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Sensing Extra Perceptions

Eye

Bringing a story into the light calls for the interplay of sight, hearing, smell, touch, and taste. All the writer's sensory gifts are working at once, and they are alert to the creation of images that use every one.

Your eye works like that of a camera, moving in for a close-up and back for a long shot, inspecting minutiae as well as overall composition. It lingers on the color of a strand of hair, passes quickly over a landscape or the cement canyons of a city.

The power of visualization is a gift you either have or haven't, but in the storywriter it can be improved with steady practice. "The train went past" may be a serviceable statement, but if the train is important to your story, you can evoke it in strength with, "Then it was there alongside, the locomotive sudden as a tornado, black, huge, screaming, the whistle sounding again in two heavy blasts, cinders and smoke streaming, and the car roofs like the backbone of a dragon." The *roofs like the backbone of a dragon* is going to fix that image in the reader's eye.

A jaunty little fox terrier becomes memorable as soon as you have told us that it "tacked along like a sailboat against the wind."

Simile and metaphor are your fast friends when it comes to passing along to the reader what your eye wants the readers to see. There have been storywriters who worked without them—John O'Hara is a notable example—but it is a little like a painter who is color-blind.

Don't overuse them. If you're good at the striking, apt, and not overdrawn metaphor, the simile that sums up much in a splash of color, save them for moments in your story when you want the reader to see very clearly what you also want to stand out. A string of similes wearies the reader because it makes the eye work too hard. A bunch of metaphors in a line is—to speak metaphorically—a bunch of boxcars passing while the reader waits. They stop the motion of the story dead as the train does traffic. Both metaphor and simile are points of color, illuminations that give the rest of the story special life by their reflections; they are not objectives by themselves, to be flaunted for their own sake.

If you don't easily see vivid correspondences in the life around you,

you can teach yourself to begin looking at mundane objects for the first time—actually *seeing* their likeness to others. A bowling pin, for instance, has a marvelous shape, like a diminutive monk with a spherical stomach. A fountain pen is a spear with its point split. A small child's hand spread in the air is a wriggling starfish. On a clear soft night the full moon is a nailhead holding up the sky. If you stare into a garbage can—holding your nose meantime—the orange rinds and the wilted lettuce and the eggshells form islands of matchless color and gradations of tints which would intrigue Paul Gauguin in their Tahitian brilliance.

Nothing is actually “like” anything else. A pebble on a beach has its own integrity of being. But in the story your eye's ability to compare can bring to the reader a close approximation of what you want him to see, and since every story is, in part, a quick series of flowing impressions, it's important to use your eyes, and the reader's, to the limit of what both can take in.

Remember, always, that too much eye imagery can get arty and off-putting. The stories of Katherine Mansfield that deal with her remembered childhood in New Zealand—“At the Bay” is one—are steeped in her homesickness, which is all that keeps the eye from blinking and turning away from the heaped-up images, wonderful as they are.

Yet used carefully and with judicial impact, the eye image can lift a reader with the sort of inner approval that exclaims, “Yes! That's how it is!” This touch with the reader is the real strength of the storyteller's eye.

Ear

Acute hearing is more to the storyteller than the ability to write good dialogue. It's the ability to hear what people really say between the lines.

If you take a page of Hemingway dialogue and read it aloud, you'll find that it's flat and doesn't play well. It has a tension that needs to bounce off the reader internally for its full effect. It says more inside the context of the story than it can ever say outside it. It's highly stylized, played close to the chest like a top poker hand.

What people mean and what they say is the difference between the reef under the ocean and its bland blue smile. “Yes, Charlie was always such a big spender” may mean that Charlie was the skinflint of the world. “Myra, your hair looks wonderful today” may be a compliment, but the operative word might also be “today” and the implication that Myra's hair is usually unsightly. Dialogue is never mere talk, but a way of characterization, of advancing the story and deepening it without narrative.

The way in which your ear hears is the way you'll write the story. Overtones and undertones are all-important. This applies to much more than an accurate ear for human speech.

The whistle of a train in the early morning has a distinctively different sound from its sound at noon and at dusk. The effect of music can be communicated by close approximates, by putting the reader into the mood for its genuine sound and feeling.

A good many of this writer's stories are about musicians. The job of soaking the reader in the sound is accomplished by images aimed like little solos at both the reader's eye and ear, but concentrating on the ear. Here are the opening and the first few lines of a story about the loneliness of the profession, the personal half-bitter, half-moody exploration of the self concentrated in a young man who has played all night and needs to find something to approximate his love for what he does on the stand.

Down the street in this edge of spring every leaf seemed its greenest, and the sky held the moon like a white dime on fire, looking through the sharp edges of the poplar boughs. It was the time before dawn, milky and serene, and a little used up as though all the music that had been played along the street—Rush Street, Chicago—still echoed far back in the inner ear, making an undertone for the thought and the spirit. The loud music and the soft, the bad music and the good—all of it pulsed softly now in some dim background, worked its way between the weary bones.

And a little later:

Rennie walked on, listening to the hollow but wonderfully alive sounds of his own heels on the paving—this time of morning the sound was like it was at no other time, it seemed to hold the feeling of the city in its beat. There was an afterbeat to each step, too, echoing down the surfaces of the buildings, charming the ear with its lost, dark and rhythmic bounce.

And still later, when in the first flush of morning Rennie is playing horn while a girl sings:

She said, "I know the words now," and he set the mouthpiece to his lips again. As he did so, he felt everything he was—his inmost being, the quiet center—pour itself through the trumpet. And she began to sing; her voice like a bird's, artless, and singing for the joy in the act. And as clear as a stream coming down through pines on a warm morning, with everything bright-polished and steady and also everlasting.

But a story needn't be about music or the people who make it to use the full range of sound in order to get over its complete message. Fitzgerald's "the Tap, K'Tap of ping-pong balls" sums up a lot better than "He could hear them playing ping pong" might do, and "the ruf-

fling of a hen with iron wing-feathers” applied to another story of mine, plays on the reader’s imagination more sufficiently than a great deal of automotive-engine-sound description could do.

Dialogue, too, is always a form of description. The use of qualifying adverbs such as “He said sternly” is necessary once in a while, but too many adverbs create a curly effect like poodles running around the page. There is a quality of delivery that can be picked up quickly and given the reader, which will tell the reader how anything is being said—if you’re introducing a person whose voice is low and clipped, the reader will know from this that “I’m terribly sorry” came out that way, and you don’t have to add that it was clipped and low. Voices tell an enormous amount about the people who have them, so that a voice full of sandpaper is going to speak in an entirely different manner from one that’s as rich as old Burgundy. Skip the qualifiers whenever possible—lay down the manner of speaking and let the spoken words be delivered from then on with that in mind.

In straight first-person narrative—“Call me Ishmael”—the voice is going to be implicit all through the story, even though it’s never described. This is where your ear comes in on all frequencies. Following are the first two paragraphs of a recent story written specifically for a particular magazine, *Rod Serling’s Twilight Zone*. It’s a fantasy, but I wanted my narrator, Jeb Malifee, to be a down-to-earth but imaginative man, both self-sufficient and a little ingrown, like so many of the natives I admire in Maine, and the task was to make him sound like what he is without saying what he looked like or going out of character.

She was a quiet woman, the best kind. Up around the rocks nobody much goes in after Labor Day. But there she was, here into October, stroking in as if the water wasn’t fit to chill a lobster. Naked, far as I could see, but for what looked like a shell necklace. Clean arms, with the shine of silver along them in the twilight and her legs scissoring nice and smooth, and no strain to it at all. A wonderful swimmer. Quiet, as I said.

Sun was just going out of sight out at Bradford Point, hanging behind the old lighthouse and making it look like a black candle in the middle of the afterglow. It’s a time when I always like to be by myself on shore. The summer people—the “straphangers” we call them, and you can figure out why—are gone and the pines and the rocks just sort of turn into themselves again. The boards of the docks look bleaker and quieter. The ring of green weed around the dock pilings gets a gentle, lost light in the evening. Molly’s Fish House down the line gets its slabby contented look back again. It seems to be about to fall into the sea but it never does. The smell of the water is stronger and like iodine around a scratch. Some places on the island you can stand still and hear a moose drinking from one of the creeks. It’s a near-to-wintering time when the sun feels better than it will again all year.

Eye, ear, *and* nose are working with the reader there, but the ear is most concerned because the reader is listening to Jeb and judging him while he tells the story, accepting his laconic but pointed style of reminiscence. And receiving from him a series of impressions which are more believable and effective than they'd be if the story were told outside him in the third person.

Sound penetrates every good story and gives it resonance and extra echoes. The "kreef kreden kreden" of crickets—a phrase used by Robert Nathan—is straight onomatopoeia, which is the Greek word for the formation of words in imitation of natural sounds, such as *crack*, *splash*, and *bow-wow* and the "brek-a-kek-kek, co-ax, co-ax" of Aristophanes' froggy friends.

The First Experiment

Before you go on reading, step into a room where people are talking and, trying to take as little part in the conversation as you can, listen. Listen to the murmur and hesitation that precede a sentence. Hear how sentences themselves are rarely complete and how a surge of silence between words says as much as the words do. Filter out all the extraneous sounds—television and similar clatter—and try to pick out which words you'd use to sum up the gist of what is being said.

Now stand outdoors and listen to the sounds of a city, trying to separate the far-off noises from those near at hand—describing them to yourself either in onomatopoeia or approximates. "The prowling cat wail of a siren," "the wind's fingers fumbling poplar leaves," "the yoo-hoo of a mother calling children," "the slish-slish of slow traffic."

Go to the place where you write and while everything is fresh, put down in metaphor and simile, without pausing and straining for effect, everything you can of sight impressions and sound remembrance. How the talkers looked as they spoke and what stands out in your mind about them. Don't do complete descriptions. Try to catch them on the wing in impressions. Do the same with the sounds. [If you don't live in a city, use the country sounds you just heard.] Then sum up the talkers' dialogue in five or six pertinent sentences.

Let all that cool and look at it from time to time.

Thinking how you could say it better.

Nose

While we're talking about sensory stimulation in the story, let's consider the nose.

Television and movies haven't as yet, in this sense at any rate, really

begun to smell on a wide and fully accepted scale. Back in the '60s, Mike Todd, trifling with the olfactory organs of potential millions, introduced a device called Smell-o-Vision; how it worked this writer has no idea, but his reference sources are unimpeachable and he can only say that he is glad it died. And in *Brave New World* Aldous Huxley projects a nauseating device which rejoices in the name of "The Feelies" and gives the benighted but delighted slaves of tomorrow substitutes for intimate human touch. Also, a good many science fiction storytellers and novelists—see Ray Bradbury's "The Veldt"—have taken for granted the future use of a complete sensual wraparound environment.

Meantime the marvelous gift of the human nose is there for you to play upon in short stories.

Three samples:

There was a fragrance of honeysuckle along the fence and of early apples fallen in the small and unattended orchard just behind the brick Colonial house that had been built between 1825 and 1830.

The store in which the Justice of the Peace's court was sitting smelled of cheese.

Cautiously, as one might test the edge of a cliff before crawling outward to an eagle's nest, I smelled the air. And again the feeling of wonder and strangeness filled me, for the air was different.

Those are very different uses of the sense of smell to evoke reader response. The first is from John Bell Clayton's story "Sunday Ice Cream," the next is the opening line of Faulkner's "Barn Burning," and the last is from my "Night Watch." Each is fitted to its special time and place and is meant to place the reader directly inside the scene, so that he or she not only sees and hears with the protagonists but exercises still a third sense to inhale the essence of the scene and enrich understanding. The reader's nostrils work as the writer's do, and when the reader's memory is touched by familiar odors—or unfamiliar ones carefully described—the reader becomes a physical participant in the story.

Clayton wanted that honeysuckle—a particularly southern scene, perfect for the mood of his story—and those early fallen apples with their slight tinge of rottenness to summon up a slow-moving Sunday in a specific section of Virginia. Faulkner wanted that general-store cheese to fill your nostrils as it fills those of the always hungry boy, Sarty Snopes, whose father is on trial for malicious arson. I wanted the beckoning, olive-laden smell of the shore to drift through the sweep port of a Roman galley and to quicken the nostrils of a rower who was resting on his oar after a storm.

Examples

There are, of course, a thousand ways to use smells in your story, and along with them goes, once more, the cautionary reminder that as in the case of simile, metaphor, and sound evocation, enough is far better than a feast—a story is not a guided tour through a fragrance factory, and the fragrances are not there to dominate but to help create the feeling of a true and whole experience.

But they are there for you to *use*. To use with an appeal to primitive alertness: “the smoky tang of flint.” To use with more sophisticated nostrils: “the warm delicate hothouse puff of Chanel Number Five.” To use as a reaction to raw nature: “For three seconds after the lightning, the world was pure ozone.” And to use as ideal evocation of a full experience in seven words, as when Huckleberry Finn tells us: “It felt late. It even *smelt* late.”

Reading a story about a grocery, a barbershop, or a tree in summer without a few illuminating words about the smell of fresh produce, the heady sharpness of bay rum, or the living smell of leaf sap is like having an important sense arbitrarily blocked off by the author.

Try never to write as though both you and the reader shared a bad cold. Think of your story as appealing to the hunting dog in everybody.

Taste

The sense of taste is connected to those of sight, sound, and smell by tiny invisible conduits which work together to create a single immediate effect—of enjoyment or revulsion or mere neutral acceptance.

“It was good” is one plain manner of describing a meal your story character has just eaten. “It was bad” is another.

And these may be serviceable and adequate methods of telling the reader what went on in somebody’s mouth. If your natural storytelling style is flat and direct, there’s no need to labor to describe the effects of grits and gravy on a Yankee or Midwest pot roast on a Southerner used to Brunswick stew.

But if you believe in and are able to think of the kind of color that lights up the demanding framework of a story, you may want a few analogies to strengthen “good” and “bad.” Sinclair Lewis, in *Main Street* and numerous other books, seldom fails to produce a bright little series of snapshots underlining either the awfulness or the splendor of the cuisine. Hemingway is often as rhapsodic over varied Spanish dishes as his style will allow. Rex Stout’s Archie, with his favorite reports on the preparation and intake of the food from Nero Wolfe’s kitchen, lends firm authenticity to Wolfe’s reputation as a gourmet. Certain stories revolve around food—Paul Gallico’s “The Secret Ingredient” is one—

and when they do, the reader usually salivates.

M.F.K. Fisher, as well as being a masterly storyteller, is a great writer about food, and her work is worth relishing not only for its excellence in other respects but for its dazzling insight into gastronomic mysteries. Writers who love food, respect it, and believe it to be a primary mover and shaker of civilization are likely to vivify the human palate in their fiction.

You are not, of course, composing a cookbook when you write a short story. A dash of salt and Tabasco—the communicated realization that what your story people eat and their reactions to what is served sometimes have direct bearing on who they are and what they are—is often enough. When Joe Christmas, the running, haunted, angry, displaced no-man of Faulkner's *Light in August*, eats cold corn bread, we know how it tastes to him. We can taste it with him. The delectable goose in "A Christmas Carol" is an elevated piece of goosehood that takes central position and soaks the revelry of the Cratchits in its juices. Your story may skip the acts of eating, tasting, entirely—it may have completely other aims—but if these happen in it, particularize; let the reader know how they sat on the tongue.

Touch

The sense of touch is another glorious gift to humanity and a constant companion of the alert writer of stories. Textures animate our lives much more than we have the ability to notice and constantly record. They consist of much more than mere harshness and softness—all gradations of tactile experience are encountered in the course of a day and night, and nerve endings are steadily caressed or assaulted by both simple and extremely complex forces. A little of this entering a story by suggestion can be splendid; too much of it can spill over into a mere sensory list of pleasure or displeasure. Like the other sensory attributes of men and women and children and animals and all of nature, when touch is kept in balance in a story, the reader recognizes it and nods in recognition; when it's insisted upon to the detriment of spirit, the story slips into self-indulgence—which is one reason why pornography for its own sake is so boring.

Waking with rough blankets around your chin and touching the floor with your bare feet while you feel an autumn sun warm them and walking over to put your hands on a cool oak windowsill constitutes a series of light enjoyable shocks which can be transferred to a short story with wholeness and great reader pleasure. Relaying the feeling of salt wind as it fills your pores, the elegant substance of new-cut wood, the

almost murmurous life of human hair, the yielding toughness of the dirt in a freshly plowed field, and a hundred other experiences of the receptive and appreciating body can be done without neglect of any other story element—in balance, so that it feels right to you and to the reader and so that, by the use of artifice, you have passed along more “naturalness” than so-called naturalism would ever achieve.

As for sex, in the short story the sense of touch if kept in balance is an essential part of it—as long as it doesn’t slop over into silly excess. Used sparingly, it underlines the warmth between people, between people and animals, people and seemingly inanimate objects. Instead of running on with heated descriptions of lovemaking—which are impossible to convey without honest passion running beneath them—simple suggestions are always more effective.

In Willa Cather’s *A Lady Lost* there’s no word that could offend a Puritan of the stripe of Cotton Mather. But there is one of the most effectively done scenes of adultery in literature, which tells us forever that Marian Forrester is an intensely desirable woman in the physical sense, as well as helping us to sympathize with her and dislike her despoilers. As in all writing, in the short story when sex is clinically handled—even in a time when anything can be said—the act of love becomes dispassionate and cold. But if it’s expressed in an electric touch, shared laughter, the impress of a head on a pillow, it turns into story magic.

The Second Experiment

Make a list of smells that start your thoughts going backward to moving or outstanding times in your life. Hay, horses, new-cut clover. Pencil shavings and black ink in a schoolroom. Blackboard eraser dust. Sweeping compound. Milky and soupy smells in a cafeteria. Grain and feed smells. Smoke of leaf fires. Crisply ironed handkerchiefs. Old leather and faintly musty paper. Anything that reels in from the past your good or bad experiences. Brassy cartridges on a firing range. Raw pink puppy smells. The swarming sharpness of ether.

Linger on these until each brings up a living image. See if any of the images fit into the story you’ve been thinking toward. If they don’t, keep on smelling backward and try to find a few that do.

Remember how something you really liked tasted the first time. Rhubarb pie, chocolate, a tomato off the vine, an egg cream at Schrafft’s, cider sharp from a barrel, a girl’s astonishingly peppermint-flavored lipstick, a man’s earlobe. And how something you hated actually tasted. Castor oil, green quince, creamed carrots [if you like creamed carrots, shift this to the good side], and whatever else is taste-

bud anathema to you. Work at remembering what happened around you while you were reveling in the good and recoiling from the bad. Find images for this—faces of people, backgrounds of places, shapes of a room or a landscape. Again, try to fit these, without forcing, into the story you're leaning toward.

Put your hand, palm flat, on a concrete surface. An automobile fender. A human cheek. A chair, a carpet, the bricks of a fireplace. An egg. A rough, scarred board, a smooth-planed one, a stone in a wall, the trunk of a tree. Whatever you touch, keep your eyes shut and let words form describing it quickly and rightly to anyone. Then go write them while they're new and clean, without thinking in "literary" terms at all but just trying for your own sort of accuracy.

After you've let your lists simmer awhile, think how you could improve them without borrowing from any other source or getting the least shade fancy.