**Worksheet: Describing places**

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**Jayne Anne Phillips**, from “Bess,” in *Fast Lanes*

**26** From Jayne Anne Phillips’ short story collection, *Fast Lanes.* She leads into the place description with a description of the atmosphere of the house and the people in it.

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*Those long winters inside were not bad times at first, but in later weeks a strange loneliness came. Late in the cold, the last few weeks before it broke, we seldom talked or read aloud or argued anymore or played games. We lived instead in silence, only doing what we were told to do. And waiting.*

*We could see no other farms from our house, not a habitation or the smoke of someone’s chimney. We could not see the borders of the road anymore, but only the cover of snow, the white fields, and mountains beyond. The mountains were an awesome height. You could not see where the sky began. The house in this whiteness seemed small, alien, as though we might be covered up and vanish; no one would know. Sounds were so muffled, except for the wind. One could have fantasies of deafness. The power of the Scriptures in such a setting was great, and we heard the Bible read aloud nearly every evening. Twilight, because the valley was deep, came as early as three or four in the afternoon; the world, the snow, seemed to fly in the face of the Word. Remove not the old landmarks, venture not into the fields of the fatherless; yet the snow still fell.*

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**Denise Giardina,** from *Storming Heaven*

In this passage, Denise weaves the place description into a passage about the uncle her character never knew.

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**12** *Uncle Alec had been dead for a long time, killed in the war between the states. “You think he’s a ghost?” I asked. “You think he still yet comes around here, and that’s why you can’t forget him?”*

*Aunt Jane smiled. “Maybe. Sometimes I feel him close. But if’n he’s a ghost, he’s a contented one. He walks for joy, not for disquiet.”*

*I began to watch for him then. I thought he walked abroad in the fog. The mist rose from the river in the morning to cling to the mountaintops. And in the evenings after a rainshower, patches of fog ran like a herd of sheep up the hillsides. I would go out then, breathe the air and feel it clean the bottom of my lungs.*

*A path wandered behind the cabin, down to the riverbank. Grapevine was broad and green, slow-running, never more than waist-deep on a grown man, save during the spring thaw. I waded into the water, my skirt hiked to my thighs. Silver explosions of trout churned the water, and minners started fuelishly about my legs.*

*I came abreast a stand of cattails and halted. The sweep of Grapevine curved away north, its path to Shelby and the Leviasy hidden by the far mountains, one after another, the mist dancing up their flanks.*

*Every way I turned, the lush green peaks towered over me. Had it been winter or spring, they would have been iron-grey or dappled with pink and white dogwood, sarvis and redbud. But always they would be there, the mountains, their heights rounded by the elements, like relics worn smooth by the hands of reverent pilgrims.*

*I swept my hand up and flung water like beads of glass. “Hey, Uncle Alec,” I whispered.*

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**Keith Maillard, from *Light in the Company of Women***

Keith Maillard grew up in the northern panhandle. He is now a Professor of Creative writing at the University of Vancouver in Canada, but he sets almost all his work in West Virginia. Through his novels, he has written about almost every period in Wheeling’s history. He offers you another way to weave details into your narrative.

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 **7** Kate: His made-up city of Raysburg, West Virginia, a steel mill town. After you’ve read several of Keith’s novels, you feel like you know the place. In his 1993 novel, *Light in the Company of Women,* he reached back to the 1800s when Raysburg was new, the immigrants were pouring in, and the steel mills were iron mills. In this sample, young Jack Middleton, a photographer, has emigrated from Ireland. In the future, his descendants will be solid Raysburg citizens. But here, he’s got his belongings in a wagon, rolling down The National Road, looking for a place to make himself a life.

>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>> *Jack had just attained his majority, by God, had just arrived in America, by God, and was full of himself, and wanted to see what he could see. He had been on his way to Columbus, or who knows, maybe even St. Louis. Jack had bought a good old dray horse - named, in the predictably idiotic American manner, Betsy - bought her and the wagon with her from a drunken tinker in Baltimore, loaded up his cameras and equipment and headed west. It was a hot day with a taste of rain in the air. Jack was alone on the road, as he had been for most of his journey. He drowsed with the leathers on his lap, as the scenes through which he passed continued to unfold themselves before his closed eyelids. Sylvan groves so dense that not a sun mote relieved the gloom. Vast prospects of mountain ridges folding back behind yet more mountain ridges. The valleys between, hazy with purple mists, as though of some mysterious fairyland, long stretches of the old, dusty pike, overgrown now with grass, upon which snakes lay about like so many ropes, sunning themselves and in so great a profusion, that Jack could not avoid running his wheels over them. Silent taverns long ago fallen into picturesque ruin. For yes, the heyday of the National Road was long past. And if expeditious transportation had been his primary concern, he should have ridden on the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, as apparently everyone else was doing.* >>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>> Kate: After a while, Jack feels lonesome and wonders what he’s doing and where he’s going. >>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>> *Jack kept at hand a flask of spirits to assist him in such moments. And now he helped himself to a long drink. A tickle of rain was lashing up in the West. The lower edge of the sky looked as though printers’ ink had been poured into it. Jack took a second drink, paused with the flask in his hand, and discovered that he was experiencing an inexplicable, though profound stirring of emotion. For the first time, he genuinely saw the place where he was, saw it as clearly as if it were framed, upside down, on his ground glass. “It’s very like Wicklow,” he thought. “By God, it is. Put up some stone fences, and this could be the very place. County Wicklow.” He slapped the leathers, called out, “Step along, girl! Move lively, my sweet.” He did not yet know where he was going, but he was suddenly in a fierce hurry to get there. Jack attained the summit of the hill and discovered a little shack which had once been a toll gate for the National Road. Directly in front of it, an ancient, white-bearded character was seated in a rough-hewn chair, smoking a pipe made from a corn cob. A few minutes of conversation were sufficient to establish the fact that this worthy had once collected the tolls. What remained mysterious to Jack, however, was why he was still there, years after his function had passed away. “Nice view,” the old man said. Since ascending the crest of the hill, Jack had perceived a distinctly unpleasant quality to the atmosphere. “I mean no offense by the question,” Jack said, “but could you hazard an opinion as to the origin of the terrible smell hereabouts?” “Smell of money,” the man said. “From the mills.” “Indeed. And with what endeavor are these mills engaged?” “Why, iron, son. Iron.” Jack bid the old gentleman a good night. He proceeded only a few yards, and was suddenly staring down on the rooftops of a prosperous town. It was, he would discover, Raysburg, West Virginia. And then, as he followed the steep streets on down toward Main, as he passed the lamplighter busy at his work, the long-threatened rain struck. And following the line of least resistance, Jack found himself urged on toward a great, dark curve, out at the edge of things and below the city, where the gas lamps of the downtown were reflected, burning white and yellow against the rain and the slate-grey sky. And as his tired mare felt her way over the cobblestones, on down the hill, he found that the mysterious line of darkness, lights reflecting yet further back, vague and diffuse, like a scattering of weary jewels, was the great, uncoiling form, obscured by night, of the Ohio River. >>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>*

**Breece Pancake**

All of the stories in *The Stories of Breece Pancake* give you excellent studies in weaving place details into an ongoing narrative.

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**3** Kate: In Breece’s best-known story, “Trilobites,” a guy named Colly grew up in Teays Valley. His dad recently died, and Colly’s supposed to keep the farm going. But the farm is going bellyup and Ginny, the girl he hoped to marry, moved to Florida, and his mom wants to sell the farm to a real-estate developer. It’s early morning. And Colly is stopping by the diner before he goes to work on the farm. Read by John >>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>

*I open the truck’s door, step onto the brick side street. I look at Company Hill again, all sort of worn down and round. A long time ago, it was real craggy and stood like an island in the Teays River. It took over a million years to make that smooth little hill, and I’ve looked all over it for trilobites. I think how it has always been there and always will be, at least for as long as it matters. The air is smoky with summertime.*

*A bunch of starlings swim over me. I was born in this country and I have never very much wanted to leave. I remember Pop’s dead eyes looking at me. They were real dry, and that took something out of me. I shut the door, head for the cafe.*

*I see a concrete patch in the street. It’s shaped like Florida, and I recollect what I wrote in Ginny’s yearbook. “We will live on mangoes and love.” And she up and left without me - two years she’s been down there without me. She sends me postcards with alligator wrestlers and flamingoes on the front. She never asks me any questions. I feel like a real fool for what I wrote, and go into the cafe.*

*The place is empty, and I rest in the cooled air. Tinker Reilly’s little sister pours my coffee. She has good hips. They are kind of like Ginny’s, and they slope in nice curves to her legs. Hips and legs like that climb steps into airplanes. She goes to the counter end and scoffs down the rest of her sundae. I smile at her, but she’s jailbait. Jailbait and black snakes are two things I won’t touch with a window pole. One time I used an old black snake for a bullwhip, snapped the sucker’s head off, and Pop beat the hell out of me with it. I think how Pop could make me pretty mad sometimes. I grin.*