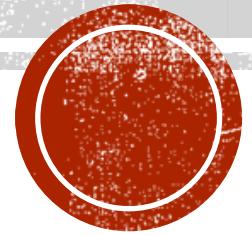


UNEXPECTED IMAGERY IN POETRY

“No ideas but in things”—Make those things sing





THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN POETRY THAT IS GREAT OR 'MEH'?

Often, it's in the details!

Learn today about crafting unexpected
imagery to surprise and engage readers,
editors and publishers.

But first, some background.....



WHAT IS IMAGERY

Truly powerful poems are ones that either transport us to new places or make us see ordinary things in a new way.

If you want to write poems that are engaging and lively, you should start with learning how to craft an image and to develop your skills of description.

It's no accident that this is the skill often taught first in poetry workshops—readers want to experience something fresh.



Not only is imagery everywhere in our lives, it is a wonderful way to start writing poetry: you can focus on something concrete that you can describe, rather than jumping right into the more complicated work of writing about emotions or ideas.

Future practice: Here's an easy way in. Start by writing about what's on your desk, or a tree outside your window, or your father's beard or your mother's scent.



Show Don't Tell

In a poem one can show the sound of the neighbor's cough, or the feel of the cotton of a lover's shirt against the speaker's face, or the smell of snow in a Vermont town in winter. Focusing on the senses gives the reader a deeper sense without being lectured as to the meaning. Trust your reader.

Future practice: List all senses that are heightened during a particular experience—perhaps the last time you were in water—describe taste, touch, smell, sight, and sound.





FOUR PART EXERCISE

1. Sit in a public space for at least 30 minutes.
2. Try to observe, using all five senses, what is happening around you. Record, in list form and in as much detail as possible, at least 20 different images that catch your attention.
3. Then, spending at least 30 minutes on your own in a quiet space, go inward. Think of strong sensory memories and try to capture—again in list form, and without worrying about providing explanatory context for a reader—those memories in language, conveying the strongest sensory details.
4. Weave together the new images with the memories—is there a poem there?



WILLIAM STAFFORD'S DAILY POETRY PROMPT

- Write down 10 images you saw in the last 24 hours
- Open a poetry book at random—write down one line
- Use the line you chose as either the first line, or write a response to it, or use some of the words in it—then use all 10 images to craft your poem.



THE 7 KINDS OF IMAGERY

Poets create imagery by using figures of speech like simile (a direct comparison between two things using like or as);

metaphor (comparison between two unrelated things that share common characteristics: the house was a mirror);

personification (giving human attributes to nonhuman things);

and onomatopoeia (a word that mimics the natural sound of a thing).



VISUAL IMAGERY

In this form of poetic imagery, the poet appeals to the reader's sense of sight by describing something the speaker or narrator of the poem sees. It may include colors, brightness, shapes, sizes, and patterns.

Kaveh Akbar Against Dying

at twenty-four my liver was
already covered in **fatty**
rot my mother filled a **tiny**
coffin with **picture frames**
I spent the year drinking
from **test tubes** weeping
wherever I went somehow
it happened wellness crept
into me **like a roach nibbling**
through an eardrum



AUDITORY IMAGERY

- This form of poetic imagery appeals to the reader's sense of hearing or sound. It may include music and other pleasant sounds, harsh noises, or silence. In addition to describing a sound, the poet might also use a sound device like onomatopoeia, or words that imitate sounds. So much alliteration and assonance here!

.chisaraokwu. The Barely Missed Girls

The ash-skinned men with rifles longer than their legs
Click their tongues & haggle over prospects of tender

Breasts beneath their palms. Their **bellies — cinched &
Tucked & belted — burst** with mama's jollof. Tongues

Loosened with palm wine beg for girl-wives to dine &
Sleep under. A **cough masks a prayer from between**

Mama's teeth. Two misplaced sniffs & they
Might've smelled our fear in the shadows.



GUSTATORY IMAGERY

- In this form of poetic imagery, the poet appeals to the reader's sense of taste by describing something the speaker or narrator of the poem tastes. It may include sweetness, sourness, saltiness, savoriness, or spiciness.

Kim Adonnizio First Kiss

her mouth gone slack and her eyes turned vague and filmy,
as though behind them **the milk was rising up to fill**
her whole head, that would loll on the small
white stalk of her neck



TACTILE IMAGERY

In this form of poetic imagery, the poet appeals to the reader's sense of touch by describing something the speaker of the poem feels on their body. It may include the feel of temperatures, textures, and other physical sensations.

Ocean Vuong On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous

That this amber light
whittled down by another war
is all that pins my hand

to your chest.



**You, drowning
between my arms —**
stay.

**You, pushing your body
into the river**
only to be left
with yourself —
stay.



OLFACTORY IMAGERY

In this form of poetic imagery, the poet appeals to the reader's sense of smell by describing something the speaker of the poem inhales. It may include pleasant fragrances or off-putting odors.

Ruth Awad-The Years of Water and Light

We fed wild dogs **overripe apples and herring**.

My hands shine with hunger. Her hair hung in willow boughs,
mine in **wild onion**. **I reel the small fish** of time.



KINESTHETIC IMAGERY

In this form of poetic imagery, the poet appeals to the reader's sense of motion. It may include the sensation of speeding along in a vehicle, a slow sauntering, or a sudden jolt when stopping, and it may apply to the movement of the poem's speaker/narrator or objects around them.

Dana Levin Above the Neck (poem follows)



Little winks from the tips of silvered tools

–

you sat in stars.

Garaged dark.

And a skein of bandages on a little stool.

Wrapped you up, my mental pupa –

On a metal folding chair.

And all around you synapses

pop and flare –

I'd been **taking the walk** called

Head Bobbing on a Font of Blood –

I couldn't believe I had legs

as the **ditch streamed by** –

spider-egged in a web of squares: chair,
house, mind . . .

Iron-press of your mummy-suit.

Head free

**to swivel and churn, if
you could**

break your neck

and be alive, head a lit
house

sweeping its beam

through the constructed
real, I

tied you up –

inside my mind –

where you're **sweating now,**
fisting under the bands –

Salt in your eye, **can't lift a
finger.**

What use had I for hands.



ORGANIC IMAGERY

In this form of poetic imagery, the poet communicates internal sensations such as fatigue, hunger, and thirst as well as emotions such as fear, love, and despair.

Robert Frost Birches

So was I once myself a swinger of birches.

And so I dream of going back to be.

It's when I'm weary of considerations,

And **life is too much like a pathless wood**





TRACE THE IMAGES

Choose one of your favorite poems and circle the images—

How do the images relate to each other? Is it an image carried multiple ways throughout the poem? Or a series of seemingly disjointed images? How does this translate into the poem's meaning—does it align with the poem's topic? Does it support the voice/style of the poem?



SYLVIA PLATH YOU'RE

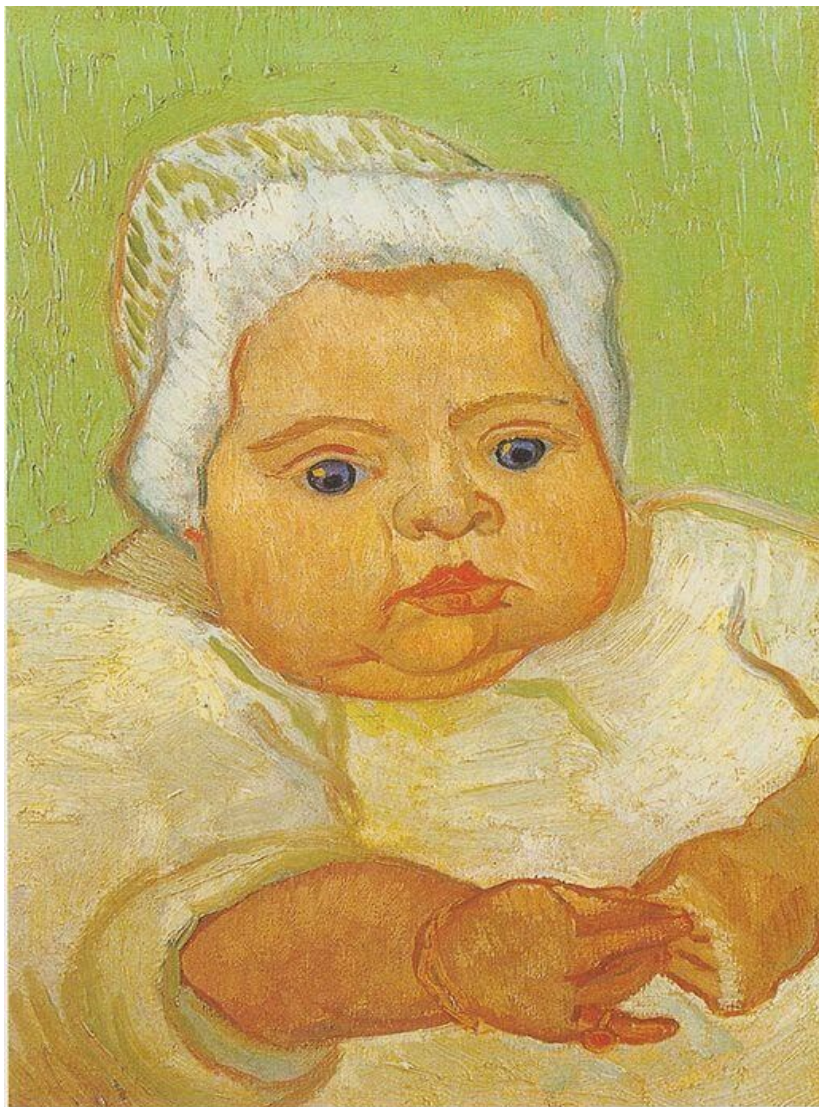
Clown-like, happiest on your hands,
Feet to the stars, and moon-skulled,
Gilled like a fish. A common-sense

Thumbs-down on the **dodo's mode.**
Wrapped up in yourself **like a spool,**
Trawling your dark **as owls do.**
Mute as a turnip from the Fourth

Of July to All Fools' Day,
O high-riser, **my little loaf.**

Vague as fog and looked for like mail.
Farther off **than Australia.**
Bent-backed Atlas, our traveled prawn.
Snug as a bud and at home
Like a sprat in a pickle jug.
A creel of eels, all ripples.
Jumpy as a Mexican bean.
Right, like a well-done sum.
A clean slate, with your own face on.





ANOTHER PASTORAL BY J.P. GLASSER

What, this shit again? Another long plunge down
the **honeysuckle's throat**, another **big-eared bat**
caught in the **vestibule**, plastered to the **pleated drapes**
and shooed to freedom with the **straw-bare broom**?
Another **electric arc of bluebird flight**, more flood, more
drought, more casts of doily light on the forest floor,
more cicada wings chaffing toward tinder and flint,
and fire, always more fire? Again the **river gnaws**
at the cutbank, produces a **curtain of lovegrass roots**, again
the **early-born calf's tail** freezes to the earth, and again
we take the **hacksaw** to it so she might live. Again the **hawk**
snatch-lands and **pins the rat snake** to the **fence's barbs**
and eats that way, in peace, without having to suffer
its coiled writhing, again and again. Tell me, why not?
Tell me our species matters more, tell me that, and I,
I will crawl back, hold your face to the soil, and show you
what we're fighting for.



SOME MORE EXERCISES

1. Describe a place using a repeated phrase as a refrain (such as “there are birds here”). Start each stanza with it. Use each stanza to invoke and evoke all the senses aroused by the subject in the refrain.
2. Describe someone using only non-human metaphors (similar to Plath’s approach in “You’re”).
3. Describe a landscape you know well in a long string of images, literal or figurative, and try to make some of them rhyme.
4. Describe one very small physical part of a landscape—a tidal pool, rather than a whole ocean or beach—in great physical detail. Try to imbue the small object, through as many senses as possible, with the feeling of the whole locale.



WHAT ABOUT THE UNEXPECTED?

We all have a tendency to reach for those first-thought comparisons. We fall back on the phrases we know or the phrases that make natural sense. He's sleeping with the fishes. They buried the hatchet. Or this: "You're my knight in shining armor."

Too often our comparisons end up halfhearted, cliché, and less than effective. Consider "ruby red lips." "Red" provides no more information than "ruby," and proves itself useless, trite and does nothing to make the poem unique.

What are some more clichés or trite images people (including us) use in our poems? Blue sky, white clouds, summer rain, fall leaves.....how can you turn these on their heads?



WHAT IS THE SOLUTION TO STAGNANT IMAGERY?

Hunt for connection that are **not obvious**. How is the sun like a shoe? How is the sky like a fish?

Connecting your ideas to entirely unrelated images that both spark a similar emotion will provide you with striking imagery, showing the same feeling from two different angles.



Metaphors correlate, and your job as a poet is to shepherd people to connecting ideas they thought were totally disparate. Strong imagery gives words to feelings we thought inexpressible.

“I could not know my mother would die young.
The tree is a galleon, its sails coppered by light,
I stand here watching, older now than she ever was.
I raked leaves into rooms and houses as a girl.”
Pantoum from the Window of the Room Where I Write by
Alison Townsend

Don't fall into the trap of comparing anything to something it closely resembles. Delve deeper and dare to describe more fully and uniquely.



SOME PRACTICE

How can your details and images replace exposition and do the heavy lifting?

How can you show instead of tell?

Let's look at two more great examples.



A LOOK AT TWO POEMS

Jack Gilbert Finding Something

I say **moon is horses** in the **tempered dark**,
because **horse is the closest** I can get to it.
I sit on the **terrace of this worn villa the king's**
telegrapher built on the mountain that looks down
on a **blue sea** and the **small white ferry**
that crosses slowly to the **next island** each noon.
Michiko is dying in the **house behind me**,
the **long windows** open so I can hear
the **faint sound** she will make when she wants
watermelon to suck on or so I can take her
to a **bucket** in the corner of the **high-ceilinged room**
which is the best we can do for a **chamber pot**.



She will lean against my **leg** as she sits
so as not to fall over in her weakness.
How strange and fine to get so near to it.
The **arches of her feet are like voices**
of children calling in the grove of lemon trees,
where my heart is as helpless as crushed birds.



RUTH AWAD MY FATHER DREAMS OF A NEW COUNTRY

America, I see through your **glass—**
I **stretch my hand and my fingerprints**
are everywhere. **Like leaves the gust blows in.**

I don't have **money to feed your fountains**
or enough water that it's never a wish,

but America, I can't stop **drinking you in.**
Your **trains, their freight like hours,**
like the vowels cut from my name.

When will you **learn my name?**

I'm running to you but I can't get there
fast enough. I'm **strung up on gridirons**
and city lights. Aren't my arms tired of reaching.

Isn't my back tired of carrying this night around.
Be good to me **like a summer rain, I swear I'm burning.**



HOW TO GENERATE UNEXPECTED IMAGERY—AN ACTIVITY

List of nouns

- House
- Fire
- Cat
- Tree
- Fish
- Sea
- Chair
- Feet
- Cigarette
- Building

List of adjectives

- Trembling
- Tiger-striped
- Crestfallen
- Crumpled
- Abrupt
- Variegated
- Weary
- Harmonious
- Lucky
- Eager



MAKE YOUR OWN LIST AND MIX AND MATCH

When it comes time to describe the nouns of your poem, how can your adjectives offer something new to the reader?

From my poem, Certainties:

I am watching my daughter **grow**, her **hair darkening to honey**,
her feet like blue canoes swimming the dark currents of our apartment floor.

From my poem, Biography:

Even when I **remember the winter light painting the rooms blue and gold as church**, the air is thick with the breath of your swamps, the clouds carry **their awkward luggage, thunder and choke, rifting puddles born from the strip mall shoppers' tears.**



PRACTICE

Write a poem with no adjectives, only nouns.

As a **girl**, I would dream about the **moon**, where it
stood in the **sky**,
and I wouldn't feel alone the **nights** my **parents**
hosted their **parties**,
our **house** echoing with the **laughter of strangers**.



Go back and revise. Examine each noun—how can you make each one a zinger? What details can you add to make the meaning fresh and surprising?

As a girl, I would dream about the **Full Cold Moon**, **it's tender face**,
it's chewing gum breath

like the Doublemint kiss I was waiting to come.

I would watch for it to **prick my room with light like a cigarette end**, feeling less alone when my parents hosted **holiday parties**, our house echoing with the laughter of strangers, **of politics, my door locked against the tipsy men in search of the toilet.**



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