

Creative Writing Invitation #6

Where Are You? (Setting)

"The high grey-flannel fog of winter closed off the Salinas Valley from the sky and from all the rest of the world. On every side it sat like a lid on the mountains and made of the great valley a closed pot. On the broad, level land floor the gang plows bit deep and left the black earth shining like metal where the shares had cut. On the foothill ranches across the Salinas River, the yellow stubble fields seemed to be bathed in pale cold sunshine, but there was no sunshine in the valley now in December. The thick willow scrub along the river flamed with sharp and positive yellow leaves." - John Steinbeck, "The Chrysanthemums"

This is the first paragraph of a short story, and as you may have noticed, the description of the setting shows and tells the reader a number of things. Steinbeck gives us the physical features of the Salinas Valley as he establishes the time of year (winter/December), the atmosphere (cold and quiet), and the tone or mood (closed in like a covered pot; the feeling of isolation).

The setting is usually described at the very beginning of a story, giving the reader a chance to settle into the story and establish a mental snapshot of the "stage" from which the story will unfold.

For this invitation, imagine a place that is or was very special to you and imagine yourself in that place. As you write, ask yourself what the place looks like, feels like, smells like, etc. Describe yourself in the setting and how it affects your feelings or thinking. Show the reader through the description how the place makes you feel.

If you have trouble with this writing, first just describe the place, then go back and "fill" yourself in, adding description that establishes the tone or mood.