Passages of Engaging Description

Prologue from ***An American Childhood***

By Annie Dillard

WHEN EVERYTHING ELSE HAS GONE from my brain—the President’s name, the state capitals, the neighborhoods where I lived, and then my own name and what it was on earth I sought, and then at length the faces of my friends, and finally the faces of my family—when all this has dissolved, what will be left, I believe, is topology: the dreaming memory of land as it lay this way and that.

I will see the city poured rolling down the mountain valleys like slag, and see the city lights sprinkled and curved around the hills’ curves, rows of bonfires winding. At sunset a red light like housefires shines from the narrow hillside windows; the houses’ bricks burn like glowing coals.

The three wide rivers divide and cool the mountains. Calm old bridges span the banks and link the hills. The Allegheny River flows in brawling from the north, from near the shore of Lake Erie, and from Lake Chautauqua in New York and eastward. The Monongahela River flows in shallow and slow from the south, from West Virginia. The Allegheny and the Monongahela meet and form the westward-wending Ohio.

Where the two rivers join lies an acute point of flat land from which rises the city. The tall buildings rise lighted to their tips. Their lights illumine other buildings’ clean sides, and illumine the narrow city canyons below, where people move, and shine reflected red and white at night from the black waters.

When the shining city, too, fades, I will see only those forested mountains and hills, and the way the rivers lie flat and moving among them, and the way the low land lies wooded among them, and the blunt mountains rise in darkness from the rivers’ banks, steep from the rugged south and rolling from the north, and from farther, from the inclined eastward plateau where the high ridges begin to run so long north and south unbroken that to get around them you practically have to navigate Cape Horn.

In those first days, people said, a squirrel could run the long length of Pennsylvania without ever touching the ground. In those first days, the woods were white oak and chestnut, hickory, maple, sycamore, walnut, wild ash, wild plum, and white pine. The pine grew on the ridgetops where the mountains’ lumpy spines stuck up and their skin was thinnest.

The wilderness was uncanny, unknown. Benjamin Franklin had already invented his stove in Philadelphia by 1753, and Thomas Jefferson was a schoolboy in Virginia; French soldiers had been living in forts along Lake Erie for two generations. But west of the Alleghenies in western Pennsylvania, there was not even a settlement, not even a cabin. No Indians lived there, or even near there.

Wild grapevines tangled the treetops and shut out the sun. Few songbirds lived in the deep woods. Bright Carolina parakeets—red, green, and yellow—nested in the dark forest. There were ravens then, too. Woodpeckers rattled the big trees’ trunks, ruffed grouse whirred their tail feathers in the fall, and every long once in a while a nervous gang of empty-headed turkeys came hustling and kicking through the leaves—but no one heard any of this, no one at all.

In 1753, young George Washington surveyed for the English this point of land where rivers met. To see the forest-blurred lay of the land, he rode his horse to a ridgetop and climbed a tree. He judged it would make a good spot for a fort. And an English fort it became, and a depot for Indian traders to the Ohio country, and later a French fort and way station to New Orleans.

But it would be another ten years before any settlers lived there on that land where the rivers met, lived to draw in the flowery scent of June rhododendrons with every breath. It would be another ten years before, for the first time on earth, tall men and women lay exhausted in their cabins, sleeping in the sweetness, worn out from planting corn.

Dillard, Annie (2009). An American Childhood . HarperCollins. Kindle Edition.

from **“You Were on Indian Land: Alcatraz Island as Recalcitrant Memory Space”**

Cynthia Duquette Smith and Teresa Bergman

As visitors continue the audio tour, ambient noises are persistently incorporated under the narration, and prisoner and guard commentaries further enliven the prison experience. One hears prison cell doors slamming shut, the pacing of guards, conversations, distant thunder, the sizzling of the metal detector and clacking of typewriters, even the sound of a shiv (a makeshift dagger) stabbing another prisoner in the back. Even though spaces like the Dining Room are empty of everything but other tourists and a handful of wooden benches, they seem to be inhabited as the visitor hears silverware, inmate conversations, the clanking of dishes, and so on. Later in the tour we hear gunfire during the discussion of the Alcatraz uprising, and we hear what we surmise is Frank Lee Morris chipping away at the plaster in his cell prior to his escape. Throughout the tour, one also hears sounds from across the bay, sounds evocative of the outside world that prisoners were denied. Visitors can hear the surf, the seabirds, the foghorn, and the buoy bells as clearly as the inmates could during their incarceration. Thus visitors are reminded again, this time aurally, of the freedom/ incarceration dichotomy that permeates Alcatraz.

From Dickinson, Greg; Blair, Carole; Ott, Brian L.. Places of Public Memory: The Rhetoric of Museums and Memorials (Rhetoric, Culture, and Social Critique) (pp. 179-180). University of Alabama Press. Kindle Edition.