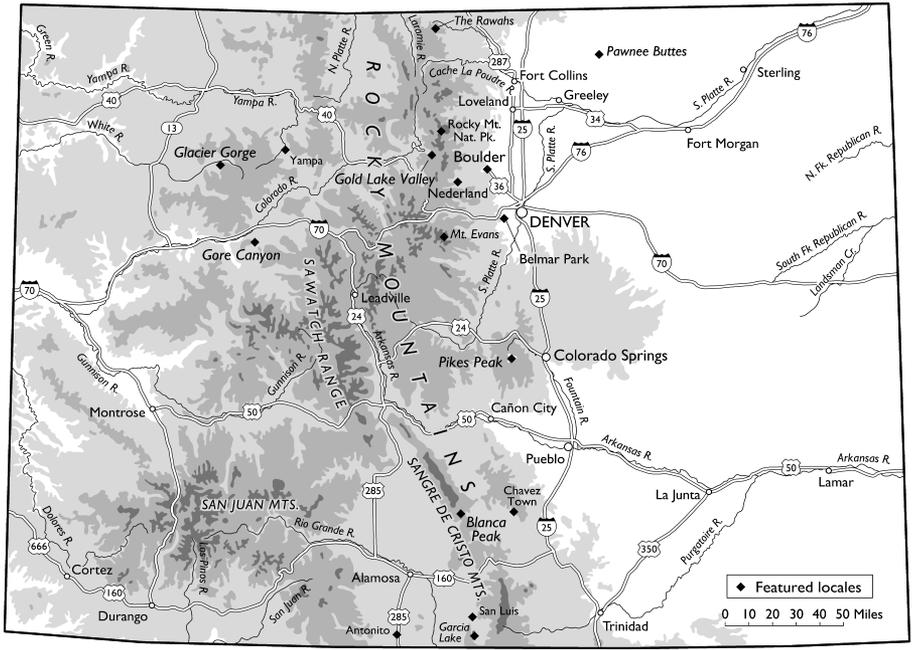
wilderness an environment where they approach something more intense and concentrated than their day-to-day experience can provide.

When I invited these writers to contribute their work to *Sites of Insight*, emphasizing that I wanted essays about Colorado locales that had some deeper spiritual significance to them—however they defined it—I was pleased to discover that no one had any trouble understanding the assignment. Something in nature inspires metaphysics. It has always provided a vital setting in the sacred texts of the world's religious traditions. In the Bible, Jesus goes into the wilderness in order to confront temptation and reaffirm his life in Spirit. The Buddha achieved enlightenment not while sitting in a monastery, but while seated outside beneath the Bodhi tree. Hindu swamis and yogis have always retreated to the caves of the Himalayas for instruction in the divine. Indigenous, or shamanistic, religions, such as those of the Native Americans, have always viewed the connection between nature and Spirit as a given.

In all honesty, I'm not convinced that nature is any more conducive to Spirit than civilization is. Even Ralph Waldo Emerson—for many, America's high priest of nature as spirituality—wrote, "Nature is a symbol of spirit." Not spirit itself, but a symbol of it. As Emerson put it, "We see the world piece by piece, as the sun, the moon, the animal, the tree; but the whole, of which these are the shining parts, is the soul."

To some of the more skeptical writers of the early twenty-first century, perhaps only nature remains to stir in us the kind of awe that God once inspired in our ancestors. Either way, wilderness feeds the human spirit. It strips us of our trivial, daily worries, errands, and distractions. It turns our awareness to something larger than ourselves, and paradoxically invites us to turn more deeply within ourselves. I hope *Sites of Insight: A Guide to Colorado Sacred Places* will help do the same for you.

—James Lough



◆ Featured locales
 0 10 20 30 40 50 Miles