

Images from Nouns and Verbs in Prose

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Animals Died at Our House, and Other Things that Burn or Wear Away

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The house he built and the animals that died there

We moved to Nye County, Nevada, when I was six years old. My stepfather built our house himself on the edge of BLM, on the rim of a dry lake bed surrounded by mountains, with a well and a basement. We had to heat our bathwater on the stove, shake the sheets for centipedes, check under the table for snakes, stamp our feet in the basement for scorpions. My stepfather's friend Gordon, who lived with us for a time in the basement, caught a tarantula in a jar. Animals often found a way to die at our house. Ground squirrels drowned in the horses' water barrel. Mice died in the attic. Feral dog packs prowled the desert and littered our yard with bones. Once, a snake crawled into the swamp cooler and decorated our walls with snake and half-dissolved bird. Sometimes I came home from school to a decapitated chicken hanging feet first from the shed.

Note: BLM: Bureau of Land Management area: land surrounding the Air Force's Nellis Test and Training Range where in the mid 20th century atomic bombs were exploded, releasing radiation into the atmosphere.

Images that Show Sound

Robert Herrick (1591-1674)

Upon Julia's Clothes

Whenas in silks my Julia goes,
Then, then, methinks, how sweetly flows
That liquefaction of her clothes.

Next, when I cast mine eyes, and see
That brave vibration, each way free,
O, how that glittering taketh me!

Images of Setting (Place, both Physical and Psychological)
from *The Country Between Us*

Carolyn Forché (1950-)

WHAT YOU HAVE HEARD is true. I was in his house. His wife carried a tray of coffee and sugar. His daughter filed her nails, his son went out for the night. There were daily papers, pet dogs, a pistol on the cushion beside him. The moon swung bare on its black cord over the house. On the television was a cop show. It was in English. Broken bottles were embedded in the walls around the house to scoop the kneecaps from a man's legs or cut his hands to lace. On the windows there were gratings like those in liquor stores. We had dinner, rack of lamb, good wine, a gold bell was on the table for calling the maid. The maid brought green mangoes, salt, a type of bread. I was asked how I enjoyed the country. There was a brief commercial in Spanish. His wife took everything away. There was some talk then of how difficult it had become to govern. The parrot said hello on the terrace. The colonel told it to shut up, and pushed himself from the table. My friend said to me with his eyes: say nothing. The colonel returned with a sack used to bring groceries home. He spilled many human ears on the table. They were like dried peach halves. There is no other way to say this. He took one of them in his hands, shook it in our faces, dropped it into a water glass. It came alive there. I am tired of fooling around he said. As for the rights of anyone, tell your people they can go fuck themselves. He swept the ears to the floor with his arm and held the last of his wine in the air. Something for your poetry, no? he said. Some of the ears on the floor caught this scrap of his voice. Some of the ears on the floor were pressed to the ground.

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Crafting Images: Writing in Rooms

A sense experience, for example, a scent, a specific color, sound, texture or taste, can spark an emotional response, a memory or partial memory, an insight, thought, knowledge, relearning and other expansions of perception of yourself and others. Experiment with this writing prompt to explore connections between sense experience, emotion and thought.

Write from three rooms.

1. The first room is **the senses**, either one or more. When you choose more than one sense experience, it is useful to decide which sense is dominant.
2. The second room is **the emotion**, either one or more. Again decide which one is dominant. Will it be dominant from beginning to end or will a second emotion gain importance to become dominant by the end?
3. The third room is **the thinking**. This might include memory, a sudden insight, seeing or relearning something/someone in a new way or a new context, seeing new connections and associations.

Steps: Write about the same thing from each room.

1. Describe or record the sense experience. Use detail through precise nouns and active verbs.
2. Describe the emotion(s) arising from the sense experience. Again used detail through precise nouns and active verbs.
3. Express the thinking, either in the present or remembered, arising from the sense experience.

To add complexity:

4. Write again, combining sense experience with either emotion or thought.
5. Write again combining all three.

When first using this exercise, it is helpful to write separately from each room to build structural skill and craft techniques for recollection/remembering. Using **concrete nouns and active verbs** will create vivid details that help you build the world of your story, memoir, poem, dramatic or creative non-fiction scene.

The sensory experience is the core of image.

“How shall I describe it—a door opens, a door shuts. In between you have had a glimpse: a garden, a person, a rainstorm, a dragonfly, a heart, a city. . . . So a poem takes place.”

--Sylvia Plath, cited in Marianne Boruch, “Poetry’s Old Air”

“ . . . image and its power, the power of the partial, the unfinished that is human.”

--Marianne Boruch, “Poetry’s Old Air”