

SETTING AS A REFLECTION OF CHARACTER
INTERIORITY IN SHORT FICTION: AN ANALYSIS AND
APPLICATION OF CREATIVE WRITING TECHNIQUES

by

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A THESIS

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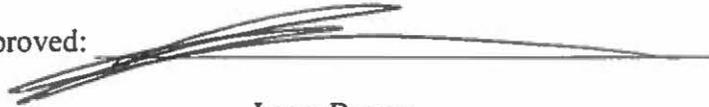
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This thesis examines the use of setting in short fiction as a tool to reveal character interiority. Through the identification and analysis of fourteen writing techniques drawn from seven short stories, it shows the importance of setting for communicating thoughts and feelings that the characters have not, will not, or cannot express, as well as for cultivating negative capability, circumventing imitative fallacy, and creating complex, human characters. It argues that setting is a tool that writers may employ in a diverse number of ways, namely by using setting symbolically, as atmosphere, in interactions with the characters, or as a revealing subject for narrative voice. It concludes with two original works by the thesis author, in which she applies a number of the techniques she has identified over the course of the project.

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Introduction

When a fiction writer fashions her story, whether she has just begun her first paragraph or is in her twelfth revision, a common question that arises is how to bring her characters to life, to convey what they are thinking and feeling without melodrama, or artificiality (unless, of course, that is the intended effect). Many authors have written on the subject, including Sarah Stone and Ron Nyren, in their chapter "Developing and Complicating Characters" in *Deepening Fiction* and Stephen Koch's chapter "Making Characters Live" from *The Modern Library Writer's Workshop: A Guide to the Craft of Fiction*. However, the range of characterization strategies available to the author narrows when she wishes to give her readers access to a character's subconscious, for example to reveal unacknowledged guilt, fear or hope. Gestures, facial expressions, and carefully crafted dialogue (including what is left *unsaid*) can carry some of this nuance. It is the aim of this thesis to explore a fourth method of revealing a character's subconscious, the unvoiced and unmanifest: setting. The lens through which people see the world, their setting, is shaded by their interiority (their thoughts and feelings), and the same can be true of characters, so that a character's description of her setting functions as a way to interpret her thoughts and feelings. If the story is not narrated by the character in question, the author's description of setting can still act as a lens through which setting evokes thoughts or feelings. For instance, an author may populate her setting with symbols in such a way that the physical landscape mimics the mental landscape of a character. This is the case in Ernest Hemingway's short story "The Big Two-Hearted River," in which the regrowth of a Michigan landscape following a fire corresponds with the emotional regrowth of the protagonist, Nick Adams, after fighting

in World War I (an example I will analyze in depth later on in the paper). This, however, is all very abstract. What occurs on the level of sentences, of paragraphs, and on a structural level, when authors use setting in this way, and what are some of the techniques authors may use to reveal character interiority through setting?

In order to respond to these questions, this thesis will analyze the use of setting in seven short stories, performing a close reading of relevant passages, and extracting from these readings a number of techniques that may be reapplied in other creative work. These techniques are not intended to represent an exhaustive list, but rather a sampling of the diverse ways in which setting can be used. My thesis will then conclude with a creative component, in which I apply a number of these techniques in two of my own short stories. Each of my works will be followed by a brief reflection in which I discuss how these techniques are functioning in my own stories, and the challenges I encountered in applying them.

This thesis argues that setting, in addition to being a valuable and unique tool for communicating a character's thoughts and feelings, is also a tool writers may employ in a diverse number of ways, namely by using setting symbolically, as atmosphere, in interactions with the characters, or as a revealing subject for narrative voice. It enables writers to reveal things that the characters will not, or cannot express.

Methodology

Works Discussed

For this project, I am analyzing seven stories: Charles D'Ambrosio's "The Point" (1995), Ernest Hemingway's "Big Two-Hearted River" (1925), James Joyce's "Araby" (1914), Annie Proulx's "The Half-Skinned Steer" (1997), Alice Munro's "A Wilderness Station" (1992), Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892), and Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour" (1891). I chose this number because it allows me to make a decent survey without being too overwhelming. While I approached the project with a few stories already in mind, I have made use of my Primary Advisor and Second Reader's knowledge of short stories to help complete my list of texts for analysis. As the wide range of publication dates implies, I am not limiting my selection of texts based on the time they were written. While the contents of a story and the characters it involves may be specific to the era the story was created, it is my opinion that the techniques that author uses can still hold relevance 50 and even 100 years later.

My aim is to identify as many different techniques as possible from my selection of texts. During my research when I have encountered multiple stories that use the same technique or set of techniques, I have focused my analysis on examples from a single story. Where applicable, I include the names of other stories I have discovered which use the same techniques.

Roots of the Project

My thesis is an expansion of the primary research paper required for the University of Oregon's Kidd Tutorial, a yearlong creative writing program in which I am currently enrolled. In the Tutorial, small groups of students (seven, in my case) are paired with a Kidd Fellow, a graduate student in Creative Writing. Kidd students participate in workshops to help develop and revise their creative work, and attend lectures by visiting and resident writers. The Kidd Tutorial culminates in each participant's construction of a body of creative work (from which I have drawn the stories for the creative component of my thesis) and a research paper focusing on an aspect of writing craft (which I have expanded into the research component of my thesis).

As I moved forward in the Kidd Tutorial, I have experimented with and applied these setting-based strategies in my own short stories as I identified them through research. While ideally I would have been able to implement all of the techniques I have discovered, my application of these techniques has depended on what each individual story required. At the conclusion of the Kidd Tutorial, I will have written six short stories. From these, I have selected the best two works¹ to include in my thesis based on the following criteria: (1) how well they were received by my peers in workshop and by my instructor following revision, and (2) how well I judged that they employ the techniques that I have learned. Once I chose the stories, I went through additional rounds of revision to see if there were any opportunities I missed to apply techniques

¹ Choosing to include two rather than all six of my creative works in my thesis is a decision largely based on time constraints, as the revision process and the creation of an introduction to my creative works takes a significant amount of writing time.

(with the stipulation that the strategies must perform valuable characterization and work within the story, and not just be present for the sake of the project). Then, I wrote two short reflections on my stories, in which I define and discuss which techniques I have applied and how they are functioning within my story.

Organization of the Analytical Portion of the Project

To better highlight the similarities and differences between setting techniques, I have organized the analytical portion of my thesis into four broad categories based on how the authors use setting in their works: symbolism, atmosphere, setting-character interaction, and narrative style. For the purposes of this thesis, I define these section titles as follows: symbolism is the use of symbols, or "Something that stands for, represents, or denotes something else [...] *esp.* a material object[s] representing or taken to represent something immaterial or abstract," as defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary*; atmosphere is multiple elements of setting functioning in tandem to evoke a feeling or idea; setting-character interaction includes any effect that the character has on the setting or vice-versa that holds symbolic meaning; narrative style is the type of voice the author uses to tell a story, and is established through decisions regarding diction, word choice and sentence structure, particularly when these decisions align the work with certain types of texts within literary tradition (such as romance or epic). These categories are not meant to be definitive -- indeed, many of the authors I am examining bridge multiple categories -- rather they present an opportunity to juxtapose techniques in a way that will allow me to consider the nuanced differences between

authors using setting as symbol, atmosphere, etc. This categorization may also prove helpful to writers considering which setting strategies to use in their own works.

This organization, one might note, is not typical of an argumentative paper. While each section and sub-section should prove the usefulness of setting as a writer's tool for communicating a character's inner thoughts, I have organized it in a way that I hope will be useful to my fellow writers, rather than as a strict defense of my topic. It is my goal that my analysis by itself will be clear and strong enough to show that setting can be much more than a stage on which the plot may unravel, or a method of creating verisimilitude; it can function as a unique way to understand even the most subconscious thoughts of the people on the page.

Literature Review

Several authors have written on setting as a tool to reveal character interiority, but to my knowledge, it has never been the sole focus of a craft essay. It is either a subsection of a chapter of a book on crafting setting, such as in *Setting* by Jack Bickham, or part of an argument in an essay that also links setting to other story components, such as "theme" and "mood," like Alexander Parson's essay "Matrix for Meaning: Physical Setting in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*" (192). This gives short shrift to a writerly tool that authors can employ and have already employed in many distinct fashions (my thesis discusses thirteen) and to a wide range of effects.

Of the craft essays (essays concerned with the craft of writing) on setting I discovered, many highlighted different techniques. Bickham focuses on an emotional depiction of setting, arguing that "If you write about a character whose feelings are sad

and lonely, then your setting will look (or be interpreted as) sad and lonely," a technique that I discuss in my section on atmosphere (102). Tom Bailey, in his book *A Short Story Writer's Companion*, describes a writing strategy that I call the "Selective Lens," when we writes "The very choice of what is observed – much less how it is described – draws for us a portrait of that character" (78-9). In analyzing Ernest Hemingway's short story "Hills Like White Elephants," Bailey also examines how the difference in the way two characters view the setting reveals a difference in their views on life (89). This is akin to a technique I discuss in my section "Complicating Character Through Contradictions in Setting Description," which proposes that differing or contradictory depictions of setting can reveal conflicting ideas within a character. Parsons describes how author Cormac McCarthy uses a mirage as a tool to articulate his characters' unexpressed wishes for "water and civilization" (200). The use of the imaginary that Parsons finds in the mirage relates to Annie Proulx's use of the dream, which I investigate in my section "Revealing the Subconscious Through Dream Setting." These are all valid and useful discussions of technique, many of which I have found confirmed in my own research. It is my hope that my project expands on this list, and groups a wide range of techniques together in a way that reveals the diversity of what authors can do with setting to reveal character, as well as offering technical observations that may help other writers employ these techniques in their own work.

Importance of Project

Goals of the Project

This project has two goals: firstly, to be a means of improving my own writing through an in-depth examination of one aspect of writing (setting), both how it is used by professional authors and how I might apply it myself; secondly to be a resource for other beginning writers. As a resource, its usefulness lies in its emphasis on the concrete. It avoids broad brushstrokes and theoretical arguments in favor of the mechanics of its examples -- the way sentences are constructed, the adjectives with which objects are described, and so on, in order to make the techniques I am distilling from my examples easy to apply. This does not mean that I am attempting to create a "cookbook" approach for using setting to reveal character interiority. Because my analysis focuses on *how* writers write and not *what* writers write, my end product is a set of tools, or techniques, for writing, rather than a series of scripts to be inserted in one's writing.

Importance for Character Development

As I discuss above and throughout my thesis, setting can be a useful tool for revealing thoughts and feelings that a character has not, will not or cannot act on. Authors can also use setting to complexify their characters -- showing a character who behaves a certain way and feels another. Both the narrator in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" and Mero in Annie Proulx's "The Half-Skinned Steer," which I analyze in the following pages, start as characters who appear to have rigid opinions

about who they are and how they should act. Mero, though an octogenarian, considers himself fit and powerful -- someone who "could dodge an emu," and Gilman's narrator thinks, at least part of the time, that she is conceding to her husband's opinions about her treatment and needs (Proulx 21, Gilman 598). Neither is true, but the texts seem to offer proof, showing us Mero's "muscular arms" and Gilman's narrator's statement that she, at the suggestion of her husband will "will let it [thoughts and worries of her disease] alone" (Proulx 21, Gilman 598). This is imitative fallacy: the texts are imitating the characters' viewpoints by showing the reader what the character wants to believe, creating images of the characters as they seem themselves, not as they are in reality. However, the focus of these stories, particularly "The Half-Skinned Steer," is not how the characters want to view themselves (although this is important), but the disparity between how they want to see themselves and how they actually are -- their doubts, their fears, their true natures. Setting, as Gilman and Proulx use it, reveals the subconscious while maintaining this disparity². Mero would never tell anyone his fears about aging and feebleness. If he did he would not be the same character. Instead, as I discuss in my chapter on symbolism, the setting of Mero's dream communicates these fears.

Importance for the Larger Academic and Non-Academic Communities

In a reading included in the documentary *James Baldwin: The Price of the Ticket*, author James Baldwin says, "You think your pain and your heartbreak are

² I owe the concept of setting as a way to circumvent imitative fallacy to a discussion with my Kidd Tutorial Instructor, Ezra Carlsen.

unprecedented in the history of the world, but then you read. It was books that taught me that the things that tormented me most were the very things that connected me with all the people who were alive, or who had ever been alive.” There is a sense that books, as windows onto the lives and hearts of other people, foster the reader's empathy in the real world, creating a sense of common humanity.

A recent series of experiments by David Comer Kidd and Emanuele Castano suggests that there may be a scientific basis for this claim. These experiments compared the effects of reading literary fiction, popular fiction, nonfiction, and nothing at all on Theory of Mind (ToM), or "The capacity to identify and understand others' subjective states" (Kidd and Castano 377). The researchers found that reading literary texts (this category was created from stories "by award-winning or canonical writers") "led to better performance on tests of affective ToM (experiments 1 to 5) and cognitive ToM (experiments 4 and 5)³ compared with reading nonfiction (experiments 1), popular fiction (experiments 2 to 5), or nothing at all (experiments 2 and 5) (378, 377). If, as the researchers propose, reading literary fiction is a workout of the mind's ability to grasp what goes on in the minds of others, then the subtle psychological complexity that strategic use of setting offers should produce a more lifelike experience of this form of mind-reading in literature (378). It is my goal that the techniques I discover be of use to writers as a method of creating a more nuanced, complete portrait of their characters -- characters who in their complexity create empathy in readers. Ideally, readers may in turn experience an increase in empathy in real life situations.

³ Affective ToM they define as "the ability to detect and understand others' emotions" while cognitive ToM is "the inference and representation of others' beliefs and intentions" (377).

Analysis

Atmospheric Setting

In the introduction to this thesis, I define atmospheric setting as when multiple elements of setting function in tandem to evoke a feeling or idea. It is different from symbolism in that it is not a one-to-one correlation between an object as symbol and an idea as symbolized, but rather a group of objects, or an “atmosphere” that creates the effect. Because of this lack of one-to-one correspondence, using atmospheric setting to reveal character interiority can be a subtler approach than creating symbols or symbolic setting-character interaction. Although this is not always the case, atmospheric setting can elicit more nuanced feeling, because each aspect of setting that contributes the atmosphere can offer a slightly different emotional tinge. An example of this, which I discuss in detail in the section “Setting as Objective Correlative,” is the image of the spring day in Kate Chopin’s “The Story of an Hour,” which manages to convey a range of related emotions, such as hope, freedom, spring, life continuing, and opportunity (Chopin 297-8).

*The Selective Lens*⁴

In Charlotte Perkins Gilman's first-person story "The Yellow Wallpaper," the narrator's husband, a doctor, confines her to a summerhouse as a means to treat her depression. Monitored closely by her husband and sister-in-law in an attempt to limit her mental exertions, the narrator tells her story via entries in a secret diary, in which

⁴ A further example of the selective lens occurs in Ernest Hemingway's "The Big Two-Hearted River," which I analyze below in the section "The Symbolic Landscape as a Parallel for Character Psychology." In this case, the author singles out images of resistance in order to show the main character's resistance to the destructive effects of the war (Hemingway 177-8)

she reveals a growing obsession with the yellow wallpaper in her and her husband's bedroom. The wallpaper and the house itself come to represent the narrator's isolation, frustration, imprisonment, and illness, and mark her descent into insanity.

Gilman begins the piece with a fairly straightforward account of the narrator's worries: "that there is something queer about" the house, that her husband "does not believe [she] is sick" and therefore may be "one reason [she] do[es] not get well faster," that her attempts to work are met with "heavy opposition" and she is forbidden the "society and stimulus" she needs (597, 598). Because her husband has strongly discouraged her from reflecting on her illness, which "always makes [her] feel bad," she announces that she "will let it alone and talk about the house" (598). However, what follows is not a neutral description of a house, but one in which the character's repressed anxiety and frustration about her illness and treatment bleed through:

"The most beautiful place! It is quite alone, standing well back from the road, quite three miles from the village. It makes me think of English places that you read about, for there are hedges and walls and gates that lock, and lots of separate little houses for the gardeners and people."
(598)

One technique that Gilman uses in this excerpt is a sort of "selective lens" through which the character views the setting. Instead of a random selection of descriptors of the house (such as "dormers with tall glass windows," "white columns," and "great old oaks on the lawn"), the attributes that the character notes -- that the house is "quite alone, standing well back from the road, quite three miles from the village," are all related to the house's isolation, and harken back to the narrator's worry that she lacks "society and stimulus" (598). The images of "hedges," "walls," "gates that lock" and "separate little houses for the gardeners and people" also speak to isolation,

particularly isolation that is enforced by human hands (which have constructed these barriers and restrictors of movement). The deliberate selection and abundance of related descriptors flags for the reader that this is not just a creative way to describe something, but also a way of describing something that has meaning in itself.

Training the Reader to Understand Character Through Setting by Means of Narrative Order

Another technique that flags the setting as meaningful is Gilman's strategic placement of this description within the text. Because the narrator has overtly discussed isolation and confinement in the preceding paragraphs, it becomes easier to recognize these sentiments when they are repeated in the setting. This repetition may seem like it makes this use of setting redundant. However, it can be a useful way to teach or train the reader⁵ to view setting as a way to understand character, so that the next time the author uses setting to develop character, she does not have to introduce it with an overt statement of the sentiments or thoughts the setting evokes. Ideally, the reader will proceed to search for character clues in the setting without being prompted⁶. Of course, there is no guarantee that any attempt to teach a reader will work -- as with any communication, there is the chance that what is intended and what is interpreted will be entirely different things. In the above example, success in teaching the reader relies

⁵ I borrow this concept of teaching the reader from James Wood's *How Fiction Works*, in which he describes how the reader learns to recognize an unreliable narrator: "We know that the narrator is being unreliable because the author is alerting us, through reliable manipulation, to that narrator's unreliability. A process of authorial flagging is going on; the novel teaches us how to read its narrator" (5).

⁶ In fact, many of the short stories I examine in this thesis make no apparent attempt to teach the reader that setting will be used as a window into the minds of its characters. These stories instead rely on the attentiveness of the reader and the power of the language and imagery to get their messages across.

largely on how apt Gilman's setting is in communicating the narrator's perceived lack of "society and stimulus" (598). Gilman offers one possible solution to this problem by creating a setting replete with images of isolation -- there are seven, total, in the above paragraph between "quite alone" and "separate little houses" (598).

Interior Change as Shown through an Evolving View of Landscape

In her short story "The Half-Skinned Steer," Annie Proulx expands on the "selective lens" technique by depicting the same landscape multiple times but drawing out different aspects based on the character's frame of mind. In "The Half-Skinned Steer," this landscape is the Wyoming ranch where the main character, Mero, grew up. While most of the scenes follow Mero in his eighties and in a period just before he left the ranch as a young man, Proulx also jumps back further to a moment when Mero is "eleven or twelve," "a few days" before "His interest in women began" (25). In this scene, he is guiding an anthropologist through the ranch to show him some Native American rock paintings:

"They climbed through the stony landscape, limestone beds eroded by wind into fantastic furniture, stale gnawed breadcrusts, tumbled bones, stacks of dirty, folded blankets, bleached crab claws and dog teeth. He tethered the horses in the shade of a stand of limber pine and led the anthropologist up through the stiff-branched mountain mahogany to the overhang. Above them reared corroded cliffs brilliant with orange lichen, pitted with holes and ledges darkened by millennia of raptor feces." (25)

In this excerpt, Proulx's/Mero's selective lens is singling out the human, domestic elements (such as "furniture," "breadcrusts," "folded blankets" and "dog teeth") of the landscape, a landscape that not only (literally) bears the handprints of humanity in the rock paintings, but also one that resembles a home in some ways. It is not obscured by

snow, as Mero sees it on his return to the ranch in his eighties, and not threatening. While the paragraph begins with domestic metaphors, it ends on a very concrete, realistic image of the "corroded cliffs brilliant with orange lichen, pitted with holes and ledges darkened by millennia of raptor feces." In this way, Proulx shows that the young Mero is still grounded in reality, even though he makes imaginative leaps.

Another description of the ranch from Mero's eighties reveals the dramatic shift in his character. At this point, Mero's "interest in women" has become an obsession over one woman -- his father's girlfriend at the time Mero left the ranch (25). As he returns to the ranch, he wonders whether his brother "Rollo had got the girlfriend away from the old man, thrown a saddle on her and ridden off into the sunset" (23). His sense of uncertainty and the unknown manifests itself in the landscape as Mero's imagination runs wild in the snow, seeing "Plumes of smoke" that "rose hundreds of feet into the air, elegant fountains and twisting snow devils, shapes of veiled Arab women and ghost riders dissolving in white fume" (31). The contrast of these fantastical images with the earlier, homey depiction of the ranch is striking, and points to the effect his obsession with the woman has had on his interiority. The familiar look of the ranch has been obscured and warped by snow just as Mero's sense of reality has been obscured and warped by his obsession with the woman. Proulx uses the shifting, abstract quality of the snow to her advantage, showing how, through Mero's fantasies, ordinary gusts of snow can become "veiled Arab women" and "ghost riders."

*Complicating Character Through Contradictions in Setting Description*⁷

As in Annie Proulx's "The Half-Skinned Steer," Charles D'Ambrosio uses contrasting description of setting to reveal character interiority in "The Point." However, where Proulx creates a contrast in setting between scenes, D'Ambrosio creates this contrast in a single sentence. The effect, then, is not to show an evolution in character, but rather a complication, an internal conflict.

"The Point" is the story of Kurt, a thirteen-year-old who is dealing with the suicide of his father and whose mother has recruited him to escort drunk people home from her parties. The following excerpt is from the opening of the story, just after Kurt has awoken from a nightmare about his father, and I will argue that its description of the setting reveals the conflict between naïve Kurt-as-child, and the more sarcastic, world-weary Kurt-as-teenager, as well as his feelings about his father:

Then the door opened, and for a moment the blade of bright light blinded me. The party was still going full blast, and now with the door ajar and my eyes adjusting I glimpsed the silver smoke swirling in the light and all the people suspended in it, hovering around as if they were angels in Heaven -- some kind of Heaven where the host serves highballs and the men smoke cigars and the women all smell like rotting fruit. (3)

The presence of two contrasting images of Heaven reveals something about Kurt's character. The first image, of the "silver smoke swirling in the light and all the people suspended in it, hovering around as if they were angels in Heaven" has a magical feel, yet is a stereotypical idea of Heaven. It is the kind of image a child might have.

However, the narrator skews this vision by adding "some kind of Heaven where the host serves highballs and the men smoke cigars and the women all smell like rotting fruit."

⁷ A related technique is the use of two character's contradictory views of setting to highlight the ways in which these characters think differently, as appears in the descriptions of the hills in Ernest Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants" (662-3)

With this statement, reality intrudes in a very adult and sarcastic fashion. It is almost as if the narrator becomes self-conscious of his own childishness, and attempts to disguise it with irony. This suggests a split within the thirteen-year-old Kurt, who is no longer a child, but not yet an adult.

D'Ambrosio creates this shift between one portrayal of heaven and the next on several levels. There is a contrast of imagery, as the first section employs more positive and mystical descriptions such as "silver smoke swirling" while the second section uses the more negative "rotting fruit." The construction of the sentence also mimics the change in tone. The first section uses a participial phrase (which is a phrase beginning with a participle, in this case "hovering," that acts as an adjective modifying the word "people"), and therefore sounds more lyrical or imaginative. The second section is more straightforward, with a series of simple subject-verb phrases such as "host serves highballs" and "men smoke cigars" linked by the word "and," which mirrors the shift in tone toward realism.

Narrative Order as a Method of Extending the Significance of Setting

A second technique D'Ambrosio uses is a strategic positioning of the setting description within the narrative in order to imbue it with extra meaning. At this point in the story the reader does not know Kurt's father is dead. However, by placing the images of heaven in this passage shortly following the description of a dream about Kurt's father, D'Ambrosio hints at this reality, and how much it occupies Kurt's mind. This implication prepares the reader for Kurt's repeated mentions of his father's death, such as when he discusses how he "shot himself" and later, "my father, who shot

himself in the head one morning -- did I already say this?" and finally the conclusion, when Kurt describes discovering his father after his suicide (4, 11, 30-31).

Setting as Objective Correlative

In her short story "The Story of an Hour," Kate Chopin offers a technique that lies somewhere between a selective lens and an emotional overlay⁸ -- it is closer to T.S. Eliot's definition of the objective correlative, a "set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of [a] *particular* emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked" (58 emphasis in original). In this story, the setting is used to signal a shift in the main character Louise's mindset as she sits, digesting the news of her husband's death in an accident (news which tragically proves to be false). After an initial "storm of grief" she retreats to her room and sits in front of a window (297):

She could see in the open square before her the tops of trees that were all aquiver with the new spring life. The delicious breath of rain was in the air. In the street below a peddler was crying his wares. The notes of a distant song which some one was singing reached her faintly, and countless sparrows were twittering in the eaves.

There were patches of blue sky showing here and there through the clouds that had met and piled one above the other in the west facing her window. (297-8)

Separately, the elements of this outdoor scene, the sparrows "twittering" and the "distant song" do not convey hope, or what Louise later names as feeling "Body and soul free" (298). The relationship between them and what they represent is not as one-to-one as

⁸ An emotional overlay, as I discuss in my section on narrative style, is the description of a neutral object[s] using emotional language (words that carry distinctly positive or negative connotations), and is a method of showing a character's mood without her having to take physical action

the "gates that lock" and isolation in "The Yellow Wallpaper" (Gilman 598). Together, however, they form a nuanced image of spring, of life continuing, and of opportunity. Chopin uses something of an emotional overlay to reinforce this interpretation of the images: "aquiver," "delicious" and "twittering" are all positive words (as compared with, say, "trembling," "breath of rain" instead of "delicious breath of rain" and "babbling" sparrows). They provide a stark contrast to words like "disaster," "sad message" and "storm of grief," used in the opening paragraphs of the piece (297). However, the images themselves carry the weight of the feeling.

"The Story of an Hour," out of all of the stories analyzed in this thesis, is the best example of how setting can carry the emotional weight of the story. The whole piece concludes in just three pages, during which Louise moves from a "storm of grief" to "feverish triumph" (297, 299). Without the intervening description of setting, this dramatic switch might feel alienating for the reader. However, the setting allows for a gradual shift, and one in which the reader can recognize at the same time as the character the "subtle and elusive" feeling and realization "creeping out of the sky, reaching toward her through the sounds, the scents, the color that filled the air" (298).

Symbolism in Setting

Among my four categories -- atmospheric setting, symbolism in setting, setting-character interaction and narrative style -- symbolism is the most direct. Instead of an attempt to cultivate a mood or voice, symbolism purely seeks to find an object that can embody something more abstract. It is, as I define in my introduction, the use of "material object[s] representing or taken to represent something immaterial or abstract"

(*OED*). Sometimes an author may wish to build an entire symbolic scene, where one aspect represents one idea, a second represents a second, and their interaction represents something further (such as the bars restraining the woman in the wallpaper in "The Yellow Wallpaper," which I discuss below). Other times, a single symbol is sufficient, and may occupy no more than a line or two of a story. This is the case in Charles D'Ambrosio's "The Point," when the young narrator, faced by a much older, drunk and half-naked woman, vacillates between continuing to guide her home or trying to take advantage of her (22-23). A brief image captures his indecision: "The receding waves dragged her shirt into the sea, and then the incoming waves flung it back. It hung there in the margin, agitated" (22). The shirt is, in essence, being "tossed" in the waves, but by drawing the action out, showing the two opposing movements of the surf, D'Ambrosio links this object and the feeling of uncertainty represents. The word "agitated" also performs some of the work, as it literally describes the movement of the shirt, but is also synonymous with "anxious" or "troubled."

*Symbolic Projection of the Character onto the Setting as a Means of Expressing
Repressed Feelings and Creating an Opportunity for Self-Reflection*

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story, "The Yellow Wallpaper" contains the most salient symbols of the works I analyze. The bulk of the text focuses on the narrator's reactions to the wallpaper in her bedroom, in which she sees a female figure (ultimately revealed as a metaphor for herself) imprisoned (608).

Discouraged by her husband from "think[ing] about [her] condition," the narrator's mind finds other creative ways for her to confront and react to her sickness and her negative situation (598). She begins to anthropomorphize the wallpaper, finding in the pattern a reflection of herself -- a "woman stooping down and creeping about" (603). "Stooping" and "creeping" are the narrator's actions as she traces the wallpaper, but they also show what she has been reduced to in her isolation. Seeing the figure, the narrator reflects: "It must be very humiliating to be caught creeping by daylight" (604). This is a self-observation in disguise, allowing the narrator to maintain her denial of the gravity of her situation, while still enabling her to emotionally confront it. When lighted, the narrator sees the pattern transform into "bars," which the figure "shake[s...]" just as if she wanted to get out" (603). Again, the setting allows this character to articulate something she might not be able to directly face -- her desperation to escape, and the idea that what was supposed to be a relaxing stay at a summerhouse has become imprisonment.

While this technique of symbolically projecting the character onto the setting is very effective in this short story, its use relies heavily on the narrator's mental instability. It is hard to accept that a character with normative cognition (or even one with another type of mental illness) would repeatedly see human figures or elements in her surroundings. This limits the number of stories in which this technique could be applied.

However, in her story "The Half-Skinned Steer," Annie Proulx reveals another way to use fantastic images in setting without necessarily straying from the bounds of a realism -- the dream.

*Revealing the Subconscious Through Dream Setting*⁹

An undercurrent of shame and worry about the aging mind and body runs through Annie Proulx's "The Half-Skinned Steer." When the main character Mero hears that his brother Rollo was killed by an emu, he tells his nephew's wife that he will drive out to the funeral and "He heard the amazement in her voice, knew she was plotting his age, figuring he had to be eighty-three, a year or so older than Rollo, figuring he must be dotting around on a cane too, drooling the tiny days away, she was probably touching her own faded hair. He flexed his muscular arms, bent his knees, thought he could dodge an emu" (21). Mero seems convinced of his own strength, contemptible of his brother's aged weakness, yet Mero's mind seems to be faltering all the same: when a police officer pulls him over for speeding on his way to the funeral, "For the minute he couldn't think what he was doing there" (24).

Proulx uses a dream to work around Mero's denial and show his fear about the decline of his own body:

He dreamed that he was in the ranch house but all the furniture had been removed from the rooms and in the yard troops in dirty white uniforms fought. The concussive reports of huge guns were breaking the window glass and forcing the floorboards apart so that he had to walk on the joists and below the disintegrating floors he saw galvanized tubs filled with dark, coagulated fluid. (28)

It takes a bit of analysis to see the brain and body amid all this imagery. The most salient clue is the "dark, coagulated fluid," suggesting blood, and the "galvanized tub," recalling the "galvanized skull-plate" of a man in a story told by Mero's father's girlfriend (23). Sinisterly, the girlfriend also declared that this skull-plate was unusual in

⁹ For a second example of the imaginary landscape, see Alexander Parson's analysis of Cormack McCarthy's use of a mirage in *Blood Meridian*, found in Parson's essay "Matrix for Meaning: Physical Setting in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*" (199-200)

that it "was made out of galvy and it eat at his brain" (23). The "galvanized tubs filled with dark, coagulated fluid" is therefore an image of mental deterioration, and the house breaking up around the tubs suggests the collapse of the body as well as the mind. Mero's location inside the house (and personal connection with the ranch) implies that this is his own mind and body collapsing, and one could even make the case for the removal of the furniture representing the removal of utility from Mero's brain and body -- in his age, he fears he has become useless.

For Mero, this is not a peaceful decline. It is depicted as a battle, with the "concussive reports of huge guns" (28). This striking imagery shows that whatever Mero claims to feel, subconsciously he is deeply disturbed by the effects of aging. Thus, the dream setting complicates the character, allowing the author to show the insecurity beneath the man who "thought he could dodge an emu" without making the character consciously acknowledge it (21).

By allowing the author to step outside the bounds of realism, the dream offers an opportunity to create a highly symbolic landscape. Because the dream is a place formed from Mero's mind, it is believable that each detail echoes some point of internal conflict. If, for example, a galvanized object appeared in the non-dream world of the story, echoing the harmful "galvanized skull-plate" described earlier, the coincidence might feel heavy-handed (23). If a confluence of images of bodily disintegration, mental deterioration and conflict existed in the real, conscious world of the story, a reader might feel the author at work behind the words, and become distracted by this attempt to manipulate the reader's thoughts or emotions. The dream side-steps these problems by allowing the images to arise from the character's own head.

Given the flexibility of the character's unconscious mind, the author creates symbols by drawing from the story and from common word associations. "Dark, coagulated fluid," conjures up the idea of blood simply through the frequent pairing of those words with blood in everyday life (blood, for example, is a "bodily fluid," and "anticoagulants" are drugs that prevent the coagulation of blood) (28). Proulx creates her own associations with the word "galvanized" through her earlier scene describing the skull-plate, so that when the word returns, the idea "it eat at his brain" arises even though the text does not expressly state it (23). The concept of destruction in the shattering glass and breaking floorboards is straightforward, but the symbolism in this case relies on the association Proulx has made between Mero and the ranch house (28).

*The Symbolic Landscape as a Parallel for Character Psychology*¹⁰

In his short story "Big Two-Hearted River," Ernest Hemingway shows how authors can symbolically charge a realistic setting to reveal a character's state of mind. This story follows its protagonist, Nick Adams, on a fishing trip in Michigan. Although Hemingway never references it within this story, other stories in the collection reveal that Nick has recently fought in World War I, and symbols in the landscape of "Big Two-Hearted River," such as a scorched piece of land slowly returning to life, reveal Nick's gradual emotional and mental recovery after the events of the War, as well as his anxieties about confronting his memories too soon. An aspect of this story that makes it particularly interesting for analysis is that Hemingway gives the reader access to only a

¹⁰ For a shorter use of the symbolic landscape, see Annie Proulx's "The Half-Skinned Steer," in which word choice turns a traffic jam into a symbol for Mero's deterioration and feelings of inferiority (24)

minimal amount of Nick's thoughts, which forces the reader to rely on the extensive descriptions of setting to infer nearly all of what Nick is thinking.

The symbolic landscape appears in the first paragraph of the piece; there is no immediate evidence to suggest that it has metaphorical meaning except for large amounts of text space that it occupies. When Nick first sees the space the town of Seney once occupied, "There was no town, nothing but the rails and the burned-over country," but instead of focusing on the destruction, Nick begins to notice what is left: the "foundations of the Mansion House hotel" and the river where the trout are "holding their noses into the current" (177-8). What Nick pays attention to, and what the authorial gaze highlights (as this is a third-person story, and it cannot be assumed that all the details included are filtered through Nick's consciousness) are images of resistance and survival. Even the river itself is "pushing and swelling smooth against the resistance of the log driven spiles of the bridge" (178).

Throughout this description in the first three paragraphs, Hemingway avoids narrating Nick's thoughts directly. There is a single Nick "had expected," and even this tells the reader little about how Nick is reacting emotionally -- it merely describes how Nick finds a "burned-over stretch of hillside, where he had expected to find the scattered houses of the town" (177). The rest of Nick's actions are physical: he "looked," "walked" and "watched" (177, 178). Nearly the only option Hemingway offers the reader to understand Nick is through a close observation of what Nick is doing, seeing, and the space he occupies. In this case, Nick occupies a damaged landscape, but images of survival attract him. He watches a trout swimming upstream, and as the trout "tightened [...] into the current" "Nick's heart tightened" (178). This is the second

glimmer of Nick's emotion that Hemingway presents (the first is to describe the trout as "very satisfactory"), and Hemingway's application of the word "tightened" to both the fish and Nick suggests that the reader should understand the trout as a metaphor for Nick, and more generally, the landscape as a metaphor for Nick. Like the land, Nick is emotionally "burned-over," but he takes heart in the idea that "It could not all be burned," and for Nick, like for the trout, the struggle to survive continues (179).

As I discussed in the previous section, it can be difficult to employ much symbolism in a realistic setting without the metaphors feeling heavy-handed or distracting. Hemingway uses one-to-one metaphors (the trout is Nick, the land is Nick, etc., as opposed to the trout representing a feeling, a thought, or something more nebulous), and one-to-one metaphors can often feel blatant. However, in this case they work because these symbols are the reader's primary mode of accessing Nick's thoughts. They are not, like some metaphors, simply a way of driving home a point already implicit in the text. In an interview with *The Paris Review*, Hemingway described his "iceberg" principle for writing, saying, "There is seven-eighths of it underwater for every part that shows" and "Anything you know you can eliminate and it only strengthens your iceberg." In this story the symbolic setting is the visible piece of the iceberg, and all the rest is omitted.

Contrasting Character Interiority Using Symbolic Landscapes

In her short story "A Wilderness Station," Alice Munro takes the symbolic landscape a step further by creating two symbolic landscapes to represent the psychological differences between characters. "A Wilderness Station" is a story written

in letters, focusing on a character named Annie McKillop. Annie marries one of a pair of young brothers as part of a practical marriage, and the three struggle to survive in the North Huron bush. When her husband dies, Annie turns herself in claiming to be his murderer, but the Clerk of the Peace doubts her story, and she is not prosecuted. One of Annie's later letters reveals her husband's brother as the true murderer, and the story concludes with an account by Christena Mullen, Annie's later employers' daughter describing Annie's trip to visit her husband's brother as an old woman. The inaccessible wilderness of Ontario in Annie's youth and the open, traversable landscape of Christena's youth symbolize the differing mindsets of these two characters.

In creating these symbols, Munro relies primarily on conceptual parallels between the characters and the setting, rather than using word choice or other concrete language to call their similarities to attention. The old Ontario wilderness is a place without bridges, and the shanty where Annie and the two brothers live is heavily wooded and inescapable in a snowstorm (194, 193, 201). The confinement and danger present in the wilderness mirrors Annie's real and perceived lack of choices when her brother-in-law murders her husband and the only place she believes she can turn for refuge is the prison, where she confesses to the murder, herself (215). Annie's lies and tall tales also find reflection in the wildness and convolution of the Ontario bush (215, 217). In contrast, Christena is open and straightforward, and remarks about the descendants of Annie's brother-in-law, "I cannot understand for the life of me why it is necessary to be so shy" (221). Furthermore, Christena is unmarried, owns her own car, and has been able to drive since she was fifteen, clearly giving her more control over her life than Annie had in her youth (216, 218, 224). Her freedom and candor is

symbolized by the openness of the new Ontario landscape -- the "big fields," the lack of bush, the bridges, the straightness of the roads, and the lake that could be seen "From miles away" -- all details which astonish Annie on her trip to see her brother-in-law (219). Christena's world, both mental and physical, is one of clarity, of ease and of order.

That these two characters have different mindsets is relatively clear from their actions (Annie's lying versus Christena's honesty, for example). However, the symbolism of the landscape is still important, because it underlines those differences, and suggests that they are more than contrasts between individuals -- they are contrasts between generations. Like the landscape they grew up in, the older generation of Munro's Ontario has a certain wildness, a certain constriction that the younger generation does not.

Setting-Character Interaction

Once an author has established a symbolic setting, her character's interactions with that setting may also take on symbolic meaning. The character is interacting both with the physical object or landscape, and the idea that object or landscape represents. In some cases, such as in Ernest's Hemingway's "Big Two-Hearted River," which I revisit below, the character's choice *not* to interact with the symbolic setting is also meaningful. Not interacting can function as a rejection of what the symbol represents.

Rejection of Symbolized Concepts through Lack of Interaction with the Landscape

In Ernest Hemingway's "Big Two-Hearted River," the swamp at the conclusion becomes a symbol for the protagonist Nick's painful thoughts and memories. By deciding not to fish in the swamp, Nick metaphorically chooses not to confront these thoughts and memories.

Hemingway establishes the symbolism of the swamp very subtly, through word choice and by parallels with what little Hemingway has said outright about Nick's emotions. In the swamp, for example, "You could not crash through the branches" and "You would have to keep almost level with the ground to move at all" (198). This parallels the earlier statement that Nick "did not want to rush his sensations any" (194). The emphasis on a calm, careful approach link the two. Then, when Hemingway describes Nick's aversion to fishing in the swamp, he creates an emotional overtone that signals the metaphorical nature of this aversion:

Nick did not want to go in there now. He felt a reaction against deep wading with the water deepening up under his armpits, to hook big trout in places impossible to land them. [...] in the fast deep water, in the half light, the fishing would be tragic. In the swamp fishing was a tragic adventure. Nick did not want it. (198)

The unusual (and repeated) pairing of the word "tragic" with fishing suggests that fishing is not the true subject of Nick's concern. Instead, "to hook big trout in places impossible to land them" becomes a metaphor for having these serious thoughts or memories without being able to cope with them, or perhaps without being to do anything about them. Nick's war days are in the past, after all, and cannot be changed.

Once Hemingway has established the swamp as a symbol for Nick's unpleasant thoughts and memories, the metaphorical quality of Nick's interaction with the swamp

is straightforward. Any way in which Nick interacts or fails to interact with the swamp is also Nick's interaction or failure to interact with what the swamp represents -- his difficult thoughts and memories.

*Interaction with the Setting as Symbolic of Desire for other Action*¹¹

In my above section on atmosphere, I discuss how the narrator in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" sees herself reflected in the wallpaper, as a woman trapped behind bars that she "shake[s...] just as if she wanted to get out" (603). The wallpaper woman's prison symbolizes the narrator's feelings of captivity and isolation in the summerhouse, where her husband has brought her to recover from her depression. Gilman shows the narrator's increasing desire for freedom through her interaction with the setting -- her attempts to destroy the symbolic prison of the wallpaper: "As soon as it was moonlight and that poor thing began to crawl and shake the pattern, I got up and ran to help her. I pulled and she shook, I shook and she pulled, and before morning we had peeled off yards of that paper" (607). The shift in the narrator from simply observing the woman in the wallpaper to interacting with her is important, because it shows the narrator's growing self-awareness. By "helping" this figure and working together, the narrator takes a step closer to realizing that she *is* the woman in the wallpaper, a fact that she accepts during the conclusion of the story (608). Interaction with the setting in this piece, therefore, is a means of showing the movement of a thought from the subconscious to the conscious mind.

¹¹ Ernest Hemingway's "Big Two-Hearted River" also contains an example of symbolic interaction with setting. When Nick picks up a grasshopper in the burned landscape and tells it to "Fly away somewhere," this may be read as his own desire to escape and recover from his past

Stripping off the wallpaper also represents a sort of middle ground for this character -- it shows a strong desire for action without the narrator having to do something that would go against her sense of propriety (such as running away). It is therefore a fairly straightforward way to show a character's negative capability, a state defined by poet John Keats as "when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason" (48). While the narrator wishes to act in another way, inner conflict prevents her from doing so. This inner conflict enlivens the character and makes her more complex and human.

Narrative Style

As I defined it in my introduction, narrative style is the type of voice the author uses to tell a story, and is established through decisions regarding diction, word choice and sentence structure, particularly when these decisions align the work with certain types of texts within literary tradition (such as romance or epic). In contrast to symbolic and atmospheric setting and setting-character interaction, narrative style does not operate by emphasizing certain aspects of the setting. Instead of a selective lens, it is more like a color filter or an overlay: the subject being described is not as important as the manner in which it is described – the values, positive or negative, the narrative voice attaches to it.

An author may employ a more consistent, overarching narrative voice throughout the story, as in James Joyce's "Araby," or she may, as in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," choose to create a narrative voice that is particularly emotional at some points, and more subtle in others. In both cases, a key

aspect to narrative voice is a discrepancy between what is described, and the way it is described. In "The Yellow Wallpaper," the object, wallpaper, is relatively neutral. However, as I discuss in detail below, the narrator describes it with such anger that the reader understands the anger not as a reflection of the wallpaper (which would be nonsensical), but as a reflection of the character's own interiority.

Use of Narrative Style in the Description of Setting to Psychologically Situate a Character

Symbolism strives to find equivalents between objects and ideas and to represent objects in the appropriate language so that one evokes the other, but exploring the incongruencies between object and representation can also be fruitful. This is the case of James Joyce's story "Araby." In "Araby," the setting is Dublin -- its pungent and shadowy streets and alleys, and its noisy, packed marketplaces -- but the narrative style that the main character uses to describe it is frequently lofty and romantic. This unexpected choice of narrative style belies the young character's central fault -- "vanity," which he only recognizes in himself in the last sentence of the story (745). It shows itself first in his account of himself and his friends playing after dark:

When we met in the street the houses had grown sombre. The space of sky above us was the colour of ever-changing violet and towards it the lamps of the street lifted their feeble lanterns. The cold air stung us and we played till our bodies glowed. Our shouts echoed in the silent street. The career of our play brought us through the dark muddy lanes behind the houses where we ran the gantlet of the rough tribes from the cottages, to the back doors of the dark dripping gardens where odours arose from the ashpits, to the dark odorous stables where a coachman smoothed and combed the horse or shook music from the buckled harness. (742)

What is perhaps first striking about this passage is the epic, magical feel of some of the descriptions. The phrase "we ran the gantlet of the rough tribes from the cottages" turns the boys into heroes risking life and limb, and turns the slums of Dublin into an epic landscape occupied by the wild-sounding "rough tribes." Even the smells of the place acquire a romantic feel, as Joyce employs the word "odour" and "odorous," which is much more elevated diction than "stink" or "smell." The lofty language and images of conflict ("ran the gantlet") and beauty ("shook music from the buckled harness") hearken back to the epic (a genre in part characterized by lyrical, often exaggerated language and deeds requiring courage and valor). The contrast between what is in reality a mundane setting and the narrator's epic descriptions suggests the narrator's inflated and romanticized sense of self, which becomes more apparent later when the narrator describes how he "imagined that [he] bore [his] chalice safely through a throng of foes" (742).

*Using Emotional Language to Describe Setting*¹²

In several instances in "The Yellow Wallpaper," Gilman does not convey character interiority subtly through her choice of details, but rather overlays it on her descriptions through overtly emotional narration. This is the case when the narrator first describes the wallpaper as having "sprawling, flamboyant patterns committing every artistic sin" and a color that is "repellant, almost revolting; a smouldering unclean yellow, strangely faded by the slow-turning sunlight" (599). She even pronounces that

¹² For an additional example of using emotional language to describe setting, see James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues," when the narrator describes the "lifeless elegance of hotels" and "vivid, killing streets of our childhood" (42)

she "never saw a worse paper in [her] life" (599). While her description of the house itself, as "quite alone" with "hedges and walls and gates that lock," uses value neutral language (the house is not the more negative "lonely," for example, or the more positive "tucked away"), the passage detailing the wallpaper has plainly negative language (598). The narrator is angry, even disgusted.

Setting becomes a vital tool in this short story because the narrator is repressed - she "take[s] pains to control [herself]" in front of her husband, and her narrative is peppered with attempts to rein in her emotions and steer her thoughts away from her illness. She must "let it alone" and "not think about that" (598, 600). The setting, and more specifically the wallpaper, becomes an outlet for her to express these emotions. It also permits the author to cultivate negative capability. The narrator can simultaneously be someone who sees her husband as "very careful and loving," and who tries to follow his advice, and someone who is frustrated and angry with her situation (598). By creating internal conflict, this strategy heightens tension in the story as the reader waits to see which impulse will triumph.

Original Works

The following are two short stories that I originally wrote and had workshopped in the Kidd Tutorial. To avoid redundant plot summaries, I will discuss my use of setting techniques in a brief analytical section following each piece. The first piece, "Homeward," is the story of a high school senior, Indigo, who is coping with her parent's divorce and her father's severe depression.

Homeward

On the early morning flight from Denver to Eugene, Indigo slept pressed against the wall of the cabin, the space between her body and her mother's forming a wide "V." She was dreaming about her father. They were snow tubing at Chautauqua in Boulder, something they hadn't done for years. Above the empty slope, scratched deep by the runs of other sledders, the Flatiron foothills poked through the forest like knife blades. At the bottom of the hill, Indigo strained against her tow rope, then turned, looking for the source of the unexpected weight. Her father had crammed himself in her old kid-sized tube like a stork on a duck's nest, and sat with his face turned away, toward the road. She called to him, laughed and told him to get out and walk for himself, but he didn't move. In the silence, she began to haul him. The tube skimmed the snow, but Indigo sunk deeper as she climbed, the fresh powder swallowing her knees, then her waist, and then she couldn't hold the rope anymore. She twisted to warn her father, and the tube swung toward her. For a moment, his face hung before her -- not the thin, bright-skinned face of her childhood, but the face he had worn for the past three years, putty-soft from sleeping all the time, his beard grey and straggling like some lonely

mountain man. He looked past her, toward the Flatirons and the sky, then closed his eyes and the tube spun down the hill, faster and faster until it was lost in the whiteness.

The plane shuddered and Indigo woke. Her mother was reading art supply catalogues. A neck pillow cradled her head, and she had pulled her hair, black and coarse like wool, over one shoulder. Indigo leaned against the wall again.

"How long?" she asked.

"Not long now," her mother said. She blew on her styrofoam cup of tea and talked on about the kelp and the rock beaches and the great, twisty pine trees of the Pacific coast. "It's not commercial at all," she said.

"It's just an ocean," Indigo said.

Indigo's mouth felt dry. Overhead, the vent was on full blast, sending cold air under her collar. She twisted it until the air stopped, and the cabin was suddenly stifling. Across the aisle, a little boy, half-asleep, was watching *Looney Tunes* on a laptop. In the summers when Indigo was his age, her father would project movies on a sheet hung in the backyard. The Garibaldis from next door would arrive with popcorn, and they would watch cartoons and *Star Wars* and *Anne of Green Gables*.

"I shouldn't have let you talk me into coming," Indigo said. "Dad needs someone at home."

"The Navarros are going to check on him every day, and he'll go to Uncle Tim's for dinners. They'll make sure he's got someone to talk to, if he needs." Her mother set her catalogue on the tray table and smoothed a crease in the cover with the chewed end of her pencil. "Please, give this trip a chance."

The fasten seat belt light lit with a ping, and the captain announced their

approach into the airport. Indigo turned away from her mother and closed her eyes.

The airport was the tiniest Indigo had seen. Two turns and a hallway and they were standing at the top of an escalator, looking out over a huddled group of people in sweatshirts and rain jackets waiting on the other side of security. Indigo's mother tightened her grip on the handrail as she scanned the faces below.

"What am I supposed to call this person, anyway?" Indigo asked. She folded her arms, hooking her thumbs under the straps of her backpack. "How should I act?"

"Joseph," her mother said. "He goes by Joseph now." Her mother gave a tiny wave. "Just act like you normally do. But nicer."

Indigo snorted, and looked in the direction her mother had waved. Joseph, solid like a sack of onions, was standing next to a coffee counter. Indigo had thought some giveaway -- full lips or big curves -- would broadcast the fact that Joseph used to be Joanne, but it wasn't obvious. All that Indigo could remember of Joanne from her mother's college photos was a letterman jacket and a fall of long red hair; nothing that fit Joseph, with his box-toed leather shoes and oval glasses. To Joseph's left, a little girl was leaning back against a case full of scones and cake, hands flat against the glass. She would push off of the case, fall back, then push off again, totally unaware of the barista glaring behind her. Her arms and legs were knobby and stretched like the legs of a young deer. When she saw Indigo's mother wave again, she launched herself toward them.

"You're Indigo and Gail, right?" she said. "Your bags are gonna come up over there. Ready to go?"

Indigo stared at her mother, eyebrows raised and eyes wide.

"We should probably say hi to your dad, first," Gail said.

The girl shrugged.

"Okay. I'm going to go watch for the bags." She ran over to the baggage carousel, copper hair swishing against her thin shoulders.

"Joseph!" Gail said, walking towards him. She sounded too bright, too friendly, and Indigo blushed. Joseph greeted them. His voice was a woman's voice, low, but not fake, or funny.

"You look well," Gail said. She hugged him, her arms slightly stiff, then laughed nervously. "God, I'm sorry. It's going to take me a moment to get used to all this."

Joseph shrugged and smiled.

"Well, it's bizarre for everyone, including me. But I'm relieved, you know?" Joseph pivoted toward Indigo and introduced himself, shaking her hand. "You've already met my infamous daughter, Mona." He looked over his shoulder. Mona was halfway into a handstand on the carpet, and her butt was waving in the air. Joseph turned back to them and tucked his hands in his pockets. In the corner, the alarm sounded on the baggage carousel.

It rained on the drive to the beach rental, spitting drops that turned into a steady grey pour. The windows of Joseph's Jetta station wagon looked like a map of rivers, raindrops beading one into the next until they lost themselves in a pool at the edge of the glass. Next to Indigo in the backseat, Mona wove potholders with loops of purple and green fabric. Indigo picked up a loop, twisting it around her fingers until they

turned white and bloodless. In the front seat Gail was talking to Joseph about how she was finally going to be able to pursue art as a career. How freeing it was.

Indigo pictured her father in Boulder. He would be sitting in the scarred leather armchair, a newspaper in his lap that he wasn't reading, staring out the window toward the blank stucco wall of the neighbor's house. Four years ago, when he started to pull away, it had seemed almost innocent. He stopped jogging in the mornings, and let leaves pile up around the half-finished chicken coop in the backyard. Then in the winter, he began sleeping ten, twelve hours a day. Gail suddenly became a world champion cuddler, hugging Indigo and her father when they walked in the door, looping arms around them on the couch, kissing them goodbye. She followed Indigo's father around with a string of questions: *what's on your mind; how's Jim-from-work's new baby; have you talked to your brother recently; why don't we have him over to eat; don't you like lasagna anymore?* She took him to a therapist, but the talking didn't help and the Prozac didn't help and the Cymbalta didn't help and another drug he tried gave him a panic attack so severe he could barely breathe. Gail ran out of questions to ask and surrounded herself with pottery catalogues. Finally, he stopped going to work, and Indigo couldn't look him in the eye any longer. All she saw there was defeat.

In the car, Indigo pulled the loop of potholder fabric tight and it snapped, the blood rushing back into her fingers. She could feel Mona staring at her.

"Whatcha thinking about?" Mona asked.

"Nothing," Indigo said. The kid kept looking at her. "It's complicated."

Mona set her potholder on her lap. "Guess what my dad's making for dinner tonight."

Indigo tried to remember the last time her own father had cooked. Lately he had been crowding their counters with half-eaten bowls of cereal. Raisin Bran, Cheerios, Cornflakes, for any meal, at any time of day.

"I don't know," she said. "Mac and cheese?"

"Nope," Mona said. "Crab. Crab with butter and garlic, and bread with more butter and tons more garlic. Salad, too, if you like it. Mostly I don't like salad. But I like it when my Dad makes it. Did you know that if a crab loses its claw, it can grow another one?" She pulled her arms inside her t-shirt, then stuck her hands out the sleeves and made tiny pinching motions. "It looks like a baby claw at first, but it grows and grows until the crab looks normal again." She scooted forward and began pinching the back of Joseph's collar. Joseph broke off mid-sentence.

"Excuse me a second," he said. "I think I'm being attacked by some kind of animal." He leaned his head back on the headrest. "Is it... a crawdad?"

Gail stuck her head around the seat and smiled. "Looks too big for a crawdad," she said.

The last time Indigo had seen her look that happy was months ago, when Gail had, on a whim, redone her bedroom in honey yellow and convinced Indigo to paint a rooster on the far wall. It was a clumsy looking bird, and the colors were muddled, but Gail said it had great character. *Look at those feet!* she had said. *It's got feet like an eagle.*

Gail faced forward again, but her hand crept around the side of her seatback and squeezed Indigo's leg. The joints in her hand were thick, knotted, and Indigo wondered if she had inherited the arthritis that made her grandfather's hands stiff and clenched. Indigo took her mother's hand. In the side mirror of the station wagon, their faces were

side by side. Indigo let go.

"I'm going to check up on Dad," Indigo said. "When we get to the house." It felt traitorous to mention him in front of strangers. Gail's arm disappeared around the seat.

"That's fine," she said. "You don't need to ask permission."

They arrived at the beach house in Yachats weighted down with suitcases, a cooler of squirming crab they had bought on the waterfront, and cloth sacks stuffed with eggs, wine, cilantro and other groceries. The house was small, and someone had stuck bright blue wooden fish into the lawn, and hung a life buoy on the door with "Welcome Aboard" painted on it. While everyone else boiled and cleaned crabs in the kitchen, Indigo sat on the couch and dialed home. The call was going to the answering machine when her father picked up.

"Indy?" he said. His voice sounded rough and thick with sleep, and he cleared his throat. She asked him about his day, and he muttered a few sentences about a nap and a walk. He asked her about the ocean, and she told him she was still a mountain girl, one-hundred percent.

"And how's your mom?" he asked.

Something metal crashed to the floor in the kitchen, and Mona and Gail laughed. Indigo muffled the phone against her chest.

"Tired from the flight, I think."

"It's good that you're there." He paused.

"I had a dream about Chautauqua, Dad. Tubing."

"Oh yeah? Wow, it's been years." He sounded happy, remembering, and warmth

spread through Indigo's chest. "Listen Indy, Uncle Tim is here, so I've got to go."

"Sure, Dad. Go. I love you, and I'll be back soon." He said he loved her too, and hung up. Indigo drew her knees to her chest and hugged them, looking out at the plain grey strip of ocean beyond the pine trees, and thinking about snow.

After dinner, Indigo's mother and Joseph sat on the couch with glasses of wine, talking about Joseph's job in IT and the bands they listened to in college. Indigo decided to take a shower. The hiss of the water blurred their words into a comforting stream of sound, but when she turned it off their conversation became clear again.

"I tried," her mother was saying. "I tried for years to be supportive. That was something that my mother did -- and still does, really well. She's a domestic goddess. I am not."

"But you were making sacrifices," Joseph said.

"Exactly. I was making sacrifices that I felt I had to make, giving up my art to work full time when Ewan got so bad he couldn't hold down a job. And then I joined this pottery group, and we were having these great conversations and it just clicked for me: I have to take care of myself, too."

Indigo bit her tongue, then jerked her shirt over her head and started toweling her hair dry, rubbing until her scalp felt red and raw.

"So that's when I started thinking about divorce," her mother continued. "I was worried at first. But now Ewan's got a solid support network, so when everything finalizes I'll actually be able to pursue what I've wanted to pursue. I can remake myself - not on the scale you did, obviously, but it's such a relief."

"Well, congratulations."

Indigo threw her towel on the floor and walked into the living room. Her mother and Joseph looked up at her, her mother's face flush from the wine. Mona was asleep stretched out on the couch with her head on Joseph's knee. Indigo sat in the armchair across from them, crossed her legs and stared at her mother.

"Keep talking. Don't let me interrupt you," Indigo said. The words came out in a whine, and she hated how childish they sounded.

Her mother turned a deeper red, followed by white, then she dropped her eyes and slid her wine glass onto the coffee table.

"Sorry, Joseph," she said. "I think I should probably go to bed. I can't --" she drew in a long breath and shook her head, then left the room, not looking at Indigo. For a long time, Joseph looked down at Mona, and Indigo began to want to run away herself. Her wet hair was heavy on her shoulders and making a cold, damp spot down her back.

"It's not her goal to hurt you, you know. Or your father," Joseph said at last.

Indigo stared at the ugly pattern of blue and cream-colored knots on the rug.

"She just acts like this is so easy for her," she said.

Joseph took off his glasses and cleaned them on his shirt. His eyebrows were so pale they were almost invisible.

"When we roomed together in college, I remember she could spend two hours on a single paragraph of an essay," Joseph said. "I don't think she's one to take things lightly."

Indigo looked past Joseph to the hallway. A band of light stretched across the floor from under her mother's door, broken for a moment by a shadow crossing from one side to the other, then the light switched off.

"What do I do now?" Indigo said. Joseph looked at her.

"I don't know," he said. He gently squeezed Mona's shoulder to wake her, and sent her to brush her teeth. "Are you okay sleeping here on the couch?" he asked. Indigo said yes, and he helped her make her bed in silence.

The next morning they drove down the coast to a jetty at the mouth of the Siuslaw River. Mona, Joseph and Gail headed up the black rock jetty to watch the looping and diving sails of windsurfers across the river. Indigo turned the other way, into a sort of sandy valley where storms had tossed up tree trunks and left them buried in the ground like giant cigarette butts. She struggled up the next hill, surprised by the shift and slide of the dry sand beneath her. Out of the valley, there was no shelter from the wind. Large gusts spit sand in her face and her eyes, and she could taste the tiny grains in her mouth and the grit between her teeth. Indigo pulled her hood up and walked with her head down toward the ocean. After a while, her mother came up beside her, and they turned up the coast, the wind blowing at their backs and pushing them along.

"How was your Dad, when you called?" her mother asked. She nearly had to shout to compete with the roar of the sea and the wind.

"Depressed," Indigo said. "The usual." She crossed her arms and tugged the zipper on her windbreaker higher.

"Listen. I haven't been completely honest with you, about this trip. I was hoping," her mother paused, "I was really hoping that when you saw the coast, you would love it. You see, when you graduate in the spring, I'm planning on moving out here."

Indigo stopped short. In the distance she could see the blackened remains of someone's beach fire. The wind had almost flattened the sand packed around the edges of the pit, and as she watched a gust scattered bits of ash and charcoal in a long black plume.

"I knew it," she said weakly.

Her mother stopped, too. Her jacket was zipped so far up that all Indigo could see were her eyes. They were red-rimmed from the blasting sand.

"There are some great artist communities here. Financially, if I want to pursue art --"

"How can you expect Dad to survive if you're halfway across the country and I'm at college?"

College. Indigo had toured Colorado State last year, sat on a bed in a cramped dorm room in Parmelee hall and imagined living with friends next door, baking brownies at 2AM in the student kitchen. Maybe she would have to live at home. There would be long evenings alone with her father and the silence. There would be dishes piling up, meals to cook, encouraging words to be said, forced smiles. "Can I still go to college?" Indigo asked. Gail's head tipped to one side.

"Oh, love," she said. "It's not as bad as all that." She reached for Indigo, hugged her, their windbreakers crinkling as they pressed together. Indigo let her head lie heavily on her mother's shoulder.

"You're leaving a sick person," Indigo said.

"Indigo," Gail said. Her voice was soft and cracking.

"I'm not ready."

"It's going to be okay."

"Mom, please..." Gail tightened her hold, and Indigo let the words drift. She didn't know what to ask for. She stared back toward the jetty. Joseph and Mona were moving toward them, walking the line where the waves rushed in and turned the sand from light to dark. "I can visit you sometimes?" Indigo asked.

"Of course you can. That's all I want."

They stood, slightly apart, as Joseph and Mona reached them. The clouds pulled past overhead, and the sea went from grey to green to blue. Then all four walked against the wind to the car.

Three days later, Indigo would open the door of the house in Boulder. She would wait before she entered, letting the air stale with sleep and lemon dish soap drain into the street, where her mother was, for the last time, unpacking her things from the car. She would hear, in the next room, her father breathing, the crackle of the newspaper in his lap as the breeze from the open door combed through its pages. She would let her own words lie still in her mouth, then, and count the number of breaths it took before he said her name.

Reflections on "Homeward"

My most significant use of setting in this piece is the opening sledding scene, which functions, like the excerpt from Annie Proulx's "The Half-Skinned Steer," to reveal the subconscious through dream setting (36). A central issue in this story, as I see it, is Indigo's sense of responsibility for and loyalty to her father, and her fear that she might fail him. I wanted to foreground these emotions in the beginning of the story, but without having to state them directly (which could be clumsy) or have Indigo admit to her fear (which I wanted to save for the conclusion of the story). The setting of the dream allowed me to do this. As in the Annie Proulx piece, "The Half-Skinned Steer," the dream created the opportunity for me to tweak reality in order to create a highly symbolic situation with symbolic images. Indigo dragging her father up the hill on her childhood snow tube is an image I intended to show the reversal of the parent-child relationship, and the responsibility she has taken on regarding her father (36). When I write, "The tube skimmed the snow, but Indigo sunk deeper as she climbed, the fresh powder swallowing her knees, then her waist, and then she couldn't hold the rope anymore," I am trying to show Indigo's anxiety that despite her efforts, she will not be able to take care of her father, and like he is "lost in the whiteness" of the snow in the dream, he will be lost in depression (36). As a manifestation of the subconscious, the dream shows the deep rootedness of Indigo's fear in a way that simply telling her mother "I'm worried I'm going to fail him," would not.

Twice in this piece, I have attempted to use basic symbolic landscapes to capture how Indigo feels about her relationship with her father and mother. The first occurs after Indigo has a conversation with her father, and sits alone, “looking out at the strip of ocean beyond the pine trees, and thinking about snow” (43). With the dream scene in the beginning of the story, I establish a symbolic connection between Indigo’s father and the snow, while the ocean is more closely associated with Indigo’s mother Gail, who arranged their trip. At this point in the story, Indigo strongly aligns herself with her father, a fact I try to communicate using a fairly negative description of the ocean as a “plain grey strip.” It is the snow, furthermore, and not the ocean where Indigo’s attention lies. While Indigo’s feelings regarding her parents may be fairly straightforward at this moment in the story, I wanted to use the setting to emphasize the emotional bond between Indigo and her father.

In contrast, the second time I use the setting to clarify these relationships, it is to show Indigo’s more neutral alignment. Indigo has just confronted the reality of the caretaker role she will likely have to assume with her father, and this has caused a shift in Indigo away from her father and towards her mother, a shift I try to communicate with the image of Joseph and Mona “walking the line where the waves rushed in and turned the sand from light to dark” (47). I am not completely satisfied with this metaphor, because while it does convey a sense of in-betweenness, it relies completely on the dialogue around it to suggest that *what* Indigo is caught between is her father and her mother. However, based on the coastal setting where I had placed myself, this was the clearest metaphor for in-betweenness I could identify.

My final use of setting to reveal character in “Homeward” is the description of the beach fire just following Gail’s announcement that she will move to Oregon (46). Because it relies on an accumulation of details – the “blackened remains” of the fire, the “flattened” sand, and the wind that “scattered bits of ash and charcoal in a long black plume” -- to create its effect, I would call this use of setting an objective correlative (46). With this description, I am trying to convey Indigo’s sense of things being destroyed and of things falling apart that were already unstable to begin with – her family, her sense of home and security. Setting was particularly useful to me here because I wanted to convey Indigo’s shock. She is not able to respond immediately, or to even articulate her thoughts in her own head, but I am still able to show her emotional reaction through the setting she observes.

Overall, setting techniques were useful to me in this piece as a way to show the depth of Indigo’s emotions. They helped me highlight her changing understanding of her relationships with her parents, and her fears, both conscious and subconscious. Furthermore, setting helped me set the stage, subtly, for one of the primary emotional conflicts of the piece.

This second piece, titled “Growing Season” is the story of a boy named Daniel, who faces questions of family, identity and betrayal when his mother, following his father’s death, decides to move the family to a commune.

Growing Season

We had been at the commune a little over a month before my mother started seeing Tall Greg. I was nine at the time, my brother Tom was twelve, and Benny five. I don't think they realized what had gone on until years later, when Benny would drive in from Ohio State to Indianapolis where Tom and I lived, and we would talk about our commune days over waffles at the Steer In Diner. I knew all along, because I had introduced my mother and Tall Greg, shown him off like a newly-won marble: my new friend.

I discovered Tall Greg in the orchard, where he had sectioned off a patch of grass for twelve dazed Alpine goats. He nodded at me as I approached, his shaggy hair and beard the color of pennies in the sun. We introduced ourselves, then for a while we didn't speak, and he handed me a glass jar of goat milk, the top thick-foamed with cream.

"You have people here, Daniel?" he asked.

Mother, I told him. Brothers. A Father who fought and died in Vietnam. Tall Greg had a brother overseas, he said, and this made me like him immediately.

"A lot of brave men over there," I said. This was something my grandfather had said once, before my father had left. Tall Greg shook his head.

"It's a real national mythology," he said. "Heroes and villains all fabricated in the factories of the powers that be." At the time, I had no idea what he meant, but I nodded, anyway. I felt as though I were being given the key to something important, and was thankful that I had found Tall Greg before Tom or Benny did. Tall Greg kept talking, about bravery, about the courage to speak out, to forge your own trail even

though we were all told from birth that there was a right way and a wrong way. I let his words wash over me, and admired how the filbert trees tangled up from the ground, shaping long, shaded archways beneath their branches like green palace corridors.

My father died of malaria in Vietnam half a year before we came to the commune. When my mother had gotten the telegram from the military, she took it out to the back porch of our house in Corvallis and sat there until sundown, when she burned it to a shining black scorch mark on the planks with her cigarette butt. After that, when I got home from school, I rubbed my toes across the smooth, burned wood, and pictured my father sitting outside an army tent by a wide, muddy river. I had never seen him holding a gun, couldn't imagine him slogging soldierly through waist-deep floodwater (these were images, stories, that came to me later in life), so in my mind's eye, he would be as I saw him most often at home, bent over a fishing hook, winding it slowly, meticulously in snippets of brilliant feather and flashy thread.

Sometimes I pictured myself next to him. *You were brave*, I would tell him. *Everybody knows it*. He would smile at that, one of those lopsided smiles where his upper lip half-disappeared under his mustache that he combed and trimmed into a perfect crescent. The sound of his voice had left me by then, so we would just sit in silence, watching the shadows climb in the forest on the other side of the river.

When we came to the commune my mother left most of my father's things behind. She boxed up his jackets and trousers and shirts for the Salvation Army, then put on a Johnny Cash record and spent an evening piling the rest in a small mountain in

the den. It sat there for days, abandoned: his tacklebox, the maps he collected, his shaving cream, the red-leaved bromeliad he had kept on his desk (withered since he shipped out), his Steinbeck and Hemingway. Eventually she locked the door.

When we were driving to the commune, me sprawled over extra fancy Calrose Rice bags in the trunk of our hatchback, I asked her about it, panicked that everyone had forgotten. The car sped up, and I latched onto Benny's headrest for support.

"Those are just things, Daniel," she said.

Tom leaned forward with twelve-year-old confidence. "But his map making kit," he said. "That's mine, that's what he told me in his letter."

I could hear the scrape of her old gold wedding ring as she slid her hands to the bottom of the steering wheel. "None of that is real anymore," she said. "Everything we need of him is here already."

The commune was built on an old filbert orchard. The day we arrived was the first day their farm stand was operating. All the commune could spare to sell at that point was a flat of jewel-like strawberries, five heads of lettuce and a bunch of carrots with outgrowths like little fingers -- miraculous to our eyes accustomed to murky Jello salads and Green Giant peas from the can. Still, nearly half the commune had squeezed into the little plywood booth to wait for the first customer. A girl, tanned skin dark against her long blond hair, ran out to our car with a head of lettuce under her arm and scowled when she realized we were there to stay, not to buy. Tom squashed his nose against the window, and glared back at her. We trundled past the ancient farmhouse with one corner sunken several feet and one corner firm, looking like the Lone Ranger's

horse rearing huge and pale out of the ground. Then we turned down the dirt lane that skirted the fields, some newly planted, and others farther off that were deep and jungle-like with unripe corn.

I met Tall Greg shortly after the commune had raised our geodesic dome, and that week I sneaked away to the orchard every day. He taught me how to milk the goats, how to wash and dry their embarrassing udders, how to discard the first few pulls of milk into the mouth of Bucky the cat, how to watch for the goats who might knock over the pail. I told him to come to the bonfire at the end of the week, and when he did, I pulled him over and nervously, proudly, introduced him to my family. He stood towering over my mother, covering her with his shadow, and told her that I was a fast learner, that he thought I could really do some good in the world. She laughed at that, kissed me on the head, and we all sat together, Tall Greg talking again about courage, and choice, and heroes.

As the bonfire really began to take, three men carried out tall drums and sat on the farmhouse steps, wedging the drums between their knees and pounding out a beat that continually transformed, so that just when I learned to recognize the voice of one drum, the men would change parts, braiding into each other's sound. My mother clapped along, and Tall Greg drifted away to do the evening milking. As the drums grew faster, people drifted over from their yurts and domes and began to dance. It was a strange shuffling, spinning dance, and after a while my mother rose to join them, pulling Benny out into the crowd and dancing crouched over so she could hold his hands and wave his arms back and forth.

"Tom! Daniel!" she called. I could see her mouth forming our names, but the sound of her voice was buried in the stepping and the hopping and the high patter of the hand drums that had joined in. I shook my head, then realized that Tom was already picking his way over to her, bending and weaving so that he didn't touch any of the other dancers. I waited a while to see if any of them would look my way again. When they didn't, I put my back to the bonfire. In the field, the bean plants snaked up their trellises, and seemed to tighten their coils as the wind brushed over them. I pushed my toes down into the dirt and shut my eyes, imagining my father standing just behind my left shoulder, thinking I could almost feel the warmth of his breath across the crown of my head. He wouldn't like the dancing either. When we used to host family gatherings at the house and it got too loud, he would drive a mile up the road to the lake and fish for bass and bluegill.

Near the bonfire, someone whooped, and my back felt cold where my father's warm presence had been. The dancers were moving faster, now, scuffing along in a tightly packed circle between the drummers and the fire. I looked for my mother and Benny and Tom, but the circle revolved once, twice, throwing dust into the air, and all I saw were unfamiliar faces. My legs froze up. I tried to take a long breath in, but my throat clotted with dust. I crouched down. Looking up at the dancers, I realized that my mother had been there all along, but she had let her hair loose, and with the way the fire threw shadows on her face, I had thought she was another woman from the commune. I called out to her, and as she broke from the circle she became my mother again, pulling Tom and Benny in tow. As we sat together, the drumming seemed to slow and I fell asleep in the grass, my back cold and my face roasting in the heat of the fire.

As the oldest brother, Tom was supposed to watch out for Benny and me. Sometimes he would get in moods, though, and would boss us over to the creek and drape himself on the limb of a tree, just out of reach, and carve messages into the bark with a spoon he kept in his pocket. *War*, he wrote once. *Go to hell*. Other things higher up that I couldn't read. It was no use talking to him when he was like that. If we came too close he would purse his lips and work up a bunch of saliva in his mouth and spit at us. Benny would give up after a while and start digging in the riverbank, and I would slip away. Before I had found Tall Greg, I would go sit next to the road and wait for the school bus. When it passed I chucked rocks at the wheels and scowled at the kids with their fresh-cut hair, but sometimes they turned their backs to the windows and that got me worse than anything. After I met Tall Greg, the kids didn't seem to matter so much anymore. I would go and lean my forehead against the wiry-haired shoulder of Heidi or Sheba, the nanny goats. I put my arms around her neck for as long as she would let me, and the warmth and the pungent goaty smell would push Tom and the commune out of my mind for a while.

When we all ate in the farmhouse Tall Greg would sit with us, me on one side, and my mother on the other.

"What's your brother like?" I asked him once. Tall Greg looked down, his beard dragging in his grated carrots, and drummed his fork a few times on the pitted tabletop.

"Let's not bother him about that," my mother said. She curled her fingers around his wrist, squeezed once.

"He's sharp, my brother," Tall Greg said. "But always looking to impress somebody, and sometimes it makes it hard for him to think straight."

"Isn't it good to be here among like minds," my mother said. He nodded, and neither of them saw as Tom scraped his pale heap of boiled cabbage onto Benny's plate, or noticed how Benny grimaced but shoveled it into his mouth all the same.

In the beginning, Tom seemed rootless at the commune. When he wasn't up in his tree by the creek, I found him leaning against the crooked columns of the farmhouse porch, vaguely watching over our mother in the fields. His grades in public school had always been uninspired, and any time the commune's teacher, Tabitha, summoned the children for an exchange on the environment or politics, Tom let his head loll forward and feigned sleep.

Then, a woman arrived at the commune with dozens of rolls of hemp twine. She settled in the corner of the dining room after dinners and looped and pulled and knotted the twine into stiff necklaces and bracelets. Tom peered at her a while, making an occasional admiring remark about the speed of her work, then one evening he went over without a word to us. She taught him how to macramé.

He used to, after Father left, try to fix things. He disassembled the tired lawnmower and the grandfather clock that clunked instead of chimed. He laid the pieces out, organized them, reorganized them, but somewhere along the way he would forget how it all went together, throw the engine pulley or pendulum at Benny and go honk angry saxophone solos in his room. Macramé, on the other hand, he seemed to understand from the beginning. He knotted bags and hats until his hands stunk

permanently of the sweet sea salt smell of hemp. He brought a purse criss-crossed with diamond knots home to my mother. She called it lovely.

"Think how much you could sell this for at the farm stand," she said. "This has got to be worth two shovels, at least." She modeled the purse, slinging it across her body, putting her hands on her hips.

Tom macraméd furiously that evening. I asked him to show me how.

"You wouldn't get it," he said. He kept knotting and I snatched the pinned up board of twine away from him. Try me, I said. He took the board back, sped through a line, handed it to me. I worked painfully, laboriously. The twine ratted in my fingers, developed stubborn lumps and twists.

"I told you you couldn't learn," Tom said.

"Well that time I wasn't really trying," I said.

I started selling Tom's bags at the farm stand. Women with hair like thunderheads would stop to buy goat milk or carrots and when they pulled out their billfolds I would leap out at them with a bag in my hands and plead shamelessly, touting the sturdiness of the bags, the pretty patterns, the long shoulder straps. I sold what I estimated to be a dozen shovels worth of bags, and was very pleased with myself.

Sometime after we were settled in our dome, my mother stopped wearing her ring. Working the soil made her hands swell, she said. It got in the way.

She sang folksongs to us almost every night after the group meal, in the dingy innards of the geodesic dome Tom and I had dubbed "The Igloo." My brothers and I

would trudge in, skinny and restless from eating too many vegetables and too little else, and burrow in the blankets by the little stove. In the early weeks, we would clear a space to play marbles on the rough particleboard, but we began to tire quickly. It was a dragging weariness that came with having the sun on our backs all day, and when the adults used words like "vibes" and "karma." So I would roll on my back and pick at the nubs on the blanket as my mother sang and shelled filberts.

Sometimes in the evenings Tall Greg would come by with mason jars of milk, and my mother gave him shelled filberts in exchange. Soon, she stopped shelling the filberts ahead of time, and he would have to come in and talk while she hulled them with a long-handled nutcracker. For a while, this was good, and then one day Tall Greg came by without the mason jars. He asked me if I felt ready to do the evening milking by myself, if Tom and Benny would help hold the goats and carry the pails. Piece of cake, I told him. I'm a fast learner.

Instead of bringing the milk to the farmhouse, where it was strained and stored, I lurched back to our dome with my two pails brimming and flawless. That was when I saw them, my mother and Tall Greg. They were standing pressed together in the center of the dome, her forehead against his chest, and him with one hand stroking her hair, and it lasted until I knew beyond doubt that this was not something between adults who are friends, but rather something more. I walked straight up to them, squatted down, and shoved over the pails one by one. The milk slopped across the particleboard and wet my mother's toes. Tall Greg looked down at me as if he had just woken from a deep sleep, and then both of them reached out for me. I flinched away.

"No!" I shouted. I snatched the pails and ran hard to the farmhouse. Tom and Benny were just coming out of the kitchen door. "Tom," I said. "Dad." My voice came out thick and strangled, and Tom stared at me for a second, his face confused at first, and then softer. He took the pails from me.

"Yeah," he said tenderly. "I know."

That night, for one night, I slept on the dirt outside the dome. My mother came out, red-faced and smelling faintly of sour milk, but I turned my face away. I avoided the orchard after that, and Tall Greg stopped coming by the dome.

A couple months after we had moved into our dome, my grandparents on my mother's side drove up in their cream-colored Rambler. My grandfather, tall, his silver hair shiny and stinking with pomade, pulled my mother out of the rows of green beans. My grandmother guided my brothers and me to the Rambler. She spread food out across the backseat: boiled eggs twisted in parchment paper, deviled ham sandwiches, stalks of celery, wedges of apple and orange, cakes and buttermilk, and watched in wide-eyed silence as we wolfed it all and licked the wrappers. Then she pulled Benny, the smallest of us, into her lap and stroked his hair with her long, bare nails. She told us that there had been people in our old house; that it was no longer fit to live in. She said our aunt and uncle had a room ready for us in Cottage Grove.

"Where have your shoes gone?" she asked us. When we said we only brought one pair, and no one wore them here, she began to cry. I stared down at Benny's stubby, suntanned feet, thinking how ridiculous it was to cry over shoes, when I noticed the smears of mud from the creek on the floor, tiny marks from Benny's toes on my

grandmother's dress, the streaks my own feet left on the fawn-colored seat. She hadn't said anything about it. Over our grandmother's shoulder, the farmhouse tilted into the ground like a capsized ship.

My mother knocked at a window of the car, and I opened my door. She reached her brown and callused hand in, and touched our grandmother's shoulder.

"Ma," she said. "There's so much love here." She pulled her hand back and looked at the rest of us. "Your grandfather wants to take you away. I told him that was your choice, and we need to respect your choices. Do you want to leave me?" She stared each of us straight in the eyes. She had stopped wearing makeup when we came to the commune, and without the black border around her eyes, her irises looked like deep, hungry holes. If my father were alive, he wouldn't recognize her. I felt the tightness on my scalp where my hair had knotted. I had grown four inches since he left for Vietnam. Would he know me? My grandmother tightened her arms around Benny.

"Don't make them decide now," she said. She kissed Benny's hair. "We'll be back in the morning." She lifted Benny off her lap, pressed a husk dry kiss on my cheek and left the clean smell of talcum powder on my collar. Tom gave me a shove from behind, and I slid out of the car. Promising to bring more food, my grandmother glared over my head at my mother.

"You should have *seen* the way they ate what I brought them today," she said.

I walked behind my mother back to the dome.

"You like it here, don't you?" she asked us. "You have fun?" Behind me, the purr of my grandparents' Rambler grew fainter and fainter.

"Making the bags is good work," Tom said. I said nothing. My mother put her arm around Tom's shoulders.

That night was hot, and fluttering with the flimsy touches of mosquitoes on my skin. I had visions, in the still-dark morning, of my aunt and uncle's fleece-like carpet, waffles on Saturday morning, school buses, the powdery smell of chalkboard dust. I turned on my side and found Tom's shoulder under the blankets.

"We've got to go," I told him.

"How?" he mumbled.

"With them," I said. "Tomorrow."

"But how?" he said. I was never sure if he was half-asleep or half-awake in that moment. At the time, I thought he was stupid, and let it alone.

My grandparents came early, and they came to the dome this time. My grandmother held a basket of fruit. They hovered in the doorway, and my mother lined us up in front of her, lined us up with our feet on the musty nubbed blankets, next to the shards of filbert shells and the empty mason jars filmed with old goat milk. The smell of hemp clung to us. My grandmother set the fruit down outside the doorway, and squatted so she was at eye level, gathering the hem of her dress out of the dirt.

"Would you like to come with Grandfather and I?" she asked. Benny stepped back and leaned against Mother's knees.

"Daniel?" she asked. I looked at Tom. He was wrapping his fingers in twine, watching them turn red and white. Finally, he looked at me.

"I can't," he said out of the corner of his mouth.

The dome folded in on me, and the scent of my mother's patchouli oil. I thought about my father's dried-up bromeliad, the forgotten tacklebox, locked in the den and left behind. I shook my head, kept shaking it. My grandmother brought me the basket of fruit, and I wrapped my arms around it, and she hugged all three of us and mother. Then she took my grandfather's arm and walked away. I watched them go, breathing the perfume of cantaloupe and early peaches and the foreign tang of pineapple, waiting until I heard their car start and crunch onto the pavement. Then I went to Tom's tree. I scraped my palms and knees raw, and finally clawed my way onto his branch. He had carved the date of Father's death into the bark. In between the leaves, I saw Tom coming across to the creek, one of his purses slung over his back. In a minute, he was climbing up beside me. "Here," Tom said. He emptied his bag and placed the twine and pins in my right hand, the board in my left. "You start with a loop."

Reflections on "Growing Season"

My first meaningful use of setting in "Growing Season" occurs at the conclusion of the first scene with Tall Greg. Daniel has had a brief conversation with Tall Greg, most of which he did not understand, then he "let his words wash over [him], and admired how the filbert trees tangled up from the ground, shaping long, shaded archways beneath their branches like green palace corridors" (52). I received a comment from one of my peers in the Kidd Tutorial that this was a good description, but that it took him out of the scene. However, this idea of being taken out of the scene is actually something I was trying to achieve, because I wanted to show Daniel's removal from

what Tall Greg is actually saying. He is interested in the ideas that Tall Greg is talking about including, “bravery,” “the courage to speak out,” “forg[ing] your own trail,” but to Daniel as a nine-year-old, these ideas are more aesthetic and impressive than practical or concrete (52). To try and communicate this, I created images of “long shaded archways” and “green palace corridors” that create an objective correlative impressiveness and aesthetics. Alternatively, I could have written, “I thought these ideas were beautiful, but it was the kind of beauty I saw reflected in my grandmother’s bedtime stories about the Knights of the Round Table, not something I could imagine existing in my own world,” but I felt that my attempt to show these feelings through the setting was ultimately stronger.

Daniel’s opinion of the commune shifts throughout the story, and borrowing from Annie Proulx’s technique in “The Half-Skinned Steer,” I tried to show this change in opinion through an evolving view of the landscape. When Daniel first sees the commune, he notes the slanting farmhouse, which resembles “the Lone Ranger’s horse rearing huge and pale out of the ground,” and the far-off fields that are “deep and jungle-like with unripe corn” (54). I imagined that Daniel would at first think the commune was mysterious, but somewhat exciting, so I tried to pick images that conveyed a sense of adventure. In contrast, when Daniel’s grandparents arrive he begins to feel ashamed of the way he looks and the mud he and his brothers have tracked all over the car. The commune itself begins to feel shameful, and to convey this idea, I created the image of “the farmhouse tilt[ing] into the ground like a capsized ship” (61). The commune is no longer something to be admired, rather, it is something to be escaped.

Daniel's shame comes to a peak when his grandparents visit the dome. To show this, I tried using the selective lens technique to highlight the dirtiness of the dome, the "musty nubbed blankets, next to the shards of filbert shells and the empty mason jars filmed with old goat milk" (62). He watches his grandmother "gathering the hem of her dress out of the dirt," and he sees his home as he believes his grandmother is seeing it – as unpleasant (62). The negative smells Daniel associates with his home – the "musty" blankets and the smell of hemp that "clung to [them]" contrast with the good smells he associates with his grandparents as they are leaving – the "the perfume of cantaloupe and early peaches and the foreign tang of pineapple" (63). Even though he decides to stay at the commune, I wanted the setting to convey his conflicting emotions regarding this decision. The pleasant smell of the fruit was my attempt to show Daniel's regret and the bittersweetness of his choice.

I also tried creating symbolic interaction with the setting, when Daniel's mother "boxed up [his father's] jackets and trousers and shirts for the Salvation Army, then put on a Johnny Cash record and spent an evening piling the rest in a small mountain in the den" and "It sat there for days, abandoned: his tacklebox, the maps he collected, his shaving cream, the red-leaved bromeliad he had kept on his desk (withered since he shipped out), his Steinbeck and Hemingway. Eventually she locked the door" (52). Here, I wanted to show symbolically the mother's ineffectual efforts to let go of her husband – instead of grieving, she is suppressing her memories and thoughts of him by locking them away and attempting to escape from them. Setting was particularly useful to me in this case, because in a story told entirely from Daniel's point of view, I have no

access to the mother's thoughts. Symbolic interaction with the setting allowed me to show her feelings indirectly.

I return to this image of the "father's dried-up bromeliad, the forgotten tacklebox, locked in the den and left behind" in the conclusion as a way to convey Daniel's resistance to leaving his mother and brothers (63). I tried to find a complex image – an objective correlative -- that could communicate several different feelings. The bromeliad and tacklebox, for me, evoke the idea of abandonment (what Daniel would perceive to be his father's abandonment of his family, and Daniel's prospective abandonment of his mother and brothers in turn), and of what Daniel would understand as his mother forgetting his father. I don't think it necessarily has to evoke both ideas in the reader, but I want there to be a sense of loss.

It was a risk to try and explain this key moment --Daniel's decision to stay at the commune -- entirely with an image. However, what I have learned from feedback on my stories in the Kidd Tutorial is that these highly emotional moments are also the moments when the characters (like any human being) are the least articulate. This applies particularly to dialogue, but for a nine-year-old character, I think it also applies to the ability to articulate and understand internal emotions. I could have used the retrospective narration (this story is being narrated by Daniel as an adult) to clarify what the nine-year-old Daniel is feeling. However, I felt that the intrusion of the adult Daniel at this point in the story would distance the reader from this moment. Also, as I have discussed regarding other excerpts, I felt that showing rather than explaining this moment was ultimately more powerful. Hopefully, allowing the reader to interpret this moment allows him/her to feel along and empathize with the character.

Ultimately I found setting techniques useful in this piece as a way to convey emotions subtly and without over-articulating them, which I felt was essential for telling the story of a nine-year-old. I relied on setting to communicate ideas in a key part of the story, and this enabled me to let the reader (hopefully) feel along in a way that a straightforward explanations of Daniel's feelings would not. In enabling the reader to make his/her own interpretations of the images and symbols I presented, it is my hope that I created a short delay between reading and understanding logically. Personally, as a reader, if I automatically understand a piece of text it is easier to move on and dismiss it. It is my aim that by delaying understanding, I allow room for the reader's emotional reaction – an empathetic understanding of the character.

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