THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME; NOT MUCH NATURAL DRAMA -- OR DANGER -- IN CONNECTICUT:

The hymn "America the Beautiful" reminds us to appreciate the majesty of purple mountains and the immensity of ever-spacious skies. Southern New England has neither. Should we be disappointed? Not really. You see, there's a downside to the immense, staggering beauty that lies west of the Mississippi River: chronic exposure to life-threatening geological hazards.

Ever-spacious skies in the American heartland are breeding grounds for tornadoes, droughts and gully-washer floods. Thunderstorms there can be so severe that they make eastern soaks look like sprinkles. I recall the day in Rapid City, S.D., when I watched dead cattle and trailer homes floating downriver from Mount Rushmore. I remember the night in Utah when I slept in a cave because the all-night sandstorm was too loud for sleeping in the vans, which is where we fled after our tents were flattened. The bone-dry streambed of Hell Creek, Mont., is as hot and dry as it sounds.

Purple mountains are painted that way when a ray of light travels through enough sky to wash away the blue hues of overhead skies from the spectrum, moving them closer to the red of sunsets. Rugged highlands are maintained by tectonic movements that are inevitably accompanied by earthquakes, which rupture the ground and shake things up, especially loose rock. Purple mountains are precipitous as well. Their topographic relief, which so commands our aesthetic attention, is inevitably accompanied by debris avalanches, landslides and mudflows. Steep mountains are also rainmakers because they deflect air masses upward, cool them quickly and deluge the earth.

Southern New England lacks the raw emotional power of jagged mountains and endless horizons, but it has none of the bad things that come with such landscapes. It's a land of steady habits, physically speaking, benign but assured. Comfortable rather than dramatic; one bearing the stability and wisdom of antiquity rather than the fresh hope of youth.

But even New England was young once. During the Paleozoic, it was a lusty, lofty land of youthful exuberance, decorated by a high purple mountain system that extended from what is now New York City to the Canadian Maritimes, a range that has since deeply eroded. Our mountain home has long since aged away, leaving only the durable basement we live on today.

It's a Goldilocks sort of a place. Seldom too wet, seldom too dry, usually just right. Though rugged and level in very specific settings, overall it's not too rugged and not too flat. Instead, it's hilly, with valleys and slopes to break up the monotony that comes with endlessly horizontal. There is room to breathe, but not so much as to make us feel insignificant. It's not too crowded nor too empty; a place where normal citizens can own their own patch of land and live on it too.

Southern New England may not be an ideal landscape for a vigorous young person in his 20s, when the call of the wild usually rates higher on a list of life priorities than a merely pleasant life. In my youth, I involuntarily floated in floodwaters. I got married on a volcano above a noisily crevassing glacier. My knees have wobbled during earthquakes. My life was spared by a rock avalanche. I lost a colleague on Mount St. Helens. I worked in a place where tsunami waves reached 1,700 feet above sea level.

I left such a life when I moved here from Alaska with wife and kids at age 32, at a time when stability and security, rather than excitement, rose to the top of my agenda.

Southern New England may suffer from pollution, blight, crime and boredom, things we have some control over. But we don't suffer from chronic fear of quicksand, landslides, seismic ruptures,
drought, wildfires, flood inundations and the snap-down of entire forests by the wind. At worst, we have ice storms, which tend to snuff out the power grid rather than take human lives.

Volcanoes? Actually, New England used to have plenty of them, though none have been active for more than a hundred million years. This way, we get the benefits of volcanic rock -- stable foundations, nice vistas from trap rock ridges, a rich soil -- without the disadvantage of being smothered by ash, poisoned by gases or simply blown to bits.

Landslides? We hardly ever get them. And when they do occur, they are usually very localized and brought on by overzealous excavation into clay-rich soils or groundwater springs. Southern New England's immunity from widespread landslides derives from its fairly rigid hardpan subsoil, a glacial deposit pressed so hard onto the land that it is almost as tough as rock, sometimes tougher. It's stony, but very, very strong.

Droughts? There are patches of sandy soil that parch during the dry season, and gardens often do need watering. But most of New England has loamy soils that catch and hold on to water as if they were misers for moisture. Indeed, the rolling hillsides of New England stay green month after month. Elsewhere, water shortages can lead to international conflicts, financial ruin and urban violence. Here, we don't think about it much at all, even when our water managers plead for conservation.

Floods? We get them, all right, but only infrequently, and they come with plenty of warning. The damage is costly, but brief. The land isn't destroyed, and very few lives are lost.

California may be richer than Connecticut in pizzazz and pinot, but it's a real loser with respect to geologic threats. Before the extinction of the geology department at the University of Connecticut, I took three or four cold phone calls from young women in California who had just been shaken up by the latest earthquake: Lomo Prieta, Northridge, Palmdale...I forget. Each was looking for a place to live that was neither too flat nor too far from the sea, and that didn't experience damaging earthquakes. The callers were mothers with small children, perhaps arming themselves with information for the inevitable dinner conversation about moving back East. At one point I actually met a woman who had persuaded her husband to move back to New England to avoid their kids being crushed to death at school during an earthquake. She couldn't live with that possibility.

It's easy to appreciate the landscape drama that comes with purple mountains and spacious skies. It's harder to appreciate the tranquility of safe, productive land.