

An aerial view of Southern California in the mid to late 1950's would have revealed a sea of concrete peppered with cookie cutter stamped, long and low ramblers indicative of the era carved into bean fields, interrupted only by the rhythmic bobbing of oil derricks. It is in the context of this slice of suburbia that I encountered nature, consisting mostly of a palette of sunbaked clay, sand, and cement. Trees were either things oranges grew on or the source of the heavenly perfume that scented the air Eucalyptus. Some bore leaves shaped like giant fans. From early childhood, most of my memories of places of special attachment were mundane backyard scenes enhanced by my very vivid imagination. I am of an era when toys were mostly everyday things transformed to use within a virtual reality that you created; I was a product of a "let's pretend" mentality, not fortified by computer animations and preprogrammed scenarios. One feature of the ubiquitous long hallways of the four-bedroom tract homes provided was a rainy-day refuge easily manipulated with a few sheets and blankets into a tunnel of horrors with which to frighten the younger siblings. Throw in an empty cardboard box or two and you have a complete backdrop for the unfolding storyline of that particular day. Perhaps motivated by the desire to regain control over the traffic flow between bedrooms the hallway once provided, my best friend's father provided her with the most extravagant playhouse money could buy which boasted real pane windows complete with flower boxes and a locking Dutch door. While this extravagant backyard addition housed many sleepovers, it never compared in my mind to the much less pretentious bamboo lean too that my father ingeniously devised. A mere shell, it provided me with the opportunity to create an interior that matched my current aesthetic. With a few cleverly hung blankets and a couple of borrowed furnishings, my private clubhouse could become a school, a library, or a grocery store. Privacy was easily attained by reconfiguration of a few simple elements within a matter of moments. Whether my father deserves to be credited with having intentionally invested in bamboo screening with the purpose of stimulating my creativity is of less importance than the fact that it was a key element. This brainstorm after all, would have to co-exist in the same mind as the concept of cedar bark below the monkey bars. Many failed aerial stunts ended abruptly and oh so rudely in the splinter hell, only slightly less painful than the occasional fateful landing in the artichokes cruelly planted at the end of the flight path of the swing. For me, the less structure, the better, in fact, I spent countless hours digging deep holes in the backyard with my father's blessing as I attempted to reach China. My father was a scientist whose intellectual approach to dealing with the issue of gaping chasm his daughter was creating was to explain how many days it would take at the rate I could dig. Only somewhat daunted by this fact, I refocused my energies to digging sideways with the concept of connecting to the underground world I imagined existed under those huge metal manhole covers in the street. If I could somehow tap into them, I reasoned, I would create a new way to travel to and from school each day. This held my interest only until I came up with the far better idea of making a giant fabric covering to gather up enough helium balloons that would allow me to "fly" to school. Once again, my father enlisted the help of an engineer friend of his to explain to me that the number of helium balloons needed to carry my weight was beyond the scope of my fledgling skills. As I assess the places of childhood, the common thread throughout is that they are mostly figments of my mind, having no physical embodiment. I did not need structure as much as I needed fresh air and my imagination.

My claim to fame may not be the thirty plus homes I have lived in, but the number of residences I have had as the daughter of an aerospace engineer/naval serviceman certainly challenges my idea of "place attachment". As I grew imagination and my reclusive demeanor

developed, I realized that the only way I could survive in a household of four siblings and a lot of noise was to find ways to escape where I could remain undiscovered for large periods of time. With so much commotion in the family, this was not terribly difficult to achieve. The most favored of these places was the roof of the first story of a split-level house we moved to in my early teens. The only access to this retreat however was through my infant sister's bedroom window. I could sit on the roof for hours and if I timed it right, (between feedings) I could perch there in the evening until everyone else had retired, jump off the roof and escape into the night unnoticed. As long as I returned by the feeding time at dawn's light, no one was the wiser. Once again, the physical characteristics of the actual place are insignificant, it was the fact that it was secret, and up high and no one else showed any interest in this sanctuary.

The idea of escaping remained compelling into early childhood. An early marriage and the arrival of small children of my own forced me into compliance with real world space and practicality. The stress of a difficult marriage brought to life my old need to retreat that found its realization in the beaches I was able to access quickly in my new home in the Pacific Northwest. Perhaps the beach was reminiscent of my Southern California upbringing, but mostly, it allowed me room to breathe. When life became threatening, and self-preservation and the well-being of my children became necessary, I could easily pack them up, head for Kirkland, and anonymously blend into the environment. The ability to disappear into the haven of a crowd may seem contradictory, but the parade of parents with toddlers, the landscape of beach towels and scent of sunscreen calmed me and helped me transport to easier times.

Life has blessed me in so many ways, not the least of which is the ability to travel in my mind to dreamscapes of my choosing. As a single parent, I never hoped to have the ability to vacation; I was content with the rewards my children brought. As I watched them grow into adults and dream their own dreams, I hoped they would get to see the places I only visited in books and on television.

My life changed dramatically the day I met my current husband and life partner. I wonder how different things might have been if he had been in my life sooner, but I am truly grateful for his presence in my life today. It is because of him that I have had the great fortune in the last twenty-five years to travel the world and see magnificent sights. In my wildest imagination I could not have known what it would be like to stand in awe at the base of Mount Uluru in Australia's Red Center, or to dive with sea turtles off the Great Barrier Reef. Vast landscapes of rich warm hues that bake under sweltering skies and are punctuated by prehistoric plants and animals rivaling the bizarre creatures of the Dr. Seuss variety evoke feelings of awe from deep within my soul. The experience of flying into the pristine canyons of the New Zealand highlands by helicopter to fly-fish in one of the most remote areas of this paradise will remain forever etched in my mind. With all its beauty, the appeal of this place as with the Australian outback was its seclusion. My imagination once again intersects reality, and the physical space is not really the locus sancta. My experience in these places, fly-fishing with my husband and seeing the pride registered in his face as I caught the most beautiful trout I have ever seen overshadowed even the call of the Kea in the distance.

The lifelong fantasy of settling foot in the United Kingdom came to being several years ago., I had long since packed away this dream not expecting that it would ever be possible. Of all the places I have had the great honor of experiencing, this has had the most impact. Several places stand out as exemplifying my notion of what it is to stand on holy ground. As a confirmed

Anglophile, I have always felt drawn to the home of my ancestors. These far distant lands even beckoned to me in my childhood. It is no wonder then that within minutes of entry into Scotland, driving along the backroads outside Glasgow, I was brought to tears. Small winding roads roller coaster over the hills and dales and provide peek-a-boo views of ancient times. A common theme re-emerges as I transport to another century and smell what it might have been like to live in this village. My eyes in soft focus now, I see through the landscape of a concurrent image of life in the 16th century with me at its center. Childhood has provided me with plenty of practice, it seems, for this special technique of living both in the now and in the past or future. My trip to Scotland fueled my imagination with enough visual information to decorate a lifetime of wild imaginings. The crown jewel of this Scottish chapter was the moment of ecstasy experienced in one of the many ruins of the Abbeys we visited. As is now apparent, the Abbey itself was not important, the revelation contained within it was. Descending the remains of a claustrophobic spiral staircase, breathing the dingy damp air and emerging at the bottom in a shell of a room, I looked out metal bars to an ocean view and knew I was finally home. My recurring dream of myself in a monk's habit had come to fruition. Chills reverberated through every ounce of my being as I hovered once again between centuries and thousands of miles with one foot in each realm. I had glimmers of recollection, desire, or great spiritual connection. This moment will always be with me, yet somehow, just outside my grasp.

A similar moment was experienced while on a clichéd journey to discover my Ulster Scottish roots in Donegal. Months of preparation and research at hand, we set out to find the small town and churches once inhabited by my ancestors. The exploration itself was transforming as we found our way to sites that even the locals may have had difficulty uncovering. Standing before altars in one church after another where the names of my dead relatives were etched in marble would send me careening headlong into recreations of a long-ago time. History came to life in countless small chapels, the occasional castle or while standing with the rector's wife in a village of less than fifty inhabitants, being graciously welcomed into an ancestral home built in the early twelfth century. My soul flushed with the sense of completeness while standing in the diocese of Raphoe on the Banks of Loch Swilly in Donegal, in the very spot that my flax growing family would have called home, I was again able to connect to the past all the while absorbing the present and all its sensations. The dreary gray mists infused with the essence of burning peat, the stone-cold rock walls containing a waterway that has rolled relentlessly by for an eternity seem not to notice that I had returned home. I smiled at the locals hoping to appeal to their recognition of my stake in this place, as they unassumingly allowed my intrusion, if only temporarily, but seemed quizzical of my interest in what must seem so mundane to a modern-day resident.

These places have as their common bond, a sense of autonomy and secretiveness while affording me wonderful opportunities for flights of fantasy. They are not at all unlike the places I have explored time and again in my mind, laying on the edge of a bed looking upside down at the ceiling and reorienting my world to see what it would be like if I lived on the ceiling with light fixtures for chairs, stepping over the threshold of a doorway to enter another world.

More recently I have had the great good fortune to travel with a very generous friend to ancient cities. Travelling through the streets of Turkey, encountering biblical landmarks and holy places. Each day when the call to prayer broadcast through the streets I was overcome by free-flowing tears and chills throughout my body. Even now, as I remember the experience, the reaction

is just as powerful. Standing before a Russian Icon that had been a page in textbook moments before resulted in powerful emotion that brought me to my knees, something the tour guide seemed taken by. She thanked me later in a private moment as she revealed having rarely seen as genuine a reaction to the presence of God in a sacred piece of art and was honored to be the one chosen to share that moment with me.

Throughout my life I have been fascinated with exploring places that cannot be traversed in the normal course of things. A partially constructed framework of a home that allows for walking through walls instead of being constrained by them, climbing into a room through a window instead of a door, removing obstacles to an unused door and gaining entry to a room whose existence had not been known for years, hold so much appeal as to entice me beyond reality, abandoning all adult rationale to return to the backyard clubhouse and the digging to China mentality of my childhood.

My husband has generously gifted me with a brand-new vocabulary full of fancy embellishments to use liberally with my special memory enhancement machine in my head. While my curiosity is every bit as insatiable and my imagination is my best travel agent, my heart's desires have been fulfilled and the memories I am left with will sustain me. I rest secure in the knowledge that place is a state of mind; the special ones are created by the experiences I have pocketed along the way. If you graciously invite me into your garden and allow me to paint my environs as my friend often has, you will not know if I sit behind my canvas brush in hand contemplating the spider's graceful path weaving in and out of a rose's petals, or if I have taken leave of your garden and now paint a hummingbird as he hovers nearby while sitting in my carefully chosen position amidst Her Highness' Royal Gardens at Saville.