

Scene Through My Window
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The day dies, and through the vast restless shade
A song of happiness trembles and saddens:
Long blue shadows descend from the mountains.
Antonio Rubino (translated by Joshua Breitzer)

When Maxine and I announced early in 2020 that we had moved, we were sharing the largely happy news of our move from a home we had lived in and loved for thirty years to a home that is part of a community for seniors.

We had sold our comfortable suburban home to move to Ohio Living Breckenridge Village, a “life plan” retirement community in Willoughby, Ohio. Breckenridge Village promises, in exchange for a substantial sum of money, to offer access to services and care its residents need for the rest of their lives—for life. We will always have a place here, no matter what our health needs become—until all our needs turn to nothing.

So, happy as our news was, underneath it lay a touch of sadness. We knew that in giving up the responsibilities of home ownership, we were also giving up the freedom that comes of being able to call an address truly our own. We realized this move would likely be our last fully under our control—that aging and, eventually, death would force any further moves upon us. And chances are very good that we will not move together from this home to the next.

We moved into a Breckenridge ranch home—a single story house that shares its roof with another residence. Most of Breckenridge’s ranch homes are of the same style: mid-brown brick; dark brown doors, window frames, and trim; and reddish, shingled roofs. We would be deadly boring, except that our homes are arranged gracefully along our streets and around our several cul de sacs, and their well-kept shrubs and flowers usually reflect each occupant’s taste in landscaping.

Our ranch is quite spacious. It has three rooms that are designated as bedrooms, although we use only one of them for that. The other two are sort of “his” and “her” rooms.

Maxine claims her room by means of a large table on which she creates art—she likes to work in colored pencils, pastels, etc.—and takes care of our bills and other financial matters. Our TV is also in her room, so many evenings we both get comfortable there, sitting on the sofa, watching. When we do that, her room is our family room. When we unfold the sofa into a bed, our family room becomes our guest room.

I claim my room by means of an iMac and an old desk where I do most of my writing. Sometimes I call it my den. It is not a man cave as such spaces are usually pictured—no Browns or Ohio State banners and no mini-fridge packed with Bud Light. When Maxine uses the Mac, or retrieves a folder from our filing cabinet, my den becomes our office.

Both her room and my room boast large windows, facing east.

Shortly after we moved into our ranch, Breckenridge, like the whole world, essentially shut down because of the COVID-19 pandemic. We have been more confined to our ranch than we had expected, less active than we'd been promised, and not as able as we had hoped to get acquainted with Village residents other than those we meet on our daily walks around the campus. I have spent more time than I had planned staring out of my room's window. So let me tell you about that window, what I see through it, and what it reveals to me.

My den's bay window is in three sections—a large glass pane bordered by two smaller ones. The two outer panes angle out from the plane of the wall, pushing the larger pane about a foot and half into the world outside.

I think of the three panes of glass that make up my one bay window as an approximation of the Holy Trinity (but an approximation only because its three entities are not equals). It is a threesome that welcomes each morning's dawn, then channels each day's changing light until bright day slips into dark night...to black.

A few scraggly plants occupy my window's granite sill, and a large glass ornament that belonged to my parents hangs from the lowered ceiling at its top. One fall would be its demise.

Around my window I have carefully hung objects that have special meaning to me, including, above it, five decorated crosses given to me by friends and parishioners through the years. On either side of it are memorabilia of a few events and friends from my life and career. These all frame the light my window welcomes into my room.

Accordion-like, room-darkening shades cover each pane. They pull closed from top down or from bottom up or from both directions at the same time, thereby covering the middle of the window. They are quite elaborate. We have the bill to prove it.

The ancient, very worn kneehole desk that faces my window belonged to my father-in-law. The drawers scrape and squawk when opened, as if protesting their reason for being. I must cross my long legs at my shins to get them under it, very like sitting in coach on an airplane. I can hardly move. Before we came to Breckenridge, I was sure I would replace the desk with a larger, more modern one as soon as I could. But the pandemic kept us from shopping, and in the meantime, something reassuring about my being locked in that enclosure has captivated me. It forces me to sit up straight, to pay attention.

When I am ready for serious writing and rewriting, I roll my task chair back from the desk, swing to the left, and work at the Mac.

Also under my window, to the right of my desk, is another near antique. It is a wooden toy box my great uncle, John Olson, made for me in 1945, for my second birthday in February. Uncle John, a commercial artist, painted delightful images of happy farm animals around its sides and on its lid. In the center of that lid, under a red DEAN, he painted a deep blue farm pond surrounded by snow and leafless trees. Below the pond are lines by British poet Sara Coleridge:

February brings the rain/thaws the frozen lake again.

Between my desk and my toy box stands a three-foot tall candlestick fashioned out of a stair balustrade and given to me by a member of the church I pastored in the early 1970s. It is topped by a fat, white candle I rarely light.

I treasure everything in my room, but especially my secular trinity window of unequals, and the useful objects and happy memories that frame it.

I also treasure the scene outside my window, through the course of each day, into each night.

September 5, 2020, 2:00 p.m: Muted sunlight filters lazily through an overcast sky, polishing trees' leaves on its way through them to the grass below. Along the top half of my window, the branch of a large oak sags into view. I see a multitude of greens.

A single, mid-sized, nearly symmetrical blue spruce stands near the center of the scene, radiant—iridescent even, a bluish variation of the prevailing greens. It shines as if charged with an internal source of energy, which of course it is.

Just beyond the spruce, a gradual hill ascends to a parking lot. The cars there, some distance away, seem to inhabit another world.

Next to the parking lot, obscured by a barricade of trees whose leaves nearly completely hide it in summer, stands a six-story brick apartment building that offers lower-cost housing to many of our community's members. Is such housing unusual for a retirement village? I suspect it is, and I am glad Breckenridge has it.

Near the top of the hill is a picnic table I've never seen anyone use. Nor have I ever seen anyone barbecuing on the nearby grill. The grassy carpet running up the hill looks worn in spots because it gets little sun and because heavy rains send water cascading toward our house. Our community's grove (as this unbuilt area is called) is studded with trees large and small, evergreen and deciduous, including two ancient and spare apple trees.

Our grove is home to many animals. I love to watch them. Young squirrels chased each other endlessly early in the summer; then, as fall approached, they settled down to the survival task of squirreling acorns away for the winter. Chipmunks skitter here and there. The occasional skunk is much more relaxed than they. A small herd of deer wanders by from time to time, sampling whatever it finds to eat.

Beyond the spruce looms the brick wall and windows of a complex building that houses Breckenridge's health and rehab center, our assisted living and memory care units, and—way over on its

far side from my window and therefore out of my sight—our chapel. Although the entire structure has been mostly off-limits since last March, its large windows return my smaller window's inquiring stares. And my window and windows of the ranch immediately to the left of ours exchange side-way glances, checking one another out.

Not far away we have placed a concrete bird bath we've had since the 1970s. It weighs a ton, but we have moved it from Maryland to Illinois and finally to Ohio. Many birds, particularly robins, enjoyed it during the summer. One day Maxine watched a large hawk splash about in it. It is a healthy diversion, watching birds enjoy the small pond we provide for them.

Near the bird bath stands a two-foot-tall statue of St. Francis, bird in hand, surveying the pachysandra patch at his feet. He guards a short flight of steps that starts up the hillside, then abruptly ends. Our family gave St. Francis to my mother for her 85th birthday, and we brought him home with us after her death in 2015. Birds and squirrels like to sit on the good saint's head—no wonder!

Late one afternoon last summer we spied a tiny, spot-covered fawn lying absolutely still among the pachysandra, under Francis's saintly gaze. The fawn was gone the next morning, surely retrieved by its mother in the safety of night.

When I search for just the right word or phrase in something I am writing, I invariably look up and out my window, confident that what I am seeking is somewhere out there, waiting to be found.

Now I notice that sunlight is streaming a little brighter through the gaps in the tree branches, so that the blue spruce shines not quite so distinctively as earlier. Still, it glows.

Only a few moments have passed in this late summer early afternoon. But change has happened in that short time, if not in what things are, then in how they look to me, through my window, to what is beyond it. I feel as if I own this always transitory scene, as if it is mine. But, of course, it is not. No matter how they put it, we are temporary residents at Ohio Living Breckenridge Village. True to life itself, our time here will one day end and other residents' times will begin.

I start nearly every day seated at the old desk, facing my window. I open the shades to prepare for my morning quiet, meditation time. I read daily scriptures, write in my journal, and pray—all in around half an hour. It's a daily routine I have practiced for years, often impatiently. Every day, there is so much to do.

The hill, the trees, and the buildings deny me any reasonable sense of the horizon, so I never actually see the sun rise. But on clear mornings, and through summer's leaves, I can see it lift itself over the health care/chapel complex until it blinds me and I have to turn away or re-close the shades, just a bit. Of course, it is the earth that is moving relative to the sun, not the other way around. But appearances matter.

As summer wanes toward fall and winter, the progression of seasons slowly shifts the sun's first appearance to later in the day and southward to over the parking lot. Summer's greens yield to yellows and golds, and the grass dulls and is mottled by fallen leaves. In time, the branches are bare—except those on the evergreens and on one blue spruce.

The sun's daily drift and the seasonal succession of colors make me sharply aware of time's unrelenting movement. Through my window each morning, my time's inevitable passage is impressed upon me. One day follows another, and I cannot go back and relive a single one of them.

When I see the rising sun peek just above Breckenridge Village's health care building—above that place where, people sometimes say, the sun sets on our lives—I sense first an irony. Then I remember that our chapel, on the far side of that complex and out of my sight, is awash in sunlight.

Our chapel: where Breckenridge residents gather to hear words that promise light brighter than any we now can see, and revealing far more than we now can imagine.

Our chapel: from which some of us are dispatched into eternity, there to be greeted by unflinching light and luminescent spruces and fawns at peace in the pachysandra and a green hill not so far away that welcomes rancher saints and apartment saints together around one bountiful picnic feast.

It is a remarkable scene—a happy yet wistful scene—that my mere faith's incredulous eye sees through my window.