J310: FEATURE WRITING
AN EXERCISE FOR WRITING ABOUT PLACE

Background: A sense-of-place essay refers to a type of descriptive essay that focuses on a specific location. When you write a sense-of-place essay, you want to describe a location so vividly that your reader is able to imagine it.

The Assignment: Find or go to a PLACE that is special or significant to you. (Examples: a favorite hangout or hiding place from childhood, the home where you grew up, a home or place where something significant in your life occurred such as a wedding or party.)

➢ Write a description of this place that uses the following elements:

• include something huge – if you are outdoors - the sky, or a mountain; if you are indoors - the largest thing within that room.
• include something tiny or minute
• include something odd or uncanny or strange

Tips:

1. **Good Place** - the park behind your house where you played as a kid; **Bad Place** – your favorite shopping mall because many shopping malls are similar instead of distinctive.

2. Go to your place, if possible. If not, sit in a quiet place and imagine it. Write a list of all the sights, sounds, textures, smells and tastes that you can remember. In addition, write down any emotions or memories that you associate with the location.

3. Be original. Write from a unique perspective.

4. Describe the physical attributes of the place using sensory images. How does it smell, sound, taste, feel, and appear to you?

5. Write about place as it means to you: fond memories? What do you like or dislike about the place? What is important or significant about this place in your life?

6. Remember as many significant details about place as you can.

7. Write a first draft. Describe the place, incorporating the sensory details from your list. Don't worry about structure or coherence; just get your thoughts down.

8. Take a break. Then, reread your first draft. Make sure your descriptions aren't excessive; never use more than two or three adjectives next to each other, and use as few adverbs as possible. In addition, use specific adjectives; "The smooth, sugary frosting" is more vivid than "The delicious frosting."
9. Replace passive verbs with active verbs. For example, "The wind whispered through the trees" is more effective than "The wind is quiet and soft."

10. Make sure your essay has a coherent, logical flow of ideas and description. Use transition words, such as also, and, but, first and finally, to orient your reader. If you describe several memories in your draft, pare down your essay to focus on one or two memories associated with the place.

11. Proofread your essay for grammar, spelling and style. If possible, have a friend or parent look over your final draft, too.

**EXAMPLE:**

"The Memory Place"
by Barbara Kingsolver published in High Tide in Tuscon

This is the kind of April morning no other month can touch: a world tinted in water color pastels of redbud, dogtooth violet, and gentle rain. The trees are beginning to shrug off winter; the dark, leggy maple woods are shot through with gleaming constellations of white dogwood blossoms. The road winds through deep forest near Cumberland Falls, Kentucky, carrying us across the Cumberland Plateau toward Horse Lick Creek. Camille is quiet beside me in the front seat, until at last she sighs and says, with a child’s poetic logic, “This reminds me of the place I always like to think about.”

Me too, I tell her. It’s the exact truth. I grew up roaming wooded hollows like these, though they were more hemmed-in, keeping their secrets between the wide-open cattle pastures and tobacco fields of Nicholas County, Kentucky. My brother and sister and I would hoist cane fishing poles over our shoulders, as if we intended to make ourselves useful, and head out to spend a Saturday doing nothing of the kind.

We haunted places we called the Crawdad Creek, the Downy Woods (for downy woodpeckers and also for milkweed fluff), and – thrillingly, because we’d once found big bones there – Dead Horse Draw. We caught crawfish with nothing but patience and our hands, boiled them with wild onions over a campfire, and ate them and declared them the best food on earth. We collected banana-scented paw-paw fruits, and were tempted by fleshy, fawn-colored mushrooms but left those alone. We watched birds
whose names we didn’t know build nests in trees whose names we generally did. We witnessed the unfurling of hickory and oak and maple leaves in the springtime, so tender as to appear nearly edible; we collected them and pressed them with a hot iron under waxed paper when they blushed and dropped in the fall. Then we waited again for spring, even more impatiently than we waited for Christmas, because its gifts were more abundant, needed no batteries, and somehow seemed more exclusively ours. I can’t imagine that any discovery I ever make, in the rest of my life, will give me the same electric thrill I felt when I first found little righteous Jack in his crimson-curtained pulpit poking up from the base of a rotted log.

These were the adventures of my childhood: tame, I guess, by the standards established by Mowgli the Jungle Boy or even Laura Ingalls Wilder. Nevertheless, it was the experience of nature, with its powerful lessons in static change and predictable surprise. Much of what I know about life, and almost everything I believe about the way I want to live, was formed in those woods. In times of acute worry or insomnia or physical pain, when I close my eyes and bring to mind the place I always like to think about, it looks like the woods in Kentucky.