I would like you to set a story in your primal landscape – meaning, the place in which you were raised. If, like me, you moved around as a child, pick the place in which you spent the longest period of time, one you can remember – which for me would be the post-industrial Pennsylvania city in which I went to high school.

There are so many different kinds of primal landscapes on this planet. We live in dry and wet climates, we live on wind-swept hillsides or in the middle of traffic-choked cities. Small town life is unique, but so is urban, suburban, and rural life. All primal landscapes are interesting to the writer who lived there because the landscape is part of who he or she is.

Your childhood landscape is in your DNA. You grew up listening to the accent, attending the gatherings, playing in the weather, being nurtured or alienated by cultural practices.

The list of writers who mine their primal landscape over and over again is long. Here is just a brief list of some of the great American writers who kept (and some of them still keep) returning to their most personal landscape, even if they also wrote about many other places.

* William Faulkner, American South
* John Steinbeck, Central California
* Annie Proulx, Wyoming
* Raymond Chandler, Los Angeles
* Sherwood Anderson, the Midwest
* Garrison Keillor, the Midwest
* H.P Lovecraft, New England
* Edith Wharton, New York City
* Flannery O’Connor, American South

One of my favorite writers of his primal landscape, and of place in general, is great stylist John Updike. Updike passed away in 2009, but left numerous novels and short story collections, as well as hundreds of poems and works of criticism behind. He wrote movingly of his primal landscape – Shillington, Pennsylvania – in an essay called “The Dogwood Tree.” Watch this clip to hear one writer explain how his primal landscape felt to him, and why he kept returning to it.

John Updike discusses “A Dogwood Tree: A Boyhood” (minute 3.44 to 8:52 at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RApWC3Mn3UA>. Note I DO NOT want learners to watch the entire program, which is old and rambling.)

Now, for your last assignment, I would like you to set the beginning of a story in your primal landscape. This is not a memoir, but rather a story set in a place you know deeply and even unconsciously. If it helps you to convert this story into fiction, be sure to write in the third person – he or she. You could call yourself “the boy” or “the girl.” If you write as “I,” it might be tempting to write autobiography.

You may use your 500-750 words to simply describe this landscape, no characters needed. Or, you may populate the landscape with characters. If you have already taken the course on character, use what you learned there to pick a character who is typical of your primal landscape. Either way, I firmly believe we are all highly influenced by the place of our youth. For better or for worse, our hometown is always our hometown.

Write 500-750 words. Let yourself go through the intense experience of remembering this landscape, its weather, people, its joys and sorrows.

Write hard, have fun.

Acres of unkempt land, at the corner lot, is a school. The architecture of the school is unlike any other building. Blocks of 3 classes are grouped. There is an ample number of trees and space between each block. There is a big stage where the assembly takes place every day. An even bigger playground, after which stretches the acres of unkempt land. Behind the stage, a brook from the mountains runs through, rushing and gushing towards the distant paddy fields. The blue mountains miles away, set a beautiful backdrop.

Occasionally the sweet smell of molasses invites us towards the sugarcane field on the other side of the brook. During summer, when there is no water in the brook, the students cross the brook to get themselves sugar cane juice. Most of the students are from well-settled families, giving the school an elite atmosphere. A yellow school bus ran from the town to the school.

The school's management is very spiritual. Frequent talks and sermons from priests, Buddhist monks, and renowned scholars were common were kept. The school also boasted a huge library with books from across the world. While the studious kids spent time after school in the library, the playful ones strolled outside the school campus following the brook's path.

The wilderness fascinated the teens. They formed bird-watching clubs and went around in binoculars looking for strange birds. They collected different kinds of bird feathers, odd-looking dry leaves, and stored them in their notebooks. Video games were not popular during that time.

Few teens were trying out sex in the name of love. Like all love stories, they fought, made up, and went about their lives. The town was small, it was not modern and has never been exposed to radical changes. So, only the brave teens dared to be in relationships in secret. When the news of the couples leaked in the school they were awed and adored by the students. When love, relationship, and sex were itself tabooed and hushed, homosexuality was way out of bounds. No one in the town was publicly homosexual.

Half an hour's drive from the school takes us close to the foot of the mountains, where a small waterfall flows. This is the very water that eventually ends up as the brook by the school. The waterfall is inside the woods, lesser-known, and is not a tourist attraction. Elephants frequently go through the mountains and so, one needs permission from the forest rangers before entering close to the waterfalls. Every elementary grade makes a field trip to the waterfall annually. The kids enjoy the trip. Occasionally, a couple of families join together, pack their lunch, get permission from the rangers, and make the waterfall their picnic spot. They even tie their tube swings by the brook. It is a beautiful sight, the happy families and the beautiful waterfalls.

This sleepy little town, like many other towns, is home to many happy families.