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The Sky Knows Itself—Place

A Letter to the Headwaters from This Place

Dear George,

Here is this struggle, my struggle to write about a place when all i do is write about this place. Some part of me feels like all you have to do is press play and i will begin again in some innate migration to the llanos, mountains, churches and rivers that form my home. i suppose it is no accident that i chose the word migration. my people came to my valley home and lands of New Mexico over 400 years ago and have been stealing or stolen from ever since.

i tell my students that we are by nature a migratory people. our own migration is like Orion's, the constellation just now back in our night, and his winter journey through the sky. He begins himself, tilted in the east, lying on his side and moves slowly upright in the southern sky before falling again on his side in the west. And then there is my own abuelito who personified this for me, who fell into his western sky on February 15th at 1:35 p.m. By now you must be wondering what my many loose connections, stars, migration, religion, family are trying to do here. Ultimately, they must be together and will be my place.

George, here is how the connections come to me. i am six years old and my parents have moved us to Pueblo, where my dad has found work. Every weekend, and i mean every weekend, we load our Caprice Classic and we drive south to this place that is ours. Sometimes my older brothers have football games and we leave after, our headlights cutting through the early morning of a road filled with pot-holes, so that we can pull into the driveway of my boyhood home at three in the morning. Later, at six a.m., my father wakes us so that we can begin the ranch work which has been neglected during the week. The story unfolds from there, packing up Sunday evening and returning to Pueblo and a house where we all do not fit, my brothers sleeping in the family room.

To me the idea of a place, a sense of place is somewhere we come back to at all costs and at all hours of the day or night. i think often of the

Monarch butterflies and their yearly migration to the south where they will finally rest in the Mexican pines. i have heard that there are so many of them that the trees groan from the weight of so many butterflies, the thick branches bent toward the earth in supplication. Here is the tragic part. Every year fewer and fewer butterflies return to Mexico. They are victims of pesticides, growth and too many cars, much like us.

i mention the butterflies because they remind me of my town and how many of us return despite the poverty, and like the Monarchs fewer and fewer make the journey with each passing generation. My town is still poor, though every year the river canyon west of my home is gobbled up by homes made of beautiful scraps. The lumber which goes into the homes is standard grade, the same stuff that clogs canyons and shorelines everywhere so that someone can have a view. The scraps, those are measured in human terms. For the most part these transplants buy only the necessities from my town, gas and fishing licenses. We see very little of the wealth that grows three stories high on a ridge where pine and aspen used to mingle. We are a beautiful people that too many think of as scrap.

So back to the butterflies, may my God bless them and their journey. May this same God bless Orion and all the rest of us who travel so that we may return and rest in the warm trees that are innately part of us. All this rambling George, and essentially what i'm saying is that a place defines us because the soul and the home are synonymous.

One last thing amigo, earlier i mentioned my abuelito and his passing. His star is somewhere beyond the San Juans' grasp, fading slowly from this hemisphere and brilliantly into another. i mention him because i miss him and because i believed, and to a certain extent still do, that he is permanently a part of this place, my home, a mountain range away from yours. i never got to say goodbye to him, though i was at his bedside on that February afternoon when it seemed even the sheep in the field below his home stopped moving. The only thing in the air was his last breath and the mumbled prayers of someone speaking too fast in Spanish.

So you see George, there is no sense to goodbyes because our human mind will not let go what it knows will return. i see my abuelito at the table playing solitaire, chopping wood, driving off to the sheep camp or simply standing there broad shouldered. This too, memory, is our place, and this round home we call earth, she disappears from herself and from us at times but returns in whatever positions are native to her and our memory. These canyons that wrinkle her and the butterflies that fan her and rest in her hair keep coming, migrating toward us and through us or perhaps it is the other way around. We cannot say goodbye to our places, no matter how they change, we must always return to them. George we make each place our own by the things we return to it, living or remembered.

Much peace to you and your own place with its migrations uniquely yours. Please do share.

Be well.

your friend,

a.

A Letter to Guillermo Concerning Why i Must Write

Dear Guillermo,

i feel that i must write. That there is something inside me which, like always, needs to be said, needs to be told. i look back now on the stories of my little town. The town which i cannot leave, my heart somehow held within its adobe walls. i think of the time i tripped running across the street and saw deep grooves cut into the asphalt from all those years of cruising back and forth, by all those people young and old, all of whom i know by name. It is muscles flexed for full effect, smooth necks, long hair, well sprayed being tossed like bait. These are the arms which bring me back, the beauty which keeps me.

Guillermo, it is not about the grooves in the street. It is about how they got there. They were formed by age, sun, wind and all those forces of nature we writers substitute for love and metaphor.

i think about that town, old and brown like Lara's house, which a long time ago my brothers and i tore down, how that was our last attempt at leaving, how we didn't know then what the house stood for, what the town stood for. We did not realize that when we took our hammers and shovels to it we were trying to destroy a part of our past. i believed that because we were going to plant alfalfa where it stood this somehow made it all right to bring the house back to its roots of dust and memory.

i remember how we tore into that house and turned the adobe to a fine dust that clung to our skin like an old shirt. i remember that we listened to my abuelo as he told us that the field used to be more than just chamizo, how despite the rocks Lara had managed to plant grain. How now, despite the rocks, we must re-plant ourselves there.

Towards the end of the day we were tired. We had taken in all the stories my abuelito offered, and with each piece of the wall crumbling the names would disappear like willow flesh from our memories. Knowing that our own names would somehow be forgotten beneath the din of magpies that flew down from the cliffs to watch, to wait at the base of the mountain

where long ago some lover had painted two blue hearts, now fading. As we finished, our bodies tired, we were able to walk away. i was the last to leave, a soft stepper walking on the brown skeleton of Lara's house, leaving my own name with the crumbled walls so the magpies could finally eat.

A Letter About Memory on my Abuelito's 87th Birthday

So here is how i will remember this place, my father arm wrestling with his 87-year-old father.

“Let him win” someone says quietly, so that my abuelito will not hear. “Viejo pero no espuelaio” he declares when he beats my father.

My abuelito defines this place, small house with thick adobe walls where my grandmother kept wild cats fed, almost loved.

From the kitchen window you can see the Mogotes, blue at dusk, just before dark. At this window my abuelo would shave in the early mornings, in almost this same light, slightly more orange and much quieter as he had the kitchen to himself. He is 87 now, and in his memory he claims to have seen the Conejos River from that window. Now there are trees, green now in summer, which twist along the vega marking the river's path. From this window you can see the broken down wagon which long ago he used to haul ice from the river. He tells Michele and i that sometimes he feels like his old wagon, missing wheels, boards missing, broken, or bowed with time.

It is approaching 9 p.m., almost time to put my grandfather to bed. He does not walk anymore. He has to be lifted from his wheelchair onto a small hospital bed which barely seems present in a room that used to be full of my abuelo and his history. When i was young he had a cabinet full of rifles, pistols, and a sword from the Spanish-American war. i admired the 30.30., the magnums, the .32 Beretta pistol, the massive sword which seemed to weigh more than the entire room. His room seems smaller now. The bed barely taking up space next to the north wall, the gun cabinet, unlocked, empty except for the dust and various canes. It was not always this way.

When i was young i would ride my bike, the ¼ mile west, to my grandparent's to chop wood for their wood stove. It was one of those chores a kid does because he is a kid, not because he can chop wood. My abuelito could chop wood better than any man i have ever seen. Holding the wood block with his left hand, his right arm ascending with a double

adze blade, seven pounds, just above his head and then dropping quickly, like a blinking eye, inches away from the fingers of his left hand, the log splitting perfectly, one blow. Chopping wood is one of those talents which is almost lost to the world. Save for memory.

He was rarely home, always driving his Ford truck to some camp, some mountain. It is difficult to see him without motion. He is a nicer man now, but something in me longs for the meaner abuelito who struck fear in me as i admired him. i don't know, really, how to remember him, or if i should just know him as he is now. To remember or to know. Perhaps both.

So here is how i will remember this place. Just before dark with the sky blueing to black, my abuelito in a wheelchair, strong except for his legs. This kitchen with scuffed linoleum, my abuelito at his same spot, the head of the table, the empty chair to his left, my grandmother's place, empty for seven years now. The water from the well has always been cold and sweet. The window has always had a view of the vega, corral, the broken wagon at the bottom of the hill. There are only juice glasses in the cabinet; i leave the water running as i drink four glasses. My abuelito is behind me and to my left. He asks me if i remember this place, living here, my abuelita who always baked bread on Friday. i finish my last glass of water, turn the faucet shut. i turn to my grandpa, knowing that i will always remember this place.

"Yes." i say, and for a while this is when the room becomes silent, the night finally wins, and it is time for bed.

A Letter to K. Translating Spanish

i think it is interesting that you would mention such things as the valley sky, breath and cold now that Orion is wildly tilted in our eastern winter sky. He is my favorite constellation, though i do not know what he could be hunting in a sky so welcoming.

Recently i looked over some of my very old and not so good poems and noticed that i mentioned sky almost instinctively. i was fascinated with clouds, rain, snow and other things aviary like our owl. Later, i looked at the new stuff and noticed that the sky had left the poems. There was no mention of the fingernail moon, the clouds that arrive already bruised in late summer. Orion, every night, reminds me that the sky is what makes the valley. At first, i thought it was the mountains, the winter Blanca, Crestone and the San Juans. At one point i thought it was religion that defined the valley.

These things are still very much a part of me and this place Michele and i, again, call home.

The sky though. The mornings are my favorite, sunrise and all its shades of blues, blacks and reds. i said once that the sky in the mornings is a malignant blue. i don't think people understood what i meant by that; malignant is such a negative word, even for a sky that is immune to negativity. i did not mean that the sky would die of some disease, though some think it might, but rather that it grows from itself, multiplies in ways a pen, brush or imagination cannot fathom. Often, we do not know why things grow inside us. The sky knows itself very well i think. It grows with purpose.

So every night as Orion lies there in the winter east. i breathe a few visible breaths in his direction. i watch as the vapor ascends without the reservations of gravity. i can see the silhouetted hills and mountains against the light of the stars, millions of them.

Without the sky they would not be no mountains. i think maybe your student might have meant poner, as in to put light into a person's shoes.

Perhaps he meant for someone to walk like the stars, across the dark sky with all their lit shoes and bright eyes.

Para poner la luz en tu zapatos. That is quite nice.

i will tell our owl, Michele's good friend with the very white wings that stretch into the above mentioned sky, to look out for you and your good husband. So that you will know, she flies over an earth which is mostly brown, though it looks gold when the light is right. Just the other day the owl flew over a white earth, and that night as the frost formed on the wire fences around our home, in the headlights of our vehicle, the crystals of ice looked like stars, touchable and cold. The sky caught my breath that night, and Orion did not hunt.

Adios.

Your friend,

a.

A Letter to K. About Rain and Hammers

It sounds to me that you have found peace amidst the banging of a hammer and the dust of creating new things. There is much creation in you. Your house, garden, and friends do better with your attention. The roof will be a good thing for you to undertake. Perhaps there will be leak after a hard rain. Something tells me that if there is it will be a nice reminder of the hard work you put in.

i guess i think of leaks in a roof as a single flaw, necessary and mysterious. Origins with such things are not so easy to trace but worth looking into.

This last September i began to appreciate such things as leaks. Here is that story.

We were back in the valley after a long time away. This part you know, but we returned to daily rains and much green. This we were not used to, so much of two things in a place where we become used to brown. There were daily rains and we, one evening when the sky was especially full, decided to go to church.

i've told you about the priest who preaches nothing but Devil and damnation. This is a God story. The priest had begun. Again, he was talking about the fiery furnaces of hell, and then it began to rain.

The church, with its tin roof, sits in a meadow, very green and full this year. Beneath this tin roof there is a single, very small, room with a few wooden pews, an altar, some saints and Jesus on the wall, and at the front a priest.

It began to rain very hard. i smiled thinking it was angels, thousands of them, running across the tin roof. The drops of rain on the few windows liked the last of the autumn light and the church was filled with sound and that very same light. The priest worked hard to speak above the rain. Today the devil or whatever evil we were supposed to fear in this sermon succumbed to the rain.

i was happy.

Then, Karen, it was silent for a few seconds, the sermon and rain ending almost on cue. It is then that the roof betrayed its flaw, very fast dripping

at the rear of the church. Here is where man shows his own flaws. From the old wooden rafters at the rear of the church, someone had tied an old coffee can with baling wire. This person had not sought out the source of the leak, a narrow slit, a small lightless hole where a nail had failed to do its job. Rather, this person had instead placed a coffee can, a tinny metronome to count the cadence of our meditation.

There is much sound in hammers, roofs, rain, and peoples' thoughts. The flaw is not always necessary, but it is a way to remember sound after the initial work has rested. You mentioned Lent. i think you said something of introspection. That is a carpenter's work and a writer's too. It is a good thing that you are both. A sound maker.

Sometimes it will take a dripping roof to make a person write. Other times it will be a well hammered note from a friend that you haven't heard from in a long time. Both are like the rain, proof of things beyond our own tracing, without origins, but in us like a tinny metronomic heartbeat.

peace, be well.

Your amigo,

a.

a letter from my journal to juan

writing from canada de los tankes
sheep have stopped here again
seems mythical how they know where to stop
do not miss city think of friends
but enjoy being alone

my abuelito used to measure everything in summers
this annual trip to sierra marked his existence
he was first to point out how sheep stop here on their own
have always loved that about this place good spirits
abuelito does not make trip anymore too old
wonder if he now learns seasons in reverse
marks his years with return of herd to rancho
assume this is the case
he would not know any other way

made a good pot of beans
had to add water six times
took eight hours to make them on the estufita
will savor them

rained the night before herd got here
had hard time making fire
thought of Pound real education must ultimately be limited to men
who insist on knowing. the rest is mere sheep-herding
never liked that guy
wonder if he knows what got into Ubaldo in 1957
wonder what made him leave his herd in the middle of the night
and run for six miles
before falling off the cliffs of toltec gorge
brujas

ezra might know
do not think he knows what it was like for sheep
lost 86 head
coyotes had a good winter
truly doubt if he knew the smell of Ubaldo's body
when my abuelito found him in river at bottom of gorge
he was only one able to carry him out
do not envy him
cannot imagine feel of skin falling off body
anyway back to pot of beans
had trouble with fire
wished Pound book had been in my possession

lost a borregito somewhere in brazos
must have tired
sheep did not seem to care
but noticed that her ubre was swelling
will begin summer in rincon bonito
where Gabriel killed six deer with six shots
amazing shots
beginning to understand why
if you ask a herder what he is doing
he usually replies making a pot of beans
live from meal to meal
can see that is how it works out here

mosquitoes are like bad dream which am unable to wake from
they tend to stick to the cool wet around the river
makes fishing difficult
but still enjoy the odd angles of my shadow on water
think of grandpa Joe
my last image of him

peaceful and somehow baggy as he stood beneath crab apple tree
odd memory
the baggy part
but knew he had died because of that image
remember him as good fisherman
beautiful unfurling of his line
bamboo rods lonely in garage after his death
think of him often on river
his spirit must be around here somewhere
always walking upstream
because that was the way he did it
can see him sometimes
good fisherman

must sign off for now
please wish everyone my love
take care
adios