VOICING PLACE

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I grew up comfortable in a poor county. Summers we had the tourists — Fudgies, we’d call them for their pilgrimages for Mackinac Island fudge — who drove through our town on their way elsewhere, stopping for a bit to enjoy our beaches, and sample our cherry pie. Winter, we had skiers and snowmobilers, come to take advantage of the snow blown in off Lake Michigan. All year-round we had our salt-stained shoes, our pockmarked roads, our trailers and houses heated by woodstoves and set off the road somewhere, at the edge of a woods. We had the farms, the orchards, the rivers and lakes. We had our same Friday nights and the games we’d travel across state for — football in the fall, basketball in the winter. And, every year, we had the unofficial November 15th holiday, the first day of deer season, when it would be just us girls in school, with a handful of boys cast like stones among us. November 15th was a day as revered by the men in our community as Christmas and Thanksgiving.

In this world of Northern Michigan — Benzie County to be exact — of the 1970s and 1980s I grew up with a father and brother who hunted and who still hunt. I remember walking a small apple orchard with my father, once, as he hunted, grateful he did not shoot anything with me there.

By the time I was a teen, my father and brother had abandoned my mother and me for Thanksgiving. While they hunted we drove nine hours south to spend the weekend with my aunt and uncle. Sometimes their hunts would be successful. Other times, the hunting would continue through the season until they had filled their permit — bagged a
doe or buck. So, I grew up eating venison. To me, deer mean food. They mean a way of life.

What I did not realize then, but I know now, is that those deer my father did shoot meant for us some luxuries. Though we were more comfortable than most, having a freezer stocked with venison still meant money that could go back into the budget, money that could be spent on other things. When you do not have to spend your money on meat, you can spend it on treats. If you have less than we did, when you do not spend your money on meat, you can spend it on heat — or glasses for your kid, or boots to shovel the snow, or milk and bread and vegetables. I know what deer mean.

That is why to me, in a deep and seemingly abstract way, deer are part of my voice. They are intricately woven into that community that exists within my “place,” the one that is rooted deep in the voice of my fiction. I can write a story about this place without deer in it, but I cannot write a story without the relationship to deer in it. Deer touch the hills, they jump in front of our cars, and they are tied to the roof with rope cut by the knives that rest in the hip pocket of every man drinking hot Sanka in Money’s restaurant on a Saturday morning. They are intrinsic to my first-hand, intimate knowledge of this place — not merely “place” as in “landscape” but place as in culture and relationships. It is community in its very broadest sense.

One year, when I was in my teens, a man who lived on the rural highway between my home and the ski resort where I was working shot a deer. He hung the deer from a large tree in his front yard. It was something I had not seen my father do in years, perhaps out of respect for my mother and me, perhaps because he had a better place to hang his deer, or perhaps it was because it was not my father’s style to show everyone
what he had killed. But because I had seen other men hang their deer in public places I was not surprised.

Allow me to stop there, for one moment, with the noun “deer” and the adjective “hang.” If you do not have intimate knowledge of deer, of a community that hunts deer — and specifically a community that hunts deer for survival (because remember, this was Michigan, in the 1980s, poor and hungry) — it may be possible for you to write a story in which a man hangs a deer in the front yard. However, in this, an outsider’s story, the deer would likely become a symbol for something unrepresentative of the community. The symbolic value placed on the dead draining deer — perhaps greed and pride and waste — is not equivalent to the role that hanging deer actually play in this real community. The deer exists within the outsider’s story, but it’s relation to the community and its true meaning is off. There’s an ignorance of the big picture. So whereas the outsider might write a greed and glutton story complete with a slaughtered animal, they’d miss the real meaning of the deer. On one level it might work, but the relationships would really missing from the story. It would be a story inauthentic to true voice, without real knowledge. It would be a story a knowledgeable reader would reject.

While deer as they may appear in my story are nouns and things, they are infused with the significance of their role in that place. Their roles in my story as images or metaphors are different from those an outsider might create. When you know a community, and you know what deer mean in that community you know the relevance of a deer hanging from a tree, gutted and draining. Were I an outsider driving through and looking at this place through an outsider’s lens, “deer” might mean animal, innocence, nature. Hence a dead deer might mean cruelty, crassness, even stupidity. But to an
insider, it is meat, hope, firewood or gas for the truck. It is the essentials and the extravagances. It is sweetness, candy to a child.

This all lies at the source of authenticity in place-based voices. Think “place” and “voice” and fiction and you may conjure up the sound of long vowels, drawl, and a unique rhythm of speech. That is because at first blush we think of voice as being a sound thing, a rhythm thing. It is the easy thing to do — to make a character sound as if she’s from a certain place. Give her just the right dialect, just the perfect twang and drawl, toss in a few colloquialisms and the task is done. You’ve managed to bring place into the voice of a story. At least that’s what some writers think.

In fact, language is not how place appears in the voice of fiction at all — at least, not in an authentic sense. Yes, writers regularly rely on such methods to try to invoke, say, the sound of the south in their fiction, but it is not how it is done right or best. While language — slang, dialect, the names a community gives to things in that community —on the surface appears to offer the hints the reader needs to locate characters in a place, language is, in fact, merely superficial. Language alone cannot accurately convey a place.

As Ann Pancake implies in her essay “Virtual Hillbilly: Musings on JT LeRoy by a Flesh-and-Blood West Virginian,” no matter how many drawls and clichés — coal mines and moonshine stills — you throw into a story, you cannot have an authentic sense of Appalachian place without the mention of the real elements — hills for example — of the region. Research only gives you coalmines and moonshine stills: intimacy gives you hills and mountains. Just as intimacy provides the deer and all the things related to those deer of Northern Michigan, the rain and umbrellas of Seattle, the wind and plastic bags of
South Dakota, it gives Pancake the flatness of a post-flood river valley with its “acres and acres of my father’s land washed downstream,” of Appalachia (Virtual 49).

Language is relevant in voice because the writer does need to know what the people of a place call things. Take, for example, the “bob wire” of Ann Pancake’s story “Ghostless.” Anyone could sit in a truck stop cafe and hear “bob wire” and go home and write about it and say they’re capturing the voice of a place, but they’d be foolish. Truly, the knowledge of “bob wire” lies in the knowledge of “bob wire” as part of the landscape, the culture and the community. It is an aspect of the meaning of “bob wire” to the inhabitants of the region who live those lives.” “Bob wire” as language and dialect is a nice addition, but without knowledge — without knowing where it exists in relation to the landscape and why — it is merely a surface detail.

While the “bob wire” (Pancake 1) is part of Appalachia culture, it is the intimacy that means the writer knows why it exists, and where — culturally — it exists and how it is used. It does not, however, require intimacy to know that an Appalachian would call it “bob wire” instead of “barb wire” or “barbed wire.” It does take intimacy to imagine it into the place, to know that it must be in the story, that barb wire, or “bob wire” is an element of the place that belongs.

Voice is not found in a story’s language but instead is rooted in knowledge, in the tangible elements of a place, the nouns and images, and ultimately in the metaphors that arise from those images and convey relationships. Writing the voice of a place is not about the ability to get the dialect and slang of a community right; it is about intimacy and knowledge. It is the ability to infuse fiction with the specifics of a place that convey
relationships between people and the place itself. It is about the ability to permeate a story with the complexities of community and the ability to leave them unstated.

It is more like the deer hanging in the yard. Place, in fact, enters fiction through its nouns.

That is because nouns are authentic things. They are the moonsnails of the Puget Sound, the barb wire fences of Appalachia, the newspapers of New York City. Nouns are the real things of a real place. Nouns name the things inherent in how people live, where people live (town, high-rise) and what they use in their everyday life (horse, snowmobile, subway).

Authentically bringing the voice of a place to fiction demands intimacy. Any eavesdropper with a good ear, or anyone who has read a great deal about a place, can affect the dialect of a place. Provided they do it well and with consistency they might be able to fool some people, but that lack of real knowledge expressed in the nouns, images and real details of a place, will leave an informed reader questioning the authenticity. Rely on language alone and the place and the people — the characters — of that place become caricatured. Such characters lack complexity; their obvious features are exaggerated so that they become a grotesque imitation of the real.

Instead, a writer intimately acquainted with a place knows the things of a place and their relevance. He knows the “crops of black umbrellas” of Seattle (D’Ambrosio 31) and the almost-clean bones of a caribou and female wolf on the Alaskan tundra (Kantner 69). He knows the plastic bags that flap and balloon in the wind in South Dakota. He knows “the cemetery ringed with plastic bags,” knows that both the cemetery and the bags exist and have relevance in this place (Meyers 17). He knows the way the
noun becomes an image in this place, the way an adjective added to a noun becomes an image: the bag is “pregnant with wind” (Meyers 214) it “sailed away, a prairie jellyfish” (Meyers 13).

He knows the way noun calls forth nouns: “Caught in the stunted and dying trees in the cemetery and on the barbwire fence that encircled it and on the stiff stalks of yucca and sage that grew on the hillsides above it, more plastic bags flapped, ballooning away from the wind” (Meyers 14). There it is, noun begetting noun. There are the bags, the dying trees, the cemetery, the barbwire, the yucca, the sage, the hillside—all the things that exist, all the nouns that name the life and death in this town. Finally, he knows the relationship of things in this place. He knows that not only are the bags here, but so is the wind, and that sometimes the two are impossibly intertwined so that with “A plastic grocery bag, pregnant with wind, floated high over the Drusemans’ roof as Earl and Willi walked down the sidewalk to the pickup” we understand that to see the wind, we must have the bag, and that to be moved and filled, the bag must have wind. We get the relationships, the relevance. We see how important both the wind and the plastic bags are in this place. How telling of his intimacy with this place that he could marry the two so well so that the reader sees them as a local might see them every day, and understands the power and complexity of both the wind and the bags. Just like the relationships between people here, the wind and plastic bag — both very real elements of this place — need each other in intricate ways (Meyers 214).

Whether they are describing the rain soaked streets of Seattle or the cemetery ringed in plastic bags of South Dakota, writers exhibit their real knowledge of a place
through the tangible nouns; the images that are evoked of those nouns that show the relationships, unique to that place; and the metaphors that spring forth from all of this.

For years, writers have sought to invoke the voice of Appalachia. Few have done it well. In fact, across the arts — from fiction to cartoons to movies — the region has become caricatured and poorly drawn, giving society as a whole a laughable impression of the region, one that slights and degrades it. Yet in the stories in her collection Given Ground Ann Pancake draws a complex, rich picture of the place, bringing to life the landscape and people of the region. Her ability to deliver this sense of place with authenticity — to get Appalachia right — is, of course, a result of intimacy. Raised in Romney, West Virginia, Pancake’s portrayal of this world reeks of firsthand experience, the voice unflinching and authentic.

Look, for example, to the story “Ghostless.” Here, we have “bob wire” and “horse” in the very first paragraph (1). There’s “squirrel”; “venison” and “dogs” and “ditches;” “brush” and a “long-john shirt” (3). These are all real, tangible thing — all nouns that serve to tell us how this place looks, smells, sounds. We get it with “town” — not city, not suburb but town — and in the very distance of town (4). It’s in the “sheet of stove iron”, the “rocks” and “humped hills” and in the “woodshed” (5, 7, 11). These nouns serve to carry with them the place, which has an authenticity and a being that is distinctly not city, not town, not academic or noble or scholarly but is of the earth and the rolling hills and the country and vacancy that is not town and which screams hill country and Appalachia. Place is carried here in the real, tangible things. Pancake knows more than just how the people sound around this part of Appalachia; she knows what they see,
smell, taste, use on a day-to-day basis. She knows what is in the place, what the place is made of. She knows where to find the gun, the wood pile, the bob wire.

And she knows the images of that place. That is because nouns paired with adjectives become images. Images are the knowledge of relationships that show us the life of a place. Take, for example, the word “horse.” Alone, the word conjures up a massive, muscled, creature with a long tail and pointy ears standing in the middle of a very specific place (most likely a field and not, say Cabrini Green.) When “horse” is modified by “steaming” the place gets a new visual. Now the horse is a horse that has been run, which can only happen in a set number of places. Also, the air around that horse is cool and still enough to show the steam rising off the horse. Knowing that the horse would be there, that he’d have just been run and why — even if the writer does not tell us — is knowledge. Telling the reader how the horse appears is an important addition.

Pancake’s world is a place where the bob wire is “notched in a twist” and the squirrel is “fried,” the deer “hunger-doped”, the venison rotting with the “dogs writhing in the carcasses on their backs” (1, 2, 3). These images — these nouns modified by adjectives — are cultural knowledge, earned through lived experience. Pancake gives us this world of images, and then tells the stories around them, around the “parched brush,” the “house rubble” and more. She knows the history of these things. She knows what they represent to the people of the community, why they exist where they exist.

In the story “Revival” we have the image of a young deer trapped in a cistern, swimming back and forth across the cistern, unable to get out and unwilling to let itself be rescued by the people above. Neither the image of that swimming deer nor the image
of the men, who hunt them one day but fish them out of wells on another, could possibly be imagined by a person interested only in language as a means of delivering place. And that is why one must be intimate with a place in order to write it. Because without intimacy with characters and how they relate in complex ways to the world around them, the characters become caricatured and the place does not rise up out of the imagery. It is not that writers who try to write a place they are not familiar with lack imagination, it is simply that they lack the knowledge of complex, rich and paradoxical relationships.

So, images represent knowledge, and that knowledge is a knowledge of relationships; of what the things mean to the people of that place, how they are used, what their relevance is. What people do with the things of a place tells us about their relationship with the objects and with each other.

It is not enough to know that things — deer, cisterns, bob wire — exist. The author must know how they exist in that place, where they exist in that place, why they exist in that place, how they matter to the characters of that place, the role they play in that place. That is the kind of knowledge that comes from experiencing a place firsthand. Any outsider can drive a farm road in a poor, rural community and see a barb wire fence and think they understand the relevance of it. Any writer can invoke a pretty visual of a plot of land surrounded by barb wire fence, but only that writer with the firsthand experience of the place knows that barb wire ends in a rusted twist, in a curl and pile of sunshine at the edge of the edge of land belonging to the meanest matron in town. Only that writer who has been intimately acquainted with the place really knows what the barb wire means, how it is really used, and what it means to the people who use it. Only the
A writer intimate with that place knows why the matron homesteader fenced the land — fear of man or fear of animal?

When a writer is intimately acquainted with a place she understands the deeper relevance of the nouns. She knows what barb wire or a cistern represent historically and she knows what they represent at present. Pancake’s story “Revival,” is full of such examples of relationship, of community in its most complex sense. These images show us the relationship of the narrator to the place and they show us the relationship between people, which further illuminates the place. On the one hand, we have the narrator who has begun to be unlike the place of the story — she arrives at the airport “well-dressed and cologned” — on the other, the father who brings the smell of the place with him. “Behind her, silent and just out of sight, the odor of hunting jacket, of little-washed man, and of the wood smoke he’s carried all the way from the house” (13). Between the two of them, in her smelling of absence and his smelling of place, we have the explication of relationship built on a sensory image of smell. With “wood” plus “smoke” we have the image, and one that suggests relationship and lifestyle. He cuts his own wood, he seems poor, he is “little washed” — and yet, we’re left believing the wood smoke, the hunting jacket, are like the hanging deer, that somehow they are the indications of some sort of provision, and that perhaps without them the narrator herself would not have escaped to a world that let’s her return “well-dressed and cologned.”

Characters emerge from history, culture, relationships all bound by place. It is in not only how they talk, how they sound, the metaphors they use to understand their lives or the idioms that make them sound unique, but in their behavior, the way they smell and look, the things they eat and cook and clean and how they eat and cook and clean them.
This is characteristic of knowledge. If you do not live around men who hunt, who stoke wood stoves, who smell, from time to time, like little-washed man — not because they’re working out and sweating but because they’re living outside the city where men can be little-washed men without others noticing so much — then you do not know this smell.

All these things are what only an insider can know and do justice to. For example, an outsider would likely feel contempt for someone that smelled like little-washed man. But here, the author understands it and instead the man earns at worst the narrator’s pity and perhaps discomfort (she does not, after all, hug him at the carousel and breathe in the familiar, familial scent that is comfort). She understands the smell of wood smoke, of the odor of a hunting jacket. The insider understands how, like those dead deer, these things can mean “candy for the children” and yet, does not need to state it.

The voice here is found in the relationships, in the narrator’s knowledge of the relationships between them and the relationships of this place, and her willingness to leave it all unstated.

So place is carried into this story on the coattails of the images surrounding the father and the narrator, both of whom have a unique relationship to this place and who either carry it with them to the outside world, or attempt to overrun it with what they carry with them. Then it appears in the father’s actions and specifically the tools he uses. Remember, if you really know a place, you know what tools exist in the place, what relevance they have, and how they are used by the characters of that place. In “Revival,” it is the appearance of the knife and they way the father uses it that shows place.

What people do with the things of a place tells us about their relationship with the objects and with each other. “They’ll sit across the plastic table under fluorescent lights
in Leesburg while he halves a Big Mac with his pocketknife, rinses the blade in a cup of water, and dries it in his handkerchief” (14). Pocketknife and handkerchief: two images that aptly convey a sense of place. They ring true of people of economy, people living outside of the city, in hard-scrabble land, or where life has not always been easy. (Like this man my father, the hunter, carries a knife with him always. In fact, he has to have two Swiss Army knives, one he keeps in Michigan and one he keeps in Florida because when he travels between the two he travels with carry-on luggage only and he’s already lost one knife that way.)

Here, the father’s use of the knife — a thing he has carried from home and uses here in the outside world — transports the place into the story, even though it is, at this point, happening in the outside world. That he uses the knife — a knife which is used regularly, we imagine, to whittle wood or pry the screen off the window — to cut his hamburger in the outside world not only is a story of relationships in the place of this story, but it carries this place to the outside world as well.

And there you have it. Place is carried in the images that surround characters, even when they leave the place.

So, images are knowledge, and knowledge is a knowledge of relationships.

Those relationships — animals, objects, history, lifestyle — are community in the largest most complex sense. Place is only slightly about physical landscape. Place is largely community in its most complex sense: the relationships people have with the land, the deer, barb wire, each other.

When a writer is writing a story she is writing a story. She’s not writing a bunch of images, or a bunch of nouns. She is not merely stringing together the tangible things
of a place, or prettying it up with images; she is writing the story of a place. She is writing about relationships and community. So, nouns are tools that serve first to define for the real things of place. Then, they are images en route to the plot. They are accidental because we write what we see, or what it seems we have seen forever, in order for the reader to see it as well. But those nouns/things/images show us what we’re supposed to know about a place.

Another excellent example of a writer who knows how to use imagery to invoke place is Annie Proulx. Proulx divides her time between Newfoundland and Wyoming and is a master at making the images stick, making them authentic to the language and culture of the place, and emboldening the nouns with adjectives and setting so that they become images. And as they become images, they begin to tell us the story of relationships.

In “The Bunchgrass Edge of the World,” of Proulx’s Close Range: Wyoming Stories, images collide with language richly as the place springs to life. “The country appeared as empty ground, big sagebrush, rabbitbrush, intricate sky, flocks of small birds like packs of cards thrown up in the air, and a faint track drifting toward the red-walled horizon.” (121). Those early words “sagebrush,” “rabbitbrush” and “sky” provide us a fundamental idea of what this place looks like. Like Pancake, Proulx knows where things — old houses, abandoned corrals and graves — exist in this place.

Then come the images. That the sky is “intricate” tells us there are clouds here too; the “flocks of small birds” nice, until we get to the magnificent modification of those birds “like packs of cards thrown up in the air,” with its sense of desperation, and the bloodied “red-walled” horizon (121). As the things become images their relevance
emerges. It is difficult to picture the cemeteries of Washington D.C. “unmarked.” That
the graves here are “unmarked” tells us the people have forgotten their dead. Here, the
houses are not merely abandoned, they are “house timbers.” It is hard to imagine a house
on Detroit’s Eight Mile road — where once majestic houses, now abandoned, reflect
some eerie racial strife — described as house “timbers.” Here, the land has consumed the
houses; the present has abandoned the past.

Even the old corrals have been “burned up in old campfires.” It’s exactly what
you might expect in Wyoming. But can you imagine an abandoned farm in green
Kentucky being reduced to firewood? At once, it is Wyoming and it is an image that
gives a sense of desperateness, lawlessness, reckless abandon. It is clear both from the
nouns she has chosen to inhabit this space and the brusque language she has used to
modify them that Proulx is intimately acquainted with this part of Wyoming. Here these
images are knowledge, these implied relationships are powerful. As a result of the
complex and buried knowledge, the writer is able to submerge the meaning in the story,
using the image to indicate meaning without telling the reader what and why and how.
As such, the images become metaphors.

Looking to Proulx’s “The Half Skinned Steer” for an example of images that
become metaphors, we see the main character’s car, in the middle of Wyoming. Here,
we’re given the enormity and desolate vastness of the place as the Cadillac (already a big
car) is devoured by the landscape. “The country poured open on each side, reduced the
Cadillac to a finger-snap. Nothing had changed, not a goddamn thing, the empty pale
place and its roaring wind, the distant antelope as tiny as mice, landforms shaped true to
the past” (31). That the country pours open suggests the vastness. That it reduces the
Cadillac to a “finger-snap” makes that even more so. Suddenly this place is not just big, it is enormous. Next, the place is an “empty, pale” place; the wind is “roaring” and the antelope so distant as to be “tiny as mice” (31).

That she knows what the landscape looks like is clearly an indication of her deep knowledge of the place. She knew not only that the place would have antelope (not cows or steer as most might imagine), but that from where the main character is they would appear in miniature. Her intimacy with the place is clear, though not so showy that it distracts. Instead, through the clever use of well-placed nouns that indicate what is crucial in this place and how the characters here make their life, and the descriptions of the nouns, we’re informed of a place so broad it goes on, flatly, for long enough to reduce the grand to miniature.

Moreover, now we have meaning. The images indicate relationships, even in the most literal sense. With the car’s relationship to the land we have a metaphor. The image has meaning. Just as that Cadillac is reduced to a finger-snap, the character is going to be reduced to helplessness by the land.

Back up and think for a moment about that deer hanging in the tree.

If you do not have intimate knowledge of deer, of a community that hunts deer, of a community that hunts deer for survival, and you write a story about greed and pride and waste in which a man hangs a deer in the front yard then, likely, that deer is imbued with your knowledge in which simply killing the deer is greedy. To take a life is greedy.

But for me, with my knowledge of this place “deer” means food, survival, hope. It has its socio-economic meaning. To the people with vacation homes, it is a tolerated
nuisance, something that destroys favorite bushes. To the farmers, it is a pest, something that can destroy their crops. To most all the locals, it is food, survival, and opportunity.

Now, the outsider sees the deer swinging in the tree day after day and sees waste. He sees greed. He sees a man who took an animal’s life for sport. And hanging a deer from a tree, that is just for show, right?

The writer with knowledge of this place, however, sees much, much more. Here, the deer means food and survival. Hanging it from a tree is relevant; it is part of the process. Hunters hang a deer after field dressing it in order to “drain” or cool down the meat. It allows blood to drain from the body cavity, allows the carcass to cool quickly and completely, avoiding spoilage and allows the meat to age, just as beef is aged. How long a deer should hang depends on temperature (it must be low enough to prevent spoilage and bugs) and is a matter of preference. (My brother’s father-in-law cuts his deer up almost immediately. My brother hangs his for a week.)

Know all this, and deer has a different relevance in the story.

Now, fast forward: That deer hung there in that tree for three months. It hung there straight through Christmas and snowplow season and right into the first buds of spring. It rotted on the limb. And where the outsider might assume greed — the taking of an animal from Mother Nature for no apparent purpose other than sport — the writer intimate with this community sees something much larger: she sees real waste. And, thanks to that intimacy, that knowledge, the wasted deer is no longer just a dead Bambi, a fur-covered carcass and a ten-point rack for the wall, or some symbol of machismo and masculinity. Instead, it is a metaphor for everything that is wrong in and with the community.
So, the writer must explore why the deer is hanging, unused, from the tree. Where the outsider thinks greed, the insider is at a loss. The insider begins to think there is something wrong in the house. Someone has died, taken ill, gone insane. Why? — because the writer knows this place and community and knows that no one would ever take a life and not use it like this. From the $15 price of the deer license to the money that will now have to be spent on meat for the winter, it is a cost. It is also wasted energy. To hunt, day after day, rising early in the morning to dress and go out in the cold, lugging a gun and knives and lunch and a thermos of coffee, is work. To field dress the deer, cutting it open with a knife and cleaning out the steaming innards there and then in the middle of a desolate and cold field or woods, and then to haul a 190-pound animal out of the forest to your car, to lift it to the roof and tie it on, is labor. To make the steady drive home where you throw the end of a rope over a tree limb and then pull the rope, hand over hand, until the beast is hanging from the branch to cool and drain, is work.

All this toiling just to let the meat rot on the limb is senseless, especially in a community where poverty is widespread. To squander that deer and its meat is unconscionable. Such waste is cruel. When families drive by and see meat rotting it is an affront. If you do not want your venison, feel free to pass it on to someone else, but you do not let your neighbors go hungry and flaunt it. That is cruel.

So, for the writer with knowledge of a place the “deer” has a completely different meaning than it does for the outsider. Of course, the meaning of deer spreads itself across all the nouns associated with this place and that deer. (Notice the relevance of each of these items, by the way? Thermos no longer merely means vessel, does it? Now it’s a source of sustenance, a resource.) Thanks to knowledge, the author knows the
meaning, past and present of the things of this place. Outside, a knife is just a knife. In this place it is more than an accessory or treasure; it is a tool. It is something men carry with them everywhere. It is what they’ll use to field dress the deer they’ll take home to their family, to feed them for the winter.

As in life, it is never just one thing with a place, and with the voice of that place. Using deer here as the jumping off point, knives and guns and gun racks and “no trespassing” signs all inherit extra meaning, all carry with them additional relevance. When they are tied to other images in the story by a writer who has an intimacy with the place — who possess a knowledge of the history associated with the items; with their roles in the society; with where they are found in the place itself — they become relevant and allow place to show through in the voice.

And, because the writer has intimate knowledge of this place, the image can stand alone in the story. The writer is not required to explain it, is not required to inform the reader about the relevance of a deer wasting away in a tree. Because she’s telling a story about something else and because the story is already filled with enough other images to give the reader a feel for this place, the wasting deer becomes metaphor. Metaphors, as they rise out of images, provide the author with the ability to leave things — complexity, difficulty, irony — unstated. It is implied instead. The writer knows the deer exists in a place. She knows the value of that deer and its importance in the community. So, when she shows the reader the deer wasting in the tree she is taking a noun, turning it into an image, and finally creating a metaphor for everything wrong with a community. The Cadillac is reduced to insignificance; the deer rots on the tree. The author never has to state implications, the significance, the relevance, the meaning.
Through it all, through the nouns that inhabit the place to the images that tell us about relationships, to the point those images become metaphors filled with meaning, the voice of place emerges in fiction as a result of knowledge and through the real things of a place. Writing the voice of a place is not about the ability to get the dialect and slang of a community, it is about intimacy and knowledge. It is the ability to infuse fiction with the specifics of a place, with the relationships between people, people and things of a place. It is about the ability to infuse a story with the complexities of community and the ability to leave them unstated. It is not a language thing.

In the end, place is in the nouns. It’s in the knives and dogs and hills and river bottoms Ann Pancake uses to give us Appalachia. It’s in the images: it’s in the way the adjectives cling to nouns giving us powerful, emotive images, such as the desperation of Proulx’s Wyoming. And finally, it’s in the metaphors that arise from these images — the yearling falling in the cistern, the Cadillac being reduced to a finger-snap, the deer rotting on a limb — and the author’s ability to leave things unstated, to submerge the relationship and all the complexity and irony of community — in the story through the use of nouns, of images, and of images that rise into metaphors.

The voice of place then is born of intimacy, ingrained in the writer’s unconscious, locked in his or her head. It is a voice made of the tangible, of the real things of significance.
Works Cited


