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“The language of elms . . . a song unmatched”: Dementia and Rootedness in Charles Dodd White’s *A Shelter of Others*

In Charles Dodd White’s *A Shelter of Others* (2014), drug offender Mason Laws, newly released from prison, does not immediately return to his devoted wife, Lavada, and his father, Sam, whom Lavada tends in his dementia. In this conflict, White explores the role of shared voices and participation in community. Mason, after his physical isolation from his home, finds reintegration difficult. Sam’s dementia, however, contributes to another sense of isolation. As he becomes increasingly unresponsive to medication, he attempts to find in the natural world a confirmation of the order he loses in his everyday life. While he struggles to affirm his ties to his immediate family, he finds more understanding in his home bordering a national park, returning to the language he hears expressed through the turn of seasons, the processes of erosion and growth, and, in contrast, its illusion of suspension of time. Sam’s attempts to restore order to his thinking suggests that he imposes order on the world around him; his internal monolog, an insistence that he has become “lost” rather than ill, symbolizes his attempt to find a path through his mental forest. Like Addie Bundren of Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying* and Huck Finn of Mark Twain’s seminal American work, Sam Laws attempts to understand himself through his engagement with the natural world; through Sam, White questions the degree to which the human community interprets the “language of elms” to salve its own pain.