

Sarah Mook Contest 2016, Grades 6-8, Second Place winner, “My Atlas”

While this second place poem is unassuming in its language, it is ambitious in its scope and theme. The poem’s premise is skillful; like an atlas, the poem explores geography and place names, but only as they apply to this writer’s need for solitude. With lyrical and precise language, measured pace, and a mature tone, the poet explores the terrain that he or she requires to write.

The poem is written with varied line length and uneven stanzas, giving it a freewheeling style. The poem opens with the geography of summer camp with its “short shores of campgrounds” and “fresh water that shimmers with Maine’s early morning sun.” In two brief lines, the poet elicits a whole host of memories of summer camp in New England where water “shimmers” in early morning—a quiet time for any thinker and writer. Next, the poet moves to the fall and school’s “desk and chairs,” which are the writer’s “platform to a world of reading and writing.” I love the metaphor of the “desk and chairs” as a “platform” for learning, which propels the poet to new places for thinking and writing.

In the next section, the poet gives the names of other locations for thought. The writer’s ‘atlas’ contains “Nooks and crannies—thinking spaces / for my mind to wander.” The names of places listed are memorable and unusual:

Tourist towns in the winter:
Damariscotta, Wiscasset, and Pophan—
faded signs point
to abandoned stores only open summer.

These relatively empty towns in winter symbolize places the writer can go where there are no crowds of tourists, no trinkets, no aimless summer needs. Aloneness and privacy are this writer’s goal.

The “thinking spaces” are enlarged in the next section. Here, the writer runs on “trails” where “matted grass” leads “farther through a field,” and “lakeside docks” can “emphasize the fine line between land and water.” I appreciate the way this writer uses the natural world to symbolize a writing and thinking life of expanded expression, and of knowing the “fine line” between two large and contrasting areas, symbolically “the land and water.” Even though the areas appear to be distinctly separated, how to delineate this kind of “front line” often escapes many writers.

The last section continues the motif of solitude. “Lone gravel roads— / meant for the solitary cycling boy” leads us to, again, seeing the writer as a figure who yearns for this aloneness to allow the mind “to wander.” The last visual image is the most striking in its evocation of apartness: “Perches— / A single branch to hold me high above a forested landscape.” Here, the writer wishes to “perch” above everything to observe and consider.

The poem ends with two separate lines that affirmatively state the purpose of the poem: “These are the pages in my atlas. / These are the places I know by heart.” These lines also confirm that this writer is serious about these locals and what they represent. Knowing something by heart is reserved for the memorable and vital.

There is evocative language in the poem that shows a writer’s mind at work. The “platform to a world / of writing and reading,” “nooks and crevices,” “the fine line between land and water,” “the solitary cycling boy,” and the word “perches” give the writing sophistication and precision.

This is a poem concerning the importance of place and how it affects a writing life. When taken together, the poem's places are symbols for a life of thought and discernment, and its elevated diction and syntax suggest a serious writer's mind at work. This poem is memorable; I hope this poet continues to search for those places that give what is needed to think and wander—and then, to write about them.

Thank you for the privilege of reading your work!

Marie Kane, Final Judge
Sarah Mook Poetry Contest, 2016
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