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postscripts

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Retrospections on Time and Place Robert Root

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Set in Scala.

For Zola,
who raised the level of my perception,
and for Ezra, Louie, Lilly, and Eliza,
who keep it high
—with love

I tend to write about events or circumstances
that raise the level of my perception.

—E. B. WHITE

In my walks I would fain return to my senses.
What business have I in the woods, if I am
thinking of something out of the woods?

—HENRY DAVID THOREAU

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prologue

Words in the Wind (The Green Mountains, Vermont)

In the aerial photograph on the postcard, Bread Loaf's oval campus dominates the foreground, and the unbroken deep green blur of the surrounding mountains throws its features—vibrant yellow meeting halls and lodgings, stark white library and theater, expansive light green lawns—into bright contrast. The encircling forest casts the viewer's gaze back toward the campus whenever it strays from it. This place must be the center of things, the viewer thinks, and doesn't wonder how far that forest extends beyond the edges of the postcard or what it conceals.

We who attend the writers' conference here get to live for a week in that postcard. Returning from a brief exploratory walk through the field across the road, down to a little river whose gurgling current sounds like unintelligible conversation, I seem to enter the establishing shot of a campus movie. The mown path arches uphill, and at first I seem to stroll toward sky, then, farther up the path, toward the tips of distant mountains. When I reach the level, I am facing the campus itself, which replaces both mountains and sky in my vision the closer I approach. Other workshoppers spread out across the porches and walks, appearing from a distance to be lively and earnest and thoroughly engaged with one another. Their words reach me in light gusts at first, then in a steady gale of sound as I cross the road. By the time I enter the main meetinghouse, a whirlwind of words has encircled me, and the mountains have disappeared from view.

Our days are measured by workshops, classes, performances, meetings, and meals, our inner lives exposed and explored in interior spaces; we move from room to room, building to building. Outdoors,

when we slip off to read or write in the green and yellow Adirondack chairs scattered across the lawns, we usually face the campus, where our doppelgangers dodge among the buildings. We let the curious mountains look over our shoulders at the words on the pages that preoccupy our gaze. The hum of distant voices rises and falls with shifting breezes.

Talk is everywhere—we are not only writers and readers of words but performers of words, analyzers of words, generators of uncountable words about the words we've generated. In the dining hall the words rise to a din that bounces off the walls, like engines at a stock car race, and I leave each meal dazed and deafened.

Looking for a quiet place to discuss my manuscript, my workshop leader and I climb to the third-floor porch of the faculty rooming house, on the side out of the persistent wind. Our chairs face the mountains, but we look only at one another as we talk. He explains his creative process and examines my work-in-progress; I query, respond, and react. We watch each other form words, talk intently of art and artifice, soon hear only each other's words and not the wind.

I leave the porch trying to memorize his words in the hope that they will guide my revision, then rush to another porch, shaded and out of the way, on the side of the main meetinghouse. There I face an editor, enthroned in a corner, screened off by building walls and bushes rising above the porch railing. More words. She scans my written words in a proposal on her lap, and we exchange spoken words about them, mine earnest and expository and, I hope, persuasive, hers practical, efficient, authoritative, conveyed with a sympathetic (and gently discouraging) charm.

A friend here has told me that her goal in writing is “to be part of the conversation.” When my second porch interview is over, I try to gauge my own place in that conversation by the measure of these interviews. I drift back to my room, replaying the meetings in my mind and listening for clues about my words. I find my workshop roommate stretched comfortably on his bed, reading. He asks what

the weather's like outside. Even though I've been outdoors for over two hours, I am startled to have to tell him I don't know.

The next day I strike out for the mountains.

The trees lining the rough dirt road behind the Bread Loaf campus cut off my view at once. I drive slowly, raising a lethargic wake of dust, until I arrive at the parking area for the Skylight Pond Trail. It is midafternoon by the time I start walking. After I pass a few returning hikers near the trailhead, I am alone in the woods. The day is cool and the trail shaded by a thick canopy of maple and beech, but the walking warms me as I climb steadily from the trailhead. Soon I enter the Bread Loaf Wilderness, a portion of the Green Mountains National Forest. A posted map indicates boundaries and limits of spaces that can't be discerned on site, in the thick woods, on the dense forest floor. The woods offer no easy passage through, except on the trail itself and the occasional creek bed or storm wash that crosses it, and my range of vision is limited on every side. Hiking in shadow over uneven terrain, I concentrate on placing my footsteps, the words of the past several days echoing in my brain. I relive conversations, analyze advice, revise and compose and imagine, and trudge upward. Sun and sky break through the canopy only near the top of the mountain.

It is too late in the day, and I have come too unprepared to make a lengthy hike. At the intersection of the Skylight Pond Trail and the Long Trail, the one that crosses Vermont lengthwise from Massachusetts to Quebec, I shake off distractions and consider my options, then turn south toward the nearby peak of Battell Mountain. The top of the mountain is less crowded than the slopes but still lushly overgrown. Open spaces through the trees appear to promise unrestricted vision, but when I approach them, I quickly drop off the level, and the potential vista disappears behind barriers of treetops and dense thickets of young firs. A side path leads me to a small opening through the trees on the western slope and, just below it, to an outcropping of granite, large and bare. The sky is the only thing beyond it. I lower

myself carefully to a ledge across from it, leap a deep, narrow crevice, and pull myself onto its slanting, uneven surface.

The peak of Battell Mountain is 3,482 feet. The outcropping is perhaps 100 feet lower. Exposed on the boulder, I feel the insistent strength of the wind. It quickly cools my sweat-dampened t-shirt and hair, tugs at my hat. I make every movement cautiously, deliberately. I take off my daypack, take out my binoculars, my daybook, and my pen; I position things so they will not slide away from me and plunge off the mountain, and I continually remind myself not to lunge after anything that does. Then I settle in and gaze across the terrain. The unobstructed view I have achieved is so expansive, its scale so vast, its horizons so distant, that I have to survey it slowly to take it all in.

I am at first aware only of ragged strips of green and blue, like randomly torn and variously shaded pieces of construction paper arranged in a layered collage—the dark green of fir and spruce sprinkled with stands of oak and beech immediately below me, the brighter green of the maple canopy lower down, the dull green of the mountains across the valley, the rich green of farmlands visible through the mountain gaps, and, in the hazy distance, more mountain chains, their colors changing from blue-green to shades of blue, growing lighter with each range. I shift my gaze slowly, overwhelmed and wordless. My mind empties of language and rallies all its resources to process sight, while the wind whispers past my ears, sotto voce, from the direction of my vision.

Many minutes pass uncounted before I attempt to recover the power of thought and try to identify what I see. At once I figure out that Bread Loaf Mountain is the higher peak looming nearby to the north. Then I realize that the line of distant mountains to the west, emerging from the haze where I mistook them for a low dark band of clouds, must be the Adirondacks, where I hiked just weeks ago. As if a closer view could confirm it, I lift my binoculars to scan them, then recognize the long irregular pale blue strip puddled before them as Lake Champlain. Unsure of my position on the outcropping, I feel nonetheless well grounded in my location.

I begin to search the nearer landscape for particulars, beginning with a glinting in the forest that catches my eye, a large pond in the middle of a forest clearing. Through field glasses I vainly search its marshy shallows for moose, then swivel toward another, longer pond farther south and inspect that as well. In the periphery of my vision I notice yet another clearing to the south and, when I swing toward it, recognize the campus of our conference. My position is behind and above the view on the postcard, beyond the northerly reaches of forest the photograph only suggests, higher and more distant. I steady my binoculars against my knee and scan the yellow buildings, picking out the barn, the inn, the faculty house. From here the library and the theater are hidden by trees, and the academics and artists are as invisible as moose. I focus on the porches of the faculty house, where yesterday I gazed complacently at this mountain. Now I gaze back from the mountain, serenely. Complacency is not the same as serenity.

I remember then how the postcard representation of the campus centered it in that panorama. From the mountain, though, the campus is merely a carefully maintained clearing, an artifice as deliberate and artful as the setting in a novel or a poem. Off to one side and hard to notice except for its size, it is less integrated with the landscape than the forest ponds I see gleaming in the distance.

I become aware of how silent it is, how silent I have been. Sitting on that outcropping, shaking in the wind, cooled and unsettled by its force and the precariousness of my perch, I close my eyes to center myself on listening. The landscape vanishes, the campus vanishes, the granite vanishes. I hear only the wind, emptied of all other sound, carrying only its own voice, and I vibrate sympathetically, like a tuning fork.

Somehow the wind has drawn me into the conversation that the universe carries on with itself, without ceasing. I open my eyes slowly, in order to keep my balance, and before I have to begin my descent, I listen a while longer to the solitary voice of the wind.