

Constructing Mental Spaces While Reading “*Adrift on the Street Formerly Known as Buendia*”

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The theory of mental spaces developed by cognitive semanticist, Gilles Fauconnier is an explanation of how humans conceptualize. It explains that language used in communication serves to guide the thinking process. During interaction, words guide an active formation of ideas through the continuous building of mental spaces that interconnect. This paper shows how the building and interconnection of mental spaces while reading give light to the ambiguities in Nikki Alfar’s short story entitled *Adrift on the Street Formerly Known as Buendia*. Structuring the story into major spaces is a key to solving the puzzle that the story presents. The two major spaces are the main character’s physical world and her mental world. Her mental world is elaborated with the spaces of her past, present, and future lives, and thoughts that are activated by metaphorical expressions. The discussion of the mental spaces in the story suggests that these are simply thoughts or visions which when organized into a network present a clear unified picture of the details in the story.

An understanding of how the mental space theory works could promote a consciousness of one’s thinking processes known as metacognition. It could assist comprehension processes through a partitioning of thoughts.

To demonstrate the creation of mental spaces, Nikki Alfar’s story is discussed as it is presented part by part. The discussion is limited to the mental spaces that are built as prompted by words and phrases that indicate the time of an action like now, subject verb-subject combinations that are followed by an embedded sentence like I know manong will be along soon (the subject-verb combination is I know and the embedded sentence is manong will be along soon), and the metaphorical use of words like corner, cardstock crown, and brand-new marbles. These are only some of the words that create scenarios beyond the space in focus at

particular points in the narrative.

Following is a discussion about cognitive semanticists' views about linguistic meaning and the mental space theory which precedes the discussion of the story parts.

Cognitive Semantics

Cognitive semantics is an approach to understanding the organization and structure of concepts in the mind. It studies the mind through the use of language. Semanticists who take this approach refute the objectivist idea that meaning is a correspondence between words or sentences, and things or events in the world, which means that linguistic meaning is understood by how it matches reality. They, instead, view meaning as deriving from mental representations of the world. Linguistic meaning then, is based not on the system of a language but on the human conceptual structure formed by "sensory-perceptual experience of the external world and subjective experience from the introspective 'world'" (Evans & Green, 2006, p. 457). Language is a tool for accessing the conceptual network which continuously undergoes either affirmation or modification as influenced by the dynamic process of meaning construction. Meaning construction, in turn, affects language through, for example, new words for new tools or ideas in a culture. The idea that the meanings of linguistic units such as words, sentences, or even word parts serves to access a knowledge system is associated with the claim that meaning is encyclopaedic. The meaning of a word, for instance, is more than its definition in a dictionary. Meanings are associated with a thing based on cultural practice or personal experience and word meaning can be understood based on the context of use (Evans & Green, 2006).

The Theory of Mental Spaces

The context of a discourse serves to guide the comprehension of meanings. This is an assumption of the mental space theory. Fauconnier, the leading proponent of the theory explains that language serves as symbols that direct and represent the elaborate construction of ideas. Meaning construction, according to him,

involves the creation of mental spaces and the establishment of connections between these. Mental spaces are mental structures that multiply while thinking or talking resulting to what can be visualized as constituent parts of a discourse. These can be envisioned as a network of structures filled with elements like the characters in a story.

Major Mental Spaces in Alfar's Narrative

As mentioned earlier, the narrative subject to analysis in this study can be visualized as having two major spaces, the narrator's physical and her mental world. This visualization is shown in figure 1.

Figure 1: A Mental Structure of the Narrative

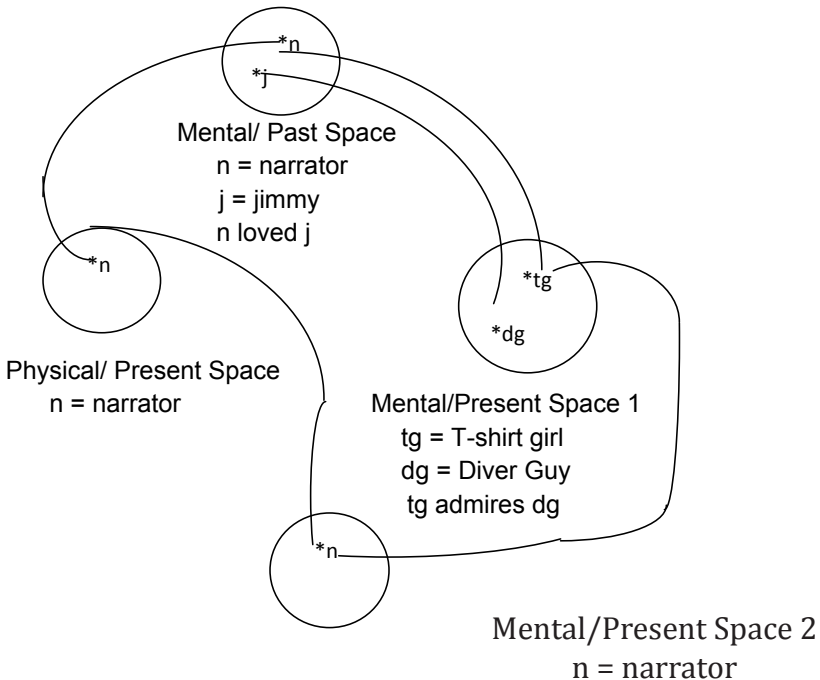


Figure 1 shows that in the mental/past space, n loved j. Mental/present space 1, contains tg (T-shirt), and dg (Diver Guy); tg

admires dg. The element n in the mental/past space can be linked to tg in mental/present space 1; j in the former space can also be linked to dg in the latter. A clarification of the difference between role reading and value reading is essential in clarifying how the elements in the two mental spaces are connected. In the story, the names Jimmy and Diver Guy as well as the narrator and T-shirt Girl represent character roles. Based on the role descriptions the male characters can be identified as the same individual filling two roles. The same is true of the women. The individual that plays the two roles correspond to the concept of value in what is known as value reading. The words and actions of the two characters prompt a “conceptual linking” (Fauconnier in Evans & Green, 2006) process. This mental operation is a property of mental spaces known as the Access Principle (Fauconnier, 1997, in Kovecses, 2006).

Language Cues in Alfar’s Narrative

The building of mental spaces as part of the thinking process involved in reading is assisted by language cues. The words that serve as cues to the creation of one of the major mental spaces in Alfar’s narrative, the narrator’s mental world, can be noted in the second paragraph, which is the word “think”. Also, the third paragraph of the story begins with “I don’t know.” The word “know” in the phrase appears twice in the same paragraph. Then the fourth paragraph begins with “I’m hoping”, the fifth with “I’m sure” which is repeated in the sixth paragraph. Know, hoping, and sure all suggest the narrator’s engagement in her thoughts. The story proceeds with bewildering accounts which could be resolved through the Access Principle which is discussed above.

Mental Spaces in the Narrative

The story begins with the narrator relating the condition that she herself is experiencing.

THE TAXI GUY won’t take me any farther than Ayala intersection which I can’t blame him for, really, because as early as this point, the water’s already knee-deep, and it’s only going to get worse down

the street.

This happens a lot on Buendia (which is supposed to be named Gil Puyat now, only I don't think anyone but the post office actually calls it that) in the wet season. Every year (or so I'm told) they muck out the sewers; and every year it floods anyway, drastically and chronically, at even the slightest hint that the sky might be vaguely considering rain. You'd think that no one would keep on living in this area anymore, but it's not like any of us can afford to move. Or at least I can't.

A very clear indication of tense in the first paragraph, the 's in water's which is a contraction of "is", cues the building of the space that represents the physical reality of the narrator. I don't think in the second paragraph suggests the narrator's mental engagement with what is taking place. This creates a mental space which is the narrator's mental world filled with the elements of anyone, the post office, and us, the residents of the street.

The narration continues with the narrator's flow of thoughts as implied by "know" used twice in the following paragraph.

I don't even know if I'll be able to pay the rent once the deposit Jimmy put down runs out, but for now I'm stuck -in my condo if not permanently on this corner. I've gotten the hang of how things work in just the couple of months I've been here. I know manong will be along soon—piloting a transformed tricycle with the motorcycle part replaced by a bike and the seat jacked up to what used to be shoulder level, or a wooden cart with one or two monobloc benches strapped haphazardly to its surface with plastic straw -in either case charging some ridiculous but incontestable amount to get people home safe and sound, if not entirely dry.

"I don't even know" is an expression of the narrator's uncertainty about the future which is implied by the future form of the verb be in "I'll be". This builds an uncertainty space that connects to the major space of the narrator's mental world. The expression, "once the deposit Jimmy put down runs out" prompts the creation of a past space that also connects to the narrator's mental space. But "for now" creates another space, the present. The narrator alone occupies the present space as cued by my in my condo which she calls corner. "I'm stuck" foregrounds the isolated feature of the corner. Manong then is part of another

present space. At this point of the narrative, a future, a past, a present uncertainty space, a present metaphorical space, and a present space occupied by Manong embed the mental space.

I'm hoping it's a cart manong who shows up, really, because with the seat propped so high, you have to totally hunch over in those tricycles, almost like a fetus; and besides, there are already two people in line ahead of me and I don't want to have to wait around anymore than I absolutely have to although thankfully the actual rain has stopped. (And of course I don't have an umbrella; no one does; it's one of those evil Manila days that started out like the scorching height of summer and then turned traitor right after lunch).

The story continues with a wish space built by “I’m hoping”, which still links to the mental present space. Another present metaphorical space is built by fetus. A reader is led to infer that the narrator’s description of hunching over in a tricycle is based on her own experience because she hopes it’s a cart manong shows up. This creates a vision of the narrator cramped in the tricycle. Further space building is prompted by “started out like the scorching height of summer...” as this creates a scene beyond the present metaphorical space. This is also a metaphorical but past space which being described as started like summer but turned traitor reminds of Jimmy who had put down a rent deposit, then disappeared.

I'm sure my mother would just be as relieved not to have to share with strangers, but I've discovered that in these situations people who have nothing else in common are suddenly willing to chatter away like old chums, which I admit isn't always desirable, but there you go - catastrophe (or the current local equivalent anyway) makes strangers into neighbors, something that doesn't happen all too often in the city.

These two in front of me, for instance; I'm sure I would never think of talking to them under ordinary circumstances. I mean, the girl seems normal enough—in fact, she's spectacularly pretty, even though she's wearing a horrible fuchsia glitter T-shirt with the words Kiss Me Quick! embossed on it—but the guy is wearing something that looks like a diver's wet suit, a one-piece rubbery getup in black and bright blue, so I'm trying not to stare at him,

which isn't easy. At least you could say he's dressed for the weather, unlike me in my one good suit and formerly good heels.

"I'm sure" creates a certainty space filled in by the mother. The same space is occupied by the narrator, the girl, and the guy. The narrator's description of these characters is not preceded by any linguistic form that signals the construction of a space different from the certainty space which is attached to the space that represents the mental world of the narrator. Without an awareness of this, it is easy to think that they are part of the narrator's physical reality but the spaces that have been constructed all attach to the mental world of the narrator. The wish and the certainty spaces now add to the future, past, present uncertainty, metaphorical spaces, and present space occupied by manong, which surround the mental space of the narrator.

He's obviously thinking along the same lines because when Manong finally arrives (with a cart, thank you, Lord!) and we clamber aboard, Diver Guy says, "Too bad about your shoes. They look expensive." They are, too—or they were, blush-colored Nine West that were a present from Jimmy back when things were good (although even then I noticed that the shoes had faint scuff marks on the soles, but I was stupidly in love and brilliant at making excuses to explain away all things I didn't want to understand).

I go. "It's okay. If I get the job I interviewed for today, it'll be worth it," as I settle in to my position in the middle of the bench. (It's Buendia Flood Etiquette that the third person in line gets the least desirable position—not that the sides of a precariously perched monobloc are exactly the lap of luxury, but at least you get an armrest and you're only squashed on one side by your companions).

"Oh?" he says, zipping the collar of his wet suit up and down a couple of inches (not in a gross way, just sort of idly). "What kind of a job?" "Call center," I say. I've already been training myself to say it without cringing, so it rolls out nice and smooth, even though of course I'm still thinking –graduated with honors in Comp Lit, and this is what I'm doing?

"That's good money," Diver Guy says. "Are you transferring from another call center, or just starting?"

"Just starting," I say. "I used to be a dentist's assistant because –" Okay, hang on, camaraderie in the face of catastrophe is one thing,

but there are limits to how much I'm willing to share here." I just kind of fell into it." I look away from Diver Guy and focus instead on the water swirling past us as Cart Manong trudges forward. It's around thigh-high here, and things are floating around in it—squashed cigarette butts, translucent plastic bags, a ragged square of carton. Dirt too, of course, though it colors the water brownish-gray instead of being visible on its own; and I'd rather not think about what else is in there that I don't see. It can't be pleasant to be immersed in.

The certainty space gets enlivened by a conversation initiated by the guy in a diver's suit. During the conversation, the narrator's past space interferes with the certainty space. This past space is occupied by the narrator and Jimmy denoted by "back when things were good". That the shoes Jimmy gave had faint scuff marks on the sole which the author did not want to explain because she was stupidly in love implies a sign of Jimmy's deceptive act. This is supported by "when things were good" which further suggests that Jimmy is no longer part of the narrator's life.

The first person point of view as used in this story is suggestive of the narrator's engagement in her thoughts which is easy for a reader to forget as he or she gets carried along by the chain of events. But the kinds of spaces constructed while reading and interpreting could serve as a reminder that the author is preoccupied with her thoughts.

Poor Manong, but at least he's making a killing at twenty bucks a passenger, just to go down the street. I look over at him and see that he's wearing a flimsy cardstock crown, like the kind they gave out at my nephew's last birthday party, only with just three points in front instead of all the way around—more Wonder Woman than Burger King, maybe. Anyway, it's open on top and doesn't protect him from the rain at all, so who knows why he's wearing it? It's just Buendia, I guess; the rain comes down and the weirdos come out. (And it's not that I'm being snotty, exactly; I figure I fit right in.)

The metaphorical use of the flimsy cardstock crown creates a new space. Comparing the crown to that of Wonder Woman and describing it as open on top so that it does not protect the wearer leads to thoughts on the risks manong is exposed to as he rules over the flooded Buendia.

"What about you, what do you do?" T-shirt Girl, from my other

side, asks diver Guy. "And why is it you're wearing a diving outfit?" Wow, obviously they're not big on manners in Fuchsia Glitter Land, or at least she doesn't have her mother's voice perpetually at the back of her mind, telling her what is and isn't proper to talk about. (And yes, I know a lot of things wouldn't have turned out the way they did if I'd listened more, but I will never admit that to you, so shut up, Mental Mama.)

"I'm a marine biologist," says Diver Guy. "I study aquatic life."

"You mean in Manila Bay?" I ask, unable to prevent my voice from squeaking up a couple of registers. I mean, obviously, it's the only sizeable body of water close enough for him to already be wearing his wetsuit (though that's still weird, if you ask me), but I wouldn't have thought anything could live in that cesspool aside from rats and roaches—then again, who knows? Maybe all the pollutants everyone dumps in the bay have caused the rats and roaches to mutate into some new kind of amphibious life form, and that's why he's studying them.

"No, no, right here," he says; and I smile because that's exactly the joke my train of thought was leading me to, that if anyone wanted to study aquatic vermin or pollution-spawned fungi all they'd have to do is come visit Buendia on a rainy day like today.

The outfit of Diver Guy and of T-shirt Girl and their dialogue tell much about their roles. Diver Guy's claims about his diving outfit during the flood are utter foolishness. He hides his deception by wrapping it in frankness. The girl's shirt described earlier as embossed with Kiss Me Quick implies her dire need of attention. Her identification as T-shirt Girl connotes the narrator's disdain for her even if her naive inquisitive manner compares with how the narrator herself unavoidably squealed her curiosity. "Wouldn't have turned out in ... I know a lot of things wouldn't have turned out the way they did if I'd listened more, but I will never admit that to you, so shut up, Mental Mama" brings the reader back to the past space. It hints at how the narrator sees herself in T-shirt Girl.

But it seems like he's actually serious, because he goes on with, "We forget, don't we, that the wellspring of life continues to flow even in the most unlikely places, whether by accident or design," and I don't have anything to say to that, so I look at T-shirt Girl to see if she thinks he's as wacky as I suddenly do, only she's looking at him

with disgusting dewy-eyed admiration, like he's MacArthur slogging through the surf at Leyte or something.

Then Diver Guy says, "In fact, I should really get to work," and holding his nose like a kid on the edge of a diving board, stands up and steps right off the edge of the cart.

"Wait!" I try to say; but he's already gone, which is ridiculous, because the water isn't even above Cart Manong's waist yet, and no one who isn't, you know, vertically challenged like Mahal, should be swallowed up by the water that's no more than three feet deep, but Diver Guy has completely disappeared.

"... but he's already gone" prompts the construction of a new space about the present, still attached to the major space of the narrator's mental world. The narrator and T-shirt Girl are left in this space.

At this point of the story the role description of Diver Guy is comparable to the role of Jimmy who having given the narrator shoes with faint scuff marks on the soles, is suggested to be deceptive. And like Jimmy, Diver Guy disappeared. In the same way, the role of T-shirt Girl reflects the narrator's character.

"Did you see that?" I ask the world in general; but Manong doesn't seem to hear me, so I address it to T-shirt Girl, who's staring at the water, but doesn't seem particularly fazed. In fact, she's smiling. Did you see that?!"

"It's nice to find out that a man can be so devoted," she says, smiling even wider to reveal annoyingly perfect pearly white teeth.

"He just vanished!" I lean further toward the side of the cart and look down, but all I see is debris and dirty water. Maybe he landed badly, and twisted his foot, and fell. Maybe he stepped straight into an open manhole. Either way, he could be drowning and no one else seems to care.

"I mean, obviously it's to his work, but still, T-shirt Girl says, "it's nice to see such commitment in a human male. Do you think he'd be the same way in a relationship?"

I should go after him, I think (even if he is quite possibly a lunatic), But I'm scared Manong will just leave me and I'll have to slog through the filthy water on my own all the rest of the way home. What if I'm

the one who falls through an open manhole? In these stupid heels, too; I could break an ankle. Maybe Diver Guy is just fine and –I don't know –swimming around, catching cockroaches underwater. No one else is worried, so maybe I'm overreacting, like Jimmy always says.

I finally make sense (literally, if not figuratively) of what she's saying.

"What?"

"Reliable," she says, twining a lock of hair in her fingers in that coquettish way I can't stand. "You know, my father warned me that it was foolish to leave everything I knew behind, but love makes people foolish, don't you think?"

I can't help but stare this time; she's hitting too close to home, and I'm starting to think that maybe, I'm one of those TV pranks shows somehow. Joey de leon hosts one, doesn't he?

"Where's the camera?" I turn my stare into a glare, hoping I look threatening and not quite as idiotic as I feel.

"I know what a camera is!" she says. "He liked to use one when we were together; he said it would give him something to remember when he got hitched."

"How did you know he was married?" I try to snarl this at her, but it comes out as a weak little whisper, because I never told anyone but Rina, and she swore never to breathe a word, and I'm going to kill her, that bitch of a supposed best friend.

"I didn't," T-shirt Girl says, "I didn't know what 'hitched' means; I only found out later, when he told me he's getting married next week."

"I realize she's not talking about me (How self-centered can I get, honestly?) and she's about to cry; her eyes are all shiny, though in a pretty way, like brand-new marbles before they get scarred from being played with.

“...Was married, never told..., and ...swore...” bring the reader back to the mental/ past space. These confirm that Jimmy and Diver Guy are one. With I realize she's not talking about me, the reader goes back to the mental/present. It not only affirms the similarity of T-shirt Girl's and the narrator's roles. It suggests that

the two roles belong to one individual. The “...brand-new marbles ...scarred from being played with” compared to T-shirt Girl’s eyes creates a metaphorical space as the description applies to the narrator who had been innocent of despair before Jimmy deceived her.

Well, a lot can happen in a week,” I say, hating myself even as the words come out. Why am I trying to give her false hope? “I mean, you could wake up tomorrow and find that you’re completely over him, just like that.” I snap my fingers, improvising. “You never know.”

She does start to cry then, and I look away so she can compose herself. The water is almost up to Manong’s chest now, and something swirls past the cart that’s way too big to be a rat, not even one of those cat-sized rats you catch sight of, running on the top of electric wires at night. It swishes by too fast to really see, and probably the muddiness of the water is messing up its real color anyway but it almost looks purple, bright purple like ube ice cream; and it’s moving like something alive.

“I don’t have a week. I don’t have any more time,” T-shirt Girl sobs and now I see that it’s not just her eyes that are shiny, it’s everything about her—skin, clothes, hair—gleaming suddenly as if she’s been wrapped in transparent plastic. I have no idea what’s happening (which seems to be the theme of my day and possibly, my life); but I want to comfort her despite the fact that she seems to be the kind of girl I ordinarily detest, so I touch her shoulder gently.

My hand passes right through her. I snatch it back and stare at it; and my hand is covered in bubbles, like I’ve been washing the dishes. I look back up at T-shirt Girl and she’s turning into bubbles—first, different colored ones, still in more or less the outline of a human being, in all the shades of her hair and skin and clothes—then pure white foam that slips through the oblong air holes on the monobloc over the surface of the wooden cart (and my once expensive shoes).

Still in connection to the mental/present space, a mental/future space is constructed with can happen in a week and tomorrow. The present /mental space further extends to another space, the metaphorical flood level. “The water is almost up to Manong’s chest now” is the crisis in the narrator’s life that is at its worse. The transformation and disappearance of T-shirt Girl and the foam that slips over the surface of the wooden cart (and the narrator’s once expensive shoes) further affirm the common

identity of T-shirt Girl and the narrator.

I can't seem to think what I should say, or do. I want to reach forward and shake Cart Manong by the shoulders (since whenever seems to hear me), screaming like the proverbial Sisa; but frankly, I'm afraid to. Less afraid that he'll be upset, or getdistracted and stumble, really, than that he'll twist around and turn out to be –I don't know –maybe the Creature from the BlackLagoon, the way things are going.

I don't know where I am anymore, I've been too distracted to pay attention; but it's pretty clear now that this is no longer Buendia, though I can see my condo building—just the very top of it with its In God We Trust logo—in the distance behind us, as we'd gone past it already when I'm pretty damned sure we didn't, at least not in any kind of way that obeys the laws of physics as I know them, not that what I know seems to count for very much in whatever place this is that I've somehow slipped into.

“I can't seem to think” creates a confused space. This is supported by “I don't even know where I am anymore”. Manong not seeming to hear the narrator screaming like the proverbial Sisa, the fear of manong turning out to be maybe the Creature from the Black Lagoon and her inability to think according to the laws of physics elaborates the disturbed mental state.

I wipe my bubbly hand on my suit jacket and keep my mouth shut, as what's left of T-shirt Girl floats farther and farther away on the brownish-gray surf.

I'm hardly surprised at all when a small boy pops out of the water and climbs aboard the cart, onto the bench beside me. He looks like a typical urchin with his tanned skin and orange-and-brown sun-striped hair except for the wide flaps—of –skin?—that stretch from his wrist to his ankles on either side, like a miniature manta ray. (Or a regular-sized manta ray, I guess, if you think about it ; and obviously this isn't the most useful thing for me to be thinking about in this situation, but I'm just yammering away in my head right now, because it's hard to make sense when the world refuses to.

“You're not pregnant, you know,” Manta Boy says; and it should probably stun me that he knows exactly what I've been trying to worry about for a week and a half, but I think I've gone beyond

amazement now.

I'm just looking at the water. It's still filthy; and it's obviously much deeper than it has any right to be (and obviously Cart Manong is much taller than any human being ought to be). And I could drown in it; or lose my bearings and never find my way home (And besides, you can't go home again, isn't that what they say? It's what Mama said, anyway); or be attacked by who knows what else is swimming around down there that is probably much, much worse than Diver Guy or Manta Boy. It would be foolish to leave what little I still do know, when I could just stay where I am.

A new space balloons as a small boy pops out of the water. This is the narrator's worry space. But as she has said, she has gone beyond amazement and is just looking at the water. Her present continuous act builds another space where the water is much deeper because she is at her worst condition underscored by manong's height. Although manong is expected to be in the same space, the description much taller than any human being ought to be in contrast to the narrator's pathetic state, activates a Filipino reader's schema or background knowledge about the poverty of a manong who drives an improvised vehicle in the Philippine setting. He surpasses his poverty during the flood which could drown the narrator.

"It's only that you haven't even let yourself cry," says Manta Boy. You'll dry up completely if you keep holding it all in. You need to learn to go with the flow."

Like manong, the narrator needs to learn to go with the flow as suggested by Manta Boy. The verb "need" in the simple present tense which suggests the imperative mood as used by the boy creates a possible hope space.

I stand up and look at him. Skin flaps aside, he's adorable, really—big earnest eyes, and the beginnings of awesome cheekbones that will have girls falling over him when he's older. Especially if he become whatever the weird aquatic equivalent is of a professional; a doctor, a lawyer, or even just a dentist.

"You shut up," I tell him. "None of it is any of your business anyway, any of you." And I take off my suit jacket; take off my hand-me-down

*shoes from my hand-me-down lover; take a breath and dive in, before
I can change my mind.*

...become whatever the weird aquatic equivalent is of a professional, a doctor, a lawyer, or even just a dentist adds to the hope in the space occupied by Manta Boy who himself signifies the birth and probable growth of hope.

The implication of hope, however, is shut up by the narrator. As she takes off her jacket and dives into the water, an empty flooded space is left.

Mental spaces proliferate as the narration proceeds. Since the events are narrated as perceived by the narrator, all the spaces thereby constructed connect to her mental space. Diver Guy and T-shirt Girl of the present space match Jimmy and the narrator of the past space, both but linked to the space of the narrator's mental world. Adrift on the street formerly known as Buendia, the narrator gets lost in her thoughts.

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