

MONTHS ONE & TWO

---

## Creating a Healing Place



## What If?

Say that it were to begin like this—an invitation arriving in the mail:

*You are invited  
An 8-week writing and healing retreat  
At a site of your choosing*

And say that it's become possible for all of your ordinary routines and responsibilities to be suspended. Work schedules have been rearranged. Children will be safe and well cared for. Anything and everything has been rescheduled such that it will not interfere. In addition, provisions have been made for your house or apartment to be cared for in your absence. Plants watered. Cats fed as needed. Floors swept. (Of course, you're also free to bring your cats with you—it's your retreat after all.)

Say that simply planning this retreat—no matter what your present circumstances—could be of benefit. And say that imagining it in some detail is somehow important.

What details would you imagine?

A gravel road?  
The smell of water?  
A white cottage?  
Climbing roses?  
A blue door?  
A room with large windows?

A desk beneath the windows?  
A breeze?  
A loft upstairs?  
A door opening from the loft onto a deck?

How would you begin to describe your own ideal place?  
What details would be essential?  
What sounds—or silence—do you imagine?  
What about the temperature?  
The color of the sky?

This list of sensory details—or perhaps a few paragraphs of description—could be the next entry in your notebook, or the first document in your folder for months one and two. It establishes a place from which to begin—a place that can, potentially, contain the work, and nourish it.

---

## Freewriting

**Y**ou can elaborate on a healing place—or a series of healing places—or on anything at all—by doing short bursts of continuous writing. As you write, the idea is to try to keep your pen moving as much as possible—or your fingers on the keyboard. There's no need to worry about spelling or punctuation or grammar, or about making beautiful sentences. The point, here at the beginning, is simply to get some words onto the page.

You can set a timer beforehand and try to write like this for ten minutes at a time, or fifteen, or twenty. Often it's best to avoid rereading what you've written until later—though I would suggest saving what you've written.

This kind of rapid, freeform writing is often called freewriting, and you may already be familiar with it. If not, the gist of it is that you really do have a free ticket. You can write whatever you like. You absolutely cannot do it wrong. You can begin with a word—a fragment of overheard conversation—an image from a dream—or a word from your previous day of writing. You can begin with the word *healing* or *retreat* or *lake*. And then you can begin to write and see where this takes you. If you get stalled at any point you can come back to the word with which you began—or you can simply write that you have nothing to write about—over and over if you like—until a new thought appears, and then you can begin to write that.

Peter Elbow, in *Writing Without Teachers*, describes periodic freewriting as *the* most effective way to improve one's writing. He suggests that it's like writing something and putting it in a bottle and sending it out to sea—with no expectations of what will happen after. He also describes it as non-editing. More like speaking than writing because it doesn't interpose all this fretful editing and censoring between our thoughts and the page. "Practiced regularly," he says, "it undoes the ingrained habit of editing at the same time you are trying to produce. It will make writing less blocked because words will come more easily. . . ."

My students—high school sophomores—love to talk. Most of them love talking much more than they love writing. I suspect they find it easier. But they're also fairly agreeable, open to guidance. At the beginning of every class, amid their chatter, I dim the lights and remind them that all of their brilliance, all their thoughts and emotions and venting and humor and planning and stories must now flow out of their hand rather than their mouth. They settle in. They write for fifteen or twenty minutes in bound composition books that we call daybooks, and afterwards they will often tell me that they feel lighter—or calmer. At the end of the semester my favorite thing to hear from a student is that they did not think of themselves as a writer at the beginning of the semester but that now they do. Often these same students will attribute this to the daybook—and to the practice of freewriting—this freedom to explore and develop a sense of flow in their writing. It's another foundation piece, like healing place.

So . . . freewriting . . .

You can write that you have nothing to write about. You can write that you wish you'd bought a different pen. You can write about your ants, or your aunts for that matter, or your laundry. You can begin with your secret hopes for writing and healing, and then in the middle you can stop and switch directions and you can write about . . . what? Your shoes? Your breakfast? The street you lived on as a child? The sky's the limit. And somewhere beyond that—stars, constellations, galaxies. You can make a list of all the constellations you know, and some you've never heard of but you wish they existed, and then you can if you like, come back to this notion of writing

and healing and you can write about what in the world the stars might have to do with it and where in the world you would like to go for a while to consider these questions. You really can't do this wrong. You write and then you let it go—like releasing a message in a bottle—with no expectations.

---

## **But What if You're Too Tired to Begin?**

**I**t's a paradox. Wanting to write in order to heal, but feeling, sometimes, just a wee bit too tired to get started. What to do? Write just a little? Take a nap first?

What if you were to start right where you are? What if you wrote into and about the weariness itself? What if you began simply with all the words for weariness—embraced the words themselves. Drowsiness. Exhaustion. Lethargy. Lassitude. Listlessness. Languor. (So many Ls.) What about torpor? Enervation?

I'm so tired I could . . . What?

What if you wrote about the deep ache of fatigue in your body? Where is it exactly? In your eyes? Your limbs? Your heart?

Or perhaps there's some other ache or sensation that's calling for attention? What would happen if you began to give this your full, undivided attention? What would happen if you were to try and give it words?

What would happen if you yielded a bit to the demands of the body rather than trying to push it back?

What if you could find a place for the body to come to rest?  
What if you were to begin to write about such a place?

There's no such place? What if you were to begin by simply imagining it? What if you began with a bed? Clean white sheets. Piles of quilts and comforters. An open window. Curtains lifting slightly in the breeze. What if you began by writing about a place like this?

---

## The Rest Cure

**I**n the early part of the twentieth century—in the twenties and thirties and into the forties—rest—and those places that offered rest—were at the very center of treatment. Refuges. Respites. Sanitariums. From the Latin *sanitas* which means health.

Say that you were diagnosed with tuberculosis, this itself an illness characterized by exhaustion. Your physician may have ordered you to the Adirondacks. You could well have been sent to Saranac Lake, a village surrounded by pristine lakes and evergreen forests that was put on the map in the late nineteenth century by a Dr. Livingston Trudeau, a man who came to the village believing he'd arrived to live out the last months of his life with tuberculosis, and found, instead, that he became rejuvenated by the clear mountain air. Twelve

years after his arrival, in 1884, he founded the Adirondack Cottage Sanitarium.

If this were your destination in the early part of the last century, you'd have likely traveled by train. It turns out that it wasn't necessary to call ahead or make a reservation. You could simply show up. If you did show up, you'd more likely than not be met at the station by a representative of the local anti-tuberculosis society. This person would escort you to the Riverside Inn.

There you'd be given temporary lodging and an examination by a physician, after which you'd be referred to one of the boarding houses or "cure cottages" while you waited for a space to open up in the sanitarium. These cottages were most notable for their porches, jutting out from the houses at all angles and providing the centerpiece of the Adirondack cure: as much time out in the fresh air as possible. Once you'd secured a room in the sanitarium—this a kind of healing village, complete with cottages, a library and an infirmary—fresh air and rest would continue to be the centerpiece of the cure, the two often provided together on wide verandas.

A typical regimen might include a two-hour rest period after breakfast, and another after lunch. Walks around the grounds would be encouraged as strength returned, but at the beginning of your stay you would, literally, be carried around wrapped in blankets by the attendants. Lights out at nine. Your stay like that at a summer camp—that same sense of a world apart, but with less physical activity, and without the camp songs.



It's such a seductive moment in the history of medicine—this belief that a place could cure you. And I can't help but wonder what it would be like if we were to begin to consider this possibility again—and to seriously begin cultivating these kinds of places: respite centers not just for drug and alcohol treatment (which themselves are so important) but also places for dealing with chronic illness and sorrow and other serious disruptions. Meanwhile, I wonder what benefit might emerge from beginning to fully imagine these places—to begin to imagine them as beautiful and healing and restorative. To begin to put words to these places—vivid, sensory details.

If you could re-imagine a sanitarium—one relevant for our own time—for your own situation—how might it look?

Where would it be? What would a typical daily regimen be like? What time would the lights go out? What would the sky look like when they did?

## A String of Reasons for Not Going

"I'm just so weary," a woman tells me.

"I know," I tell her.

Sarah has reason to be weary. Her story is Job's story, one catastrophic event followed by another, and then another. Fifteen years ago now her daughter died suddenly in an automobile accident. Five years later, she lost her husband to leukemia. Four years after that she was diagnosed with breast cancer and underwent treatment. Not long afterwards she became the primary caregiver of an elderly, and disabled, mother. And then, God help her, not long after that, her brother suffered a ruptured aneurysm in his brain. He was left paralyzed on one side of his body, requiring total care; he stays in a rehab facility where she visits him several times a week.

Sarah's a good sister. She brings him clean drawstring pants and clean T-shirts and foods that he craves—a bologna sandwich with a slice of onion, a fried shrimp dinner, Krispy Kreme donuts. He's been depressed in that place, and sometimes confused, and sometimes he tells her that he wishes he would just die, but when she brings him these foods, and he eats them, he closes his eyes. He takes a bite of a Krispy Kreme donut and he says to her, "Ah, but what a sweet way to go." Sarah's brother has a better life because of her kindness, but Sarah is also a woman who struggles now with chronic, and sometimes flattening, fatigue. She's carrying the kind of chronic stress load that contributes to a build-up of stress

hormones, the kind of chronic stress load that eventually, one way or the other, takes a toll on health.

What I wish for Sarah is a respite.

What I wish is that I could put her on a train.

I remember having the thought, more than once, back when I was practicing medicine, back when this kind of scene was not infrequent, that maybe it would help if I smoked a pipe. Maybe it would help if my voice were deeper, my physical countenance somehow more imposing. I would have looked patients like Sarah in the eye. I would have said, Enough! I know that the care you are offering to others is life-giving, perhaps even life-sustaining, but I also know that you are putting your own life at risk. You absolutely cannot continue like this without a respite. You cannot. Your family would be bereft if you left them? Tell them you'll be back. Later. Arrange other caregivers if you must. But now, for the sake of your own health and well-being, you have got to get away. No questions. No excuses. Money is an issue? Borrow it. Beg for it. You have got to get on that train.

She would likely still argue with me. I can hear her now, the string of reasons why she can't possibly go. And I can hear how the string sounds so convincing—so solidly woven—so sturdy—so unbreakable.

And I can imagine that you might also have a string of such reasons. Even a string of reasons why you can't even *imagine* getting on that train.

I wonder if it would be helpful now to write down each thread in that string—each reason—so that you can see each one more clearly.

And I wonder if it would also be helpful to write down, for each reason, a possible counter-argument. How the doctor with the pipe might respond.

But then again, perhaps he simply says this: “It’s time.” And that when you arrive there will be someone there, at the other end, to greet you.

---

## The Woman Who Meets the Train

Let’s say that she waits on the platform, a woman with white hair pulled back in a sensible braid. She looks vaguely familiar. She is matter of fact.

“I’ve been expecting you,” she says.

She escorts you to her van. On the ride from the station she asks only the barest of questions. How was the train ride? Are you at all thirsty? She doesn’t pry, or seem to require conversation at all. This feels like a relief—a reprieve. She points to a cooler. Inside are several bottles of water, an assortment of juices. Also sandwiches and fruit—grapes, cherries, plums. “Go on,” she says. “Help yourself.” The grapes are cold and sweet, the van pleasantly warm. The landscape rolls past in a kind of

soothing monotony. When you find yourself beginning to drift, she lets you sleep.

You wake as she makes the turn—a crunch of gravel. The road winds and climbs, opening out finally onto a high clearing: light and sky. Pine trees. A white house that looks as if it's grown by accretion. She parks the van, pauses for a moment. You count five different porches. "We call these cure cottages," she says. The word itself seems to hold a kind of potency. Cure cottage. As if such a thing were possible.

"Go on and just leave your bags in the van," she says. "Someone will carry them in."

You follow her up to the front porch. There's a moment, standing there. The silence like a lull—an opening—a cessation of some undercurrent you hadn't been quite aware of before. The air is—different. Cleaner. There's the astringency from the pines, and a watery smell too, like melting snow. You breathe. You feel your shoulders drop.

Her voice breaks the silence. "Some say the pines here are like medicine. A balm for guilt—or for whatever hard thing a person is carrying. I think it's just a matter of having something that's bigger than you are. And then too, the water makes a difference."

She leads you upstairs to your room: a corner room, warm with late afternoon light. There's a bed with a white comforter. A folded quilt. A desk. A wardrobe. An armchair. A door

leading to a balcony. You follow her out. The balcony looks out over a lake, two canoes turned over on the near shore.

“Dinner,” she says, “is at 5:30. You can come down to the dining room, or, if you’d rather, you can put a note on your door, ask for it to be brought up to your room. Either is fine.” She continues on, making her way through a litany of details. A bag in the wardrobe for laundry. A ping pong table. A library. Breakfast served between seven and nine, with fruit and muffins and coffee left out in the breakfast room if you sleep in.

“There’s plenty to do here,” she says, “if and when you feel up to it.” She mentions walking trails, an indoor pool, yoga classes, a potter’s shed, a spa, a library. Canoes and gardens, even gardening classes. Just when you’re beginning to feel a tad overwhelmed, she pauses.

“Don’t start thinking you need to do everything on your first day or your first week—or even at all if it doesn’t suit. There’s a screened porch across the back of the house. You can get a nice view of the lake there. And most days a decent breeze.”

She asks if you have any questions. She shows you a small refrigerator stocked with juices and bottled water. Your bags arrive.

“I’ll leave you to get settled,” she says. Before she leaves, she turns at the door. “You’ve got plenty of time here,” she says.

Then she's on her way out, and there's a moment when you consider calling her back. Just stay, you want to say to her. Just for a moment . . .

Perhaps she reads this in you. "There'll be," she says, "a thousand or so things that you want to be saying. And you'll be wanting someone to listen. And there'll be a time for that. But for now, what I'd do—I'd start writing it down. The ones I've seen here who have made the best use of their time, they've let themselves get still for a while and do some writing. It doesn't matter what kind really. It's the writing itself that seems to be the most important thing."

Then she's gone. And you're there in that room.

What might you do next? What would you most like to do next?

And then what?

What if you were to consider the woman's advice? What if you were to open a notebook in this clean, spare room? What would you write? How would you most want to begin?

## A Vocabulary of Healing Place

Say that one afternoon you wander into the library. You come across a book. *The Magic Land*. It has to do with the design of gardens, but it's a bit different than most garden books. Instead of photographs, it contains fanciful charcoal drawings. A cottage in a forest. A castle. A girl in a tree. It's a book that conjures archetypes. But it's also grounded in the tangible elements of a garden—stone walls and hedges and ferns. Sometimes, at the beginning, what is called for is a kind of vocabulary—a primer—and *The Magic Land* offers this.

The book suggests seven particular archetypes—or vantage points—seven ways of thinking about the landscapes we inhabit—or could inhabit.

Sea  
Cave  
Harbor  
Promontory  
Island  
Mountain  
Sky

None of the archetypes is exactly new. It's not that. It's more like the naming itself has the possibility of making us aware of the elements in a new way. This can allow us to look at the landscape freshly, to begin to pay closer attention to those spaces in the world which we most long for and need.



These seven archetypes can then become a kind of blueprint for creating and conjuring healing places.

Each of these archetypes could become the title of a document or a notebook entry—and each could become a place to begin to collect words and images; also poems and excerpts, and perhaps sketches and pictures as well. One could begin with any of the archetypes. Or one could start at the beginning and do each one in turn.

Because one is imagining here—simply collecting and conjuring images—more becomes possible. A cottage by the sea? A cabin with a view of the valley? A tree house? One can let go of any and all thoughts of real estate costs and feasibility—just let them go. Who knows? Perhaps the tree house will one day get built. It's possible. Anything is possible. But for now it can be built in the imagination. It can be created with words—like Robert Louis Stevenson creating oceans and cities and hills among the folds in a bedspread in “The Land of Counterpane.”

*When I was sick and lay a-bed,  
I had two pillows at my head,  
And all my toys beside me lay  
To keep me happy all the day. . . .*

*I was the giant great and still  
That sits upon the pillow-hill,  
And sees before him, dale and plain,  
The pleasant land of counterpane.*

## The Sea

The key concept here is immersion. One can begin by imagining a cottage next to the sea and one can then perhaps consider walking out across the dunes and wading in. Ankles. Legs. Waist. Perhaps the water is unexpectedly warm. And there's a moment . . . you feel yourself letting go, completely giving yourself over to the buoyancy, letting it hold you. No matter if you're not ordinarily a strong swimmer. In this place you can be as graceful as a seal.

You can also conjure the archetype of the sea with a deep clear pool. A soothing bath. A long hot shower.

A cathedral can create a sense of immersion.

A lake.

A leafy forest.

A grove of trees.

The hush created by snow—the change in the light.

What about reading? I've often thought one of the reasons reading can be so appealing is its capacity for immersion—especially when the images are vivid. In the novel, *Folly*, the main character, Rae, loses her husband and young daughter in a tragic accident. She responds at first with a nervous breakdown. But then she decides to move to an island and begin building a house there. On one of her early nights on the island, frightened, despairing, she responds to her fear by going down to the water:

*One step, and two into the bone-chilling water, then to her knees.  
When the level reached her thighs, she began to have trouble catching  
her breath; at waist level she thought she would be forced to retreat.  
The water was black against the black land—creepy to venture into,  
and impossible to see the sandy patches in—and her rapidly numbed  
feet came down on rocks slick with eelgrass and no doubt a variety of  
squiggling creatures, but she struggled on until the icy swell of water  
reached her chest. She remained upright a moment longer, quailing,  
and then she dropped, surrendering to the frigid benediction of the  
night sea . . .*

Sometimes . . . not always but sometimes . . . we read some-  
thing like this and it's as if we go into the water too. Surrender  
to our own benediction.

Or what about the experience of a poem? What about enter-  
ing into the stillness in Frost's "Stopping by the Woods on a  
Snowy Evening?"

*Whose woods these are I think I know.  
His house is in the village though;  
He will not see me stopping here  
To watch his woods fill up with snow.*

And how can we use writing to hold and extend this sense of  
immersion?

Could synonyms for immersion become a place to begin?

Soaking

Wetting

Dunking

Steeping  
Bathing  
Rinsing  
Submersion

Steeped in the stillness of the woods?  
Bathed in the light of a cathedral?  
Rinsed by the sea?

It seems possible that when we find ways to bring vivid verbs and images into our own writing—it seems possible that writing can then itself become a kind of immersion.

---

### Shall There Be a Cave?

**A**fter immersion, it might be pleasant to return to a smaller, snuggier space. After Rae, from *Folly*, takes her bone-chilling night swim she finds her way back to her tent:

*She splashed madly for shore and sprinted clumsily for the comparative warmth of the tent, where she stripped off and toweled dry, her teeth chattering uncontrollably. She dressed in many layers of warm things, dove into her bed, and pulled the sleeping bag over her wet hair.*

Sometimes it's the contrast between archetypes that can seem especially powerful—immersion followed by retreat to a cave-like space.

When Lucy first crosses through the wardrobe to Narnia in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, she's frightened. And it's winter—snowing and cold. But then she meets Mr. Tumnus, the faun, and he invites her back for tea. Just when it seems as if he's leading her straight into a rock, Lucy realizes they've come upon the entrance to a cave. Inside, a wood fire is burning. She finds a kind of comfort she hadn't expected.

*Lucy thought she had never been in a nicer place. It was a little, dry, clean cave of reddish stone with a carpet on the floor and two little chairs ('one for me and one for a friend' said Mr. Tumnus) and a table and a dresser and a mantelpiece over the fire and above that a picture of an old faun with a gray beard. In one corner there was a door which Lucy thought must lead to Mr. Tumnus' bedroom, and on one wall was a shelf full of books. Lucy looked at these while he was setting out the tea things.*

I like that there's a carpet on the floor in this cave, a shelf full of books, tea things. I suspect that this fits C.S. Lewis' ideas of comfort. One could furnish a cave like this—or in any way that one likes—and it doesn't have to be a literal cave.

A room can be a cave. In *Daughter of the Forest*, a retelling of the fairy tale, "The Six Swans," the heroine of the story, Sorcha, encounters a fair amount of trouble while she's trying to save her brothers, but at one point in the story—the middle of her quest—she finds unexpected refuge, a reprieve from her difficult journey:

*I suspect somebody chose for me a bedchamber deemed suitable for a barbarian: small, remote, sparsely furnished, located very close to the servants' quarters and in earshot of the clatter and bustle of the busy*

*kitchens. If they thought to insult me thus, they miscalculated. For I loved, instantly, the tiny, square room with its stone walls and its hard pallet on a wooden frame, with its heavy oak door that opened straight out into a neglected corner of garden full of tangled herb bushes shot to seed. As soon as it was light, I would go out and see if starwort grew there. An old rose clambered up the wall just outside the door, and a tiny, blue-flowered creeper carpeted the stone steps. There was a mossy pathway choked over with weeds. Through the single round window, set high in the wall, the moon would look down on my slumber.*

The essence of the cave archetype is a sense of nesting and security. Here are some words used in *The Magic Land* to evoke this essence:

Nooks  
Alcoves  
Retreats  
Eaves  
Cottages  
Igloos  
Wigwams  
Pavilions  
Dovecotes  
Snuggeries  
Tree houses  
Bowers  
Summerhouses  
Burrows  
Nests

All of these places are relatively small and snug, with an opening from which to look out at the world.

What would happen if one were to choose just one of these words—or the word cave itself—and place it at the top of a page? What would happen if one were to begin to use writing to imagine this place more fully?

---

## Finding Harbor

**H**arbor is similar to a cave in its sense of enclosure—but this archetype has more to do with an outdoor rather than an indoor space. It's about finding or imagining a place in the landscape that offers a sense of embrace.

A walled garden?

In *The Secret Garden*, Mary, a girl who is beginning to discover how lonely she is, hears about a secret locked garden and longs to enter it. Eventually she finds the key—and the lock where the key fits—and she pulls back a curtain of ivy and pushes the door. It opens:

*Then she slipped through it, and shut it behind her, and stood with her back against it, looking about her and breathing quite fast with excitement, and wonder, and delight. She was standing inside the secret garden.*

Sometimes part of the thrill is in the discovery.

*It was the sweetest, most mysterious-looking place any one could imagine. The high walls which shut it in were covered with the leafless*

*stems of climbing roses which were so thick that they were matted together. . . . There were numbers of standard roses which had so spread their branches that they were like little trees. There were other trees in the garden, and one of the things which made the place look strangest and loveliest was that climbing roses had run all over them and swung down long tendrils which made light swaying curtains, and here and there they had caught at each other or at a far-reaching branch and had crept from one tree to another and made lovely bridges of themselves.*

How lovely is that—the tendrils of the climbing roses creating light swaying curtains. And it continues:

*The sun was shining inside the four walls and the high arch of blue sky over this particular piece of Misselthwaite seemed even more brilliant and soft than it was over the moor. The robin flew down from his tree-top and hopped about or flew after her from one bush to another. He chirped a good deal and had a very busy air, as if he were showing her things. Everything was strange and silent and she seemed to be hundreds of miles away from anyone, but somehow she did not feel lonely at all.*

If we're fortunate we've had some experience of a place like this—or had at least one instance where an enclosed space has sheltered us. We can recreate such a place by simply writing our way back to it. We can begin with one single detail. A door that swings open? The smell of lilac? A particular tree?

But there may also be times when such a place exists just beyond our reach. Poets can become a way to extend our reach. They can serve as guides. Consider this excerpt from Wendell Berry's poem, "The Peace of Wild Things."



*When despair for the world grows in me  
and I wake in the night at the least sound  
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,  
I go and lie down where the wood drake  
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.  
I come into the peace of wild things.*

The earth can be a harbor. A poem like this can itself become a harbor. It can also give us a template for conjuring:

*When despair for the world grows in me  
and I wake in the night at the least sound  
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be . . .*

What then? Where can you go to find harbor?

*I go out to the kitchen and I make, again, a mug of hot cocoa, and I remember, if only for a moment, the breezeway in my grandmother's house, the coolness against my bare feet, the way it led out to the patio and the small table there, the fence around the yard, and the flowers against the fence, hollyhocks and four o'clocks and lilac. I feel how that place is still present because I can remember it and with that I come into the peace of my grandmother's garden.*

It's a template that could be used over and over.

*When despair for the world grows in me  
and I wake in the night at the least sound  
in fear . . .*

Fear of what? And what could happen next? Where could you go?

## Threshold

Something new is happening with the next archetype, promontory. Instead of being contained by the landscape, we're venturing out. In fact, it's perhaps because of the safety of the harbor that we are able to take this step.

A promontory is a headland, a nose of high land jutting out into a body of water. It's not quite a mountain. High land but not that high. At one time forts were built on promontories. Castles were built on promontories. A promontory can be thought of as a threshold. A bridge. A place poised between land and sea and sky.

Such a sense of possibility here. A sense of moving up and out, crossing over. A sense of an adventure beginning.

In *Folly*, before Rae takes that icy swim, she begins her adventure by standing on a promontory. This occurs in the very first sentence: "The gray-haired woman stood with her boots planted on the rocky promontory and watched what was left of her family pull away."

I love that her boots are planted on the rock. And that her gray hair reveals her as an atypical hero. In a classic hero's journey one of the early stages is the crossing of the first threshold—one leaves behind the ordinary world to begin an adventure. Once one crosses that first threshold, however reluctantly, however uncertain, the risk is taken, the decision made.

*Here on the edge of the world on a narrow precipice above the final abyss, Rae Newborn had come to make her halfhearted stand. No safety net, no other to take responsibility, just Rae and her ghosts and demons. She had come here because she was tired, not of life itself, but of living between. She had come to a place whose very name was Folly as a way of forcing the issue.*

A promontory can be considered as a place on the very edge of the ordinary world.

What might such a place look like?

What would it feel like?

When might be the right time to pursue this archetype?

And what could happen in such a place?

---

## Island

**W**.B. Yeats' famous poem, "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" pulls us with him to the archetype of island:

*I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,  
And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made;  
Nine bean rows will I have there, a hive for the honey bee,  
And live alone in the bee-loud glade.*

*And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow,  
Dropping from the veils of the morning to where the cricket sings;  
There midnight's all a glimmer, and noon a purple glow,  
And evening full of the linnet's wings.*

*I will arise and go now, for always night and day*

*I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;  
While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements gray,  
I hear it in the deep heart's core.*

There's so much to love about this poem. The bee-loud glade. The peace dropping slow. The veils of the morning. Once, in a footnote, I came across a brief passage from Yeats' autobiography in which he speaks of how he came to write it.

*I had still the ambition, formed in Sligo in my teens, of living in imitation of Thoreau on Innisfree, a little island in Lough Gill, and when walking through Fleet Street very homesick I heard a little tinkle of water and saw a fountain in a shop-window which balanced a little ball upon its jet, and began to remember lake water. From the sudden remembrance came my poem Innisfree, my first lyric with anything in its rhythm of my own music.*

I love how he creates an entire island from the merest trickle of water. I love his clarity about his movement toward it.

*I will arise and go now . . .*

I love how he is able to conjure it in the midst of a busy city.

*I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;  
While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements gray,  
I hear it in the deep heart's core.*

I love the sense that he's conjuring this island for us too. If we memorize this poem—which I did a few summers back—then the lines can become, at least for a while, a part of us. We are

arising and going there. Building the cabin. We are there with the water lapping and the peace dropping slow. We have taken ourselves away from the mainland, at least for a while—and for however long we might need this place.

His lyrics can become a kind of vehicle.

I will arise and go now . . .  
And go to . . . where?

---

## Mountain

A mountain, like an island, can offer some of that same sense of getting away—of being apart from the world. But now we're heading up instead of out. A mountain is that tall place in the landscape from which we can see the big picture. We climb and climb and then we look out and down.

In the last two lines of his poem, "July Mountain," Wallace Stevens writes:

*The way, when we climb a mountain,  
Vermont throws itself together.*

That's how it can be—we move away from the world and then look back down toward it—and the pieces begin to come together.

We can begin to consider which places in the world are like mountains in this way. Which places allow us to see a larger perspective? A new point of view?

There's another poem by Wallace Stevens I've always liked, a much more famous poem: "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," which is itself about looking at the world from different points of view. In the thirteenth and final stanza, Stevens writes:

*It was evening all afternoon.  
It was snowing  
And it was going to snow.  
The blackbird sat  
In the cedar-limbs.*

The poem ends there—with the blackbird sitting high up in the limbs. How might the blackbird see the wintry afternoon?

## Taking Off with the Wild Geese

This whole notion of becoming familiar with the archetypes of the landscape is a way to become smarter about it—wiser about the ways in which the landscape can restore us. When we begin to feel shaky, we can seek out the comfort and security of a cave, or a harbor. When we long for escape we can carry ourselves to an island. When we begin to feel closed in we can venture out—climb a promontory, or a mountain, even if the climbing is something we do only with the mind’s eye. Seeking transcendence, we can turn toward the sky.

We can look out the window. We can step outside and look up. We can turn to memory, and recreate the moment, say, when a heron first lifts itself from the creek, flapping and splashing, and then opens its wings, takes off.

“The Wild Swans at Coole” by Yeats begins with a moment of stillness:

*The trees are in their autumn beauty,  
The woodland paths are dry,  
Under the October twilight the water  
Mirrors a still sky;*

The sky is contained in the mirror of the water. But then swans appear in the stillness—“nine-and-fifty Swans”—and they lift and “scatter wheeling in great broken rings.” The

swans burst upward, and it's as if we move upward with them, at least for a moment.

Or consider these lines at the end of "Wild Geese" by Mary Oliver:

*Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.  
Meanwhile the world goes on.  
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain  
are moving across the landscapes,  
over the prairies and the deep trees,  
the mountains and the rivers.  
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,  
are heading home again.*

I love the repetition of the word meanwhile. This sense of a larger world moving on, so much larger and so far beyond any individual despair. I've read this poem many times now but each time, if I read it slowly and let myself absorb it, I hear the meanwhile—and I feel a shift—especially with those last lines—with the wild geese high in the clean blue air—lifting me away from my smaller self.

Natalie Goldberg, in *Writing Down the Bones*, suggests that when one is writing about something as concrete and specific as, say, the carving of a spoon out of cedar, one should remember to concentrate on the specific details, yes, but at the same time not get myopic. (We've all seen that movie, where all the shots are close-ups inside of rooms, and you feel like you're suffocating, and you need nothing more than to open a window and get air.) Goldberg suggests that even as we're zooming in on the details of that cedar spoon—knife against



cedar, the scent of it, the wood shavings—that we also and at the same time keep in mind the color of the sky.

There's something important here, something easily overlooked. At any moment, we can look up from our lives, and remember the sky, and look for it, and find a way, perhaps, to bring the wide expanse of it into our writing.

---

## Crossing Back

In the final stanza of “The Wild Swans at Coole,” the speaker of the poem imagines the birds leaving. He admires the swans, delights in them, but, at the same time, there's this awareness of impermanence.

*But now they drift upon the still water,  
Mysterious, beautiful;  
Among what rushes will they build,  
By what lakes' edge or pool  
Delight men's eyes, when I awake some day  
To find they have flown away?*

This too seems essential—to recognize the healing place—begin to create it—but at the same time understand how fleeting it can be. When Lucy first goes through the wardrobe to Narnia, she experiences herself as having been in this magical country for several hours. But, upon her return, her siblings believe nothing of her story. For one thing, they swear that she's only been gone a moment, that they just saw her go into

the room with the wardrobe. Later, all four of the children cross over to Narnia together. They undergo a series of adventures, become kings and queens. They reign for years. But when they return back through the wardrobe to England they are exactly the same age.

Perhaps you've experienced something like this at one time or another. A moment when time seemed suspended, or dilated—if only in retrospect. Perhaps you've experienced this in a dream, or awake, as awake as Lucy sharing tea in Narnia with the faun, Tumnus—with a very real brown egg and sardines on toast and a sugar-topped cake. Perhaps, if time is measured in this other way, then there is the possibility, even in a single day, or an hour, of having all the time in the world.

And yet still, there comes that moment—we have to cross back through the wardrobe to our ordinary lives. When I did my imagery training in San Rafael, the question always asked just before crossing back from a healing place was this: What would you like to bring back with you? If you could bring back some talisman—some way to remember this place—what would it be?

A photograph? A stone? A story? A word?

How will you remember the texture of this place? How can you best remember what you experienced here? How can writing be used to hold it?

## A Moveable Feast

In Paris, while in his twenties, Ernest Hemingway wrote about his childhood in Michigan. His family had owned a cottage on a lake there and he'd spent his summers there as a boy. The place seemed to make a deep impression. In his Michigan stories the images are vivid:

*Halfway down the gravel road from Hortons Bay, the town, to the lake, there was a spring. The water came up in a tile sunk beside the road, lipping over the cracked edge of the tile and flowing away through the close growing mint into the swamp. In the dark Nick put his arm down into the spring but could not hold it there because of the cold. He felt the featherings of the sand spouting up from the spring cones at the bottom against his fingers. Nick thought, I wish I could put all of myself in there. I bet that would fix me.*

Hemingway seemed to conjure places best when he was at a distance from them. Here, in his memoir, *A Moveable Feast*, he writes about the conjuring he did while he was in Paris:

*I was writing about up in Michigan and since it was a wild, cold, blowing day it was that sort of day in the story. I had already seen the end of fall come through boyhood, youth and young manhood, and in one place you could write about it better than another. That was called transplanting yourself, I thought, and it could be as necessary with people as with other sorts of growing things.*

Hemingway evoked place with physical details. Perhaps because he needed to recreate the place for himself he became adept at evoking it for us, his reader. The water lipping over

the cracked edge of the tile. The close growing mint. His arm plunged into the cold spring water.

Hemingway wrote about Michigan while he was in Paris. Some thirty years later, Hemingway recovered a trunk of notebooks from his years in Paris and, first in Cuba, and then in Idaho, began drafting what would become *A Moveable Feast*. He conjured the Paris café, and the ritual of writing. Hanging his waterproof on a coat rack. Ordering a café au lait. Then taking a notebook and pencil out of the pocket of his coat.

It's the sensory details that are crucial—the details that create a sense of place. Perhaps a kind of portable place, accessible even when one is at a distance from it, vivid and real even on those days, and perhaps especially on those days, when one is most in need of it.

What could be the first detail?

What could be the next one?

---

## Tuscany

Some years ago now, while staying alone in a cabin at Wildacres, a retreat center in the Blue Ridge Mountains, I had a dream about a former patient, Nora. In the dream I'd gone to visit her. There were several of us visiting, sitting on chairs and couches. She was presenting a slide show of places she'd been. When I woke, I had the sense, as one does sometimes after dreams, that I was meant to be paying close atten-

tion, but I couldn't, for the life of me, remember any of the actual pictures. So I did what I often do in the wake of puzzling dreams—I tried to write my way into figuring out what the dream might have been showing me.

Nora was a teacher, fifty-seven years old, bright, very articulate. She had a PhD in art history, was conversant with entire centuries I know next to nothing about. She liked, she told me once, to read Samurai novels, these novels, I learned, which are set in seventeenth century Japan. She told me she liked the way the setting in these novels was inextricably entwined with the action, so that you were acutely aware, as you read, of the slant of light in a particular scene and what flowers were blossoming, and whether, for instance, a particular petal had fallen. Nora, herself, was acutely aware of setting. She had a strong sense of aesthetics, a love of visual beauty. For several years she'd owned an art gallery in Manhattan. She'd come to North Carolina with her husband, taught art history at the School of the Arts here for several years, and then taught Language Arts in one of our middle schools, this until she received a diagnosis of breast cancer, and then got word that it had spread into the liver and bone.

Not long after receiving her diagnosis, Nora put no small amount of energy into planning a trip to Commonweal, a cancer retreat center in Bolinas, California, a stunning place located on the Point Reyes National Seashore. She was very much looking forward to it. But just a little over a week before she was to leave for Commonweal, Nora fell down in the driveway of her home and broke a vertebra, this landing her in the hospital and effectively canceling her trip. The next

time I saw her she told me that she knew now that that had been her last window—her last chance to take a trip of this magnitude. Her belly by this point was swollen from the tumors that had arisen in her liver. Her bones ached. She was, she told me, very, very tired.

But she also told me this. That not long after she broke her vertebra and came to realize she was not going to make it to Commonweal after all, she had a series of dreams. These were dreams, she said, about places she'd traveled. Tuscany figured largely in one of them. When the dreams ended, she told me she understood now that all of the places were deep inside her, that she carried these places within her now, and it would no longer be necessary for her to travel.

I don't think I've ever heard it put so poignantly—that transition—how the healing places we've inhabited can become a part of us. How the mind itself can become intertwined with healing places.

---

## **An Inner Courtyard**

**I**n a lovely and haunting story by Shaun Tan called “No Other Country,” a child, while helping to recover a plastic Christmas tree in the attic, puts his foot through the ceiling. But, when the family troops downstairs to inspect the inevitable damage, they can't find it. They return to the attic—

*It was then that they were struck by a scent of grass, cool stone, and tree sap that breezed through the attic. They all inspected the hole closely. . . . It opened into another room altogether, one they didn't know about—an impossible room somewhere between the others. . . .*

The family decides to call this place the inner courtyard.

*It became their special sanctuary. They visited at least twice a week for picnics, bringing everything they needed through the attic and down a permanently installed ladder. They felt no need to question the logic of it, and simply accepted its presence gratefully.*

When I first came upon this story I thought immediately of Nora—and the possible connection between creating a space inside a house and creating one inside one's very self. Once, many years ago, my then-husband and I took our two young children on a Tibetan Buddhist retreat. I had gone, on the invitation of a friend, to see a Tibetan lama speak and after that we'd gotten some information about the retreat and we were intrigued enough to sign up. It was to be a retreat for families, but when we arrived we discovered that only one other family had registered—and they had cancelled. So it was just the four of us, along with a nun and a monk, and we were all staying, unexpectedly, at what turned out to be rather ordinary if large house in Virginia, ordinary at least on the outside, but on the inside it had the most lovely garden.

The house held an entire room at the center of the house that was all garden: a large koi pond surrounded by ferns and plants and statues of the Buddha. The nun and monk were both so kind to us, so hospitable. They made us hamburgers

and frozen pizza, foods they thought the children would like. When they realized we would be the only ones at the retreat they decided to keep it very informal. They had conversations with us and answered our questions, and I remember the nun listening in an especially patient way while our daughter told her a long narrative about the Star Wars movies. We went for long walks on the grounds. We'd bought portable cameras for the children and they took pictures of the garden. The nun taught us simple brief meditation. On Sunday morning, our last day there, she did a final teaching session with all of us on meditation. I remember that this time she suggested we close our eyes and imagine an open space inside ourselves and I remember having a strong image of the inner garden of that house—the deep pond with the koi and the ferns surrounding it.

There's a lovely poem by Thomas Lux called "The Voice You Hear When You Read Silently." I often share it with my sophomores at the beginning of a semester. He writes about how when we read a word we each hear a different voice inside our heads and imagine something a bit different. For instance, when we hear the word barn, it is different for each of us.

*The voice  
in your head, speaking as you read,  
never says anything neutrally — some people  
hated the barn they knew,  
some people love the barn they know  
so you hear the word loaded  
and a sensory constellation  
is lit:*



I often ask the students, when we read this poem, to stop and think for a moment about a barn they know, and then, once they've done that, to take a moment and look around the room and consider all the different pictures—the different sensory constellations—being lit around the room. And to think for a moment about the way that language can evoke a picture—and sometimes an entire experience.

When I think about an inner courtyard a whole constellation is lit for me and I imagine a cure cottage, and a clean, bare room inside a cure cottage, and a garden that might begin to emerge from inside that clean bare room. I imagine the sanctuary in Shaun Tan's story, the slides of Tuscany in my dream about Nora, the koi pond in Virginia located unexpectedly inside an ordinary house—and the possibility of an open space inside my own mind that might begin to hold such a healing place.

What do you imagine? And what would happen if you were to try and write about this constellation of places?

This could be a good culminating activity—to steal a quiet Saturday morning—or even a quiet hour—to look over any and all pages you've made about healing places and begin to piece them together—in a kind of collage or list or poem or story, or who knows what? To stand perhaps on a mountain—and watch a healing place begin to throw itself together.