

Writer's Idea Box: writing about place

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Poetry is everywhere.

—Naomi Shihab Nye

You're just writing all the time; with every breath, you're writing.

—Garth Brooks

Writing Warm-up

Where is your favorite place or happiest place to be in the whole wide world? Set a timer. Free-write for three minutes.

Writing Samples (attached)

- 1) *Always, In Returning* by Lynne Burnett; a poem of place from memory
- 2) *small territories* by d. ellis phelps; a poem of place from oral history

Writing Exercise #1: recall and take us there!

- **Think of a childhood or present-day playing place:** When you play, where do you go? Do you ski? Do you play poker? Do you swim? Do you play sports? Or do you play around in your mind? Where did you play as a child? In the empty lot down the street? In the park? Or in your room?
- **Think of a place for saving or keeping things:** Do you save money, photographs, campaign buttons, memories? Where do you save what you save? Under the bed, in the closet, in a safe? In a china cabinet, a garage or a storage shed? Think of a closet, a shelf or drawer in your present-day home or one from your childhood home.
- **Think of the ordinary objects found in these places:** the smells, the colors, the sounds. Where does thinking of these places and their objects take you? Does it take you to another place in time; does it evoke memory of a special person or an event?
- **Free-write for as long as you can without editing.** See what's emerging as you recall; let the writing guide you; follow the thought that flows from the end of your pen without trying to control where you might be going; see where this takes you.

Writing Exercise #2: write from history, an animal specific to place, a landscape...

- Write about an event from recorded history or from oral family or the local history of a place.

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- Write from the point of view of or about the landscape: the cypress trees along the Cibolo Creek; the creek itself; the hills; the wild grasses and so on.
- Write from the point of view of or about a city. Write from modern times or from any time in history. Try creating dialogue between the two times you are writing about.
- Write from the point of view of or about an animal common to an area.
- Write from the point of view of or about an historical character from the area.
- Write from the point of view of or about someone buried in a local cemetery (reference poems from [*Spoon River Anthology*](#) for example)

Writing Exercise #3: more ideas about place associations

- a place to belong: Where or in what group do you feel you most belong?
- a place to live: How many places have you lived? In what cities, countries, or homes?
- a place to relax: Where do you find yourself most relaxed?
- a resting place: When you need to rest, where do you go? What environments are most restful for you?
- an emotional place: *I'm just not in a good place right now.*
- a place in the heart: In whose heart do you hold a special place? Who holds a special place in your heart?
- staying in place: as in “for safety” or because of social norms and expectations.

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Always, In Returning

Always, in returning to the house of my farm-grown summers,
I come home to the wild oat, the whole grain of me. Riding bareback
again through the fields of a long-ago self, who I was rises golden
and green in a warm wind:

Bud hasn't gone crazy yet. Audrey
and Rose still live. The hayloft babies are hiding in the rafters
of first love, waiting to be born. The lake's so deep you can swim
one step out from the bouldered shore.

Blind Grandpa keeps
his pockets full of change. Cackling, he leans on his cane, throwing
every quarter-nickel-dime onto the ground. He listens as we fall
upon them like scabbling crows. Gran scolds but he never stops
making us rich.

Dad shows Bob and I at 5:00 a.m. how to hook
a worm (I've been saving them from a dry street death ever since).
Later Gran, with a shake and quiver of strong, baggy arms, scales
and cleans eight small bass in the kitchen sink.

Uncle Jim drives
his tractor in a pressed white shirt. I slip out the door, running past
rabbit-friendly trees to hide among sky-driven stalks. Lying down,
I press my body into sweet conversation with the earth. Here, no
machinations of the soul, just secrets told, flitting like fireflies
through branches of maple, alder, birch.

Who I became is the land
that grew them—a defiant wave of long grass beside a paved road,
a wealth of open sky, water deep enough for a man to drown in,
the flickering light that might save him

© Lynne Burnett

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small territories

after the porch & the sitting
mid-summer sun settling
wrens nestling in
scent of ligustrum
prickly pear blooms:
—yellow festoons persuading

the hills remember

~

laughter children
chasing after fireflies

—stars zig-zagging the yard

how we built a wall
with all the limestones
that owned our land
before we did

not like other walls:
a century old
marking small territories:
granted to heads of households

pioneers who paid for their acres
with sweat and death

with small bodies wiggling
in one room schools taking
their lessons in german

buried too soon in tiny plots:

five year old twins
their curiosity

one horse apple
too many

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