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The Garden

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“The Garden,” by Alison Logan

Instructor’s Note

This paper fits into the genre of an observation essay. For this particular essay, I instructed students to observe a setting of their choice and to visit that setting at least twice. Once they had taken careful notes in the place—recording both concrete details and their impressions—students took those notes, and wrote about what they had learned. In her essay, Alison Logan shares with readers what she has learned from her careful observations of a setting—in this case, a natural setting. From her notes and repeated observations, the author has learned that whatever humans place in a natural setting will always stand out. Moreover, she comes to the realization that she does not fit in here. To succeed, an observation essay must always transcend mere description, and Alison Logan’s essay does just that.

Writer’s Biography

Ali Logan is a freshman psychology major from Indianapolis, Indiana. She loves to run and spend time outdoors. When she isn’t working out, you will probably find her singing or listening to music.

The Garden

College dorms. Churches. Neighborhoods. I gradually pass each of them as I slowly turn the pedals of my bike. I know there is no need to hurry because my destination will be there no matter when I arrive. It will always be there.

I finally come to the street onto which I have turned countless times. As I pedal past more houses with their lush green lawns, I speed up a bit in anticipation. When I arrive at the red gate, I tuck my bicycle into the bushes and climb over. After a few more homes, trees line my left side and an open field springs up on my right; I know I am

close. I follow the road several more yards before I duck into the thick woods and onto a gravel path. The gravel turns into small rocks decorated by tall weeds, and then all signs of civilization vanish, replaced by forest and a narrow, rocky trail. Along the trail, across the wooden bridge, down the stairs, and there it is—the Garden.

The Garden was not planted by hands—it rooted itself in the unforgiving ground. Each element has worked hard to find and secure its place in the scene. The Garden sits in the middle of a large gorge, preserved as a natural park. Most of the gorge is composed of the thick forest I initially entered, but the Garden is a clearing where the river narrows into a quiet, rocky brook. I follow the edge of the wide clearing to a rock. After hoisting my backpack on top, I climb the rock and perch on its small plateau. I take a sip from my water bottle, brush a piece of spider web from my arm, and fade into the background.

Several feet above the boulder, a cliff of large melded rocks overhangs half of the scene. The rocks stretch so far that it seems they could fall at any second, yet they create a sense of safety in the shelter they provide. Together, the cliff and the canopy of the trees cast a shadow over most of the clearing that keeps the air cool and moist. The sun, as it threatens to disappear under the horizon, hardly reaches this place. A garden of boulders lies scattered across the scene, adding to the array of gray hues. It is as if they were once cast off from the cliff, and yet have made peace with the ground below, now planted and unmovable.

My gaze now wanders from the grayness of the rocks to where life emerges. Plants sprout gaily from seemingly random places, their flashy green leaves calling loudly as if unaware of the serenity they interrupt. My mouth turns up in a smirk as my eyes are drawn to the center of the scene where two worlds meet: a single mighty rock towers over the smaller pebbles at its base, but its top is haphazardly decorated by an array of green. Lush plants sprout from the rock's crest like a head of early morning hair. Upon looking upward, one realizes the cause for the odd splash of vegetation—above this rock is the only break

in the forest's canopy, thus allowing both rain and sunlight to reach it. How the plants dig their roots into their harsh terrain remains a mystery.

Behind my perch, the living and the lifeless come together again where moss crawls up the crevices of the notched cliff. The moss is better seasoned than the ferns and grasses that attempt to assimilate. It knows how to thrive in the damp and shadowed atmosphere. It knows how to join the rock without disruption. Dark, murky green complements the browns and grays of stone, but the fuzzy feel adds warmth to the rock's cold sleekness. The moss demonstrates the harmony to which vegetation and stone may come; two worlds collide and live as one.

Trees are the rocks of the plant world. The tall, still stalks tower over the boulder garden, kings of the natural world for which they provide. Large green leaves create a canopy to guard the scene, but are so distantly high that they cannot intrude upon the gray hues. Brown trunks contribute to the Garden's serenity in their jagged roughness. Dark clouds settle over the clearing and begin to spit rain over the canopy. The tree leaves do all they can to keep the water from reaching the ground with the understanding that in the shaded clearing, drops that land on the forest floor may remain untouched by the drying sun for days. However, the trees know their duty to let enough rain through to sustain their smaller and weaker family members—the ferns and grasses below. Small pools of water left from previous rains ripple and splash as rain hits their surfaces. Leaves tremble under the weight of the fattened raindrops. But the trees stand firm as silent protectors of the elements below.

A third world presents itself in the scene: my own, that of man, in the form of three large cement blocks. The cement attempts to homogenize with the rock garden, but fails in its sharp contrast. Composed of a lighter gray color than any other part of the clearing, the blocks are cleanly cut with smooth sides and sharp corners. One side of each is jagged where the block has been broken as if a large structure was dropped from the sky and crumbled upon landing, leaving pieces of a puzzle never to be put together

again. As water drips from boulders and pools in their crevices, raindrops bounce off of the smooth, resentful surfaces of the concrete slabs. Nature rejects these objects of civilization; the cement tries and fails to make the same peace with the ground that the boulders have. Instead the blocks lie sadly atop hardened ground in their undeserved place among the natural serenity.

I feel like the cement—hard as I try to fade away, I knew my part is the alien. I take care to blend into the tones of solitude as I write quietly and dare not utter a sound. I lack the serenity of the moss and the innocent gaiety of the bright grasses. When a guest enters another man's house, he is welcomed but expected to behave properly and with certain etiquette; he does not walk immediately into the kitchen and help himself, but instead only accepts what is offered to him. Nature welcomes us as a hospitable host, but we must take care not to tread beyond our boundaries. We are guests and can never be anything more.

Of course, other life moves through the Garden, but only fleetingly. A frog occasionally pops out from under a rock to splash through a puddle. Mosquitoes quietly buzz through the damp air. Leaves gently rustle in the presence of a chipmunk. Birds sing sweetly from distant trees. A brook bubbles over rocks along the Garden's perimeter. But even among the noise, there is silence. The plants, the trees, and the rocks hold steadfast, never moving, never speaking, never acknowledging each other's presence.