From "Escaping into the Open: The Art of Writing True" by Elizabeth Berg

To get at emotion, both in yourself and in your writing, you have to start with feelings. Some of our feelings originate mysteriously and reside in us in the same way; but many more come overtly and directly from that most wonderful (and portable) of gifts—our senses. The more we utilize them, the more attention we pay to the excellent information they provide us, the richer our writing can be.

Seeing

It is not enough to give a passing glance to something if you want to really see it. Whether you are talking about the

colors of an island sunset or the grime in a down-and-outer's flophouse bathroom, you have to look deeply. You have to give yourself enough time to transcend the impulse we usually have of naming or classifying something—thereby often dismissing it. To really see something is to let yourself move beyond the narrow place of words and into a 360-degree kind of noticing, an act which, if done correctly, temporarily takes up all of a person, and utilizes much more than the eyes—utilizes, for example, the heart and the soul.

Seeing deeply requires a kind of telescoping vision: looking at the surface of something and then beyond that, and then beyond that. Oftentimes this requires only that you let your eyes look longer than they might ordinarily. Other times it means you look not only at but into, or that you move something aside in order to look behind, or under, or through.

One way to describe things that you see in an interesting way is to be aware of what something reminds you of. Some of the most charming and effective descriptions I've read are those that let me see a familiar thing newly. This kind of prose is akin to poetry; it utilizes the power of metaphor. For example, I remember my then-three-year-old daughter seeing snow that had been dirtied by trucks spewing out tan-colored sand. She said, "The snow looks like crumb cake," and she was exactly right. But it took her telling me that to see it. You want to solicit in your readers that same pleasant rush of recognition, that satisfying surprise of finding out something they knew but didn't know they knew.

When you're looking at something, be aware of substructure—look not only at a face, but the bones beneath it. Notice subtleties and gradations in the color and form of

everything, and focus especially on the details of what you see. Those details tell the real story, and make you see things in the most concrete way. Consider, for example, poet and gardening enthusiast Celia Thaxter's 1894 description of a poppy:

> It is held upright upon a straight and polished stem, its petals curving upward and outward into the cup of light, pure gold with a lustrous satin sheen; a rich orange is painted on the gold, drawn in infinitely fine lines to a point in the center of the edge of each petal, so that the effect is that of a diamond of flame in a cup of gold.

After reading that description, who could ever look at a poppy in the same way? This author not only tells us what she sees, she makes us see it, too. And this is a gift that gives in two directions: The reader is enriched by being able to see something that he may not have seen before; and the writer is enriched because of the connection she makes.

Whether you're writing fiction or nonfiction, you can greatly help define a character by sharing not only what he says and does, but also how he looks. Again, details matter. Don't tell the reader that someone is old; show it by describing the dime-size age spots, the sag of the cheeks, the see-through hair, the spiderlike spread of veins at the back of the knees. Are nylons falling down? Are belts too big? Are there greasy thumbprints on the lenses of the bifocals? Is the posture stooped or stubbornly erect? Is there a periodic squeal from a hearing aid? What does he eat for breakfast? How does she speak on the phone? Do medication bottles rattle in his front pocket? Does she keep nitroglycerin in a silver monogrammed case?

You can also define your characters by showing how *they* see; you can in that way differentiate between levels of sensitivity. I know a woman who said she couldn't stand to be with her boyfriend anymore when he found utterly uninspiring a display of artwork that moved her to tears. How would you write *that* scene?

Hearing

When you want to listen to any sound, be it a human voice or the buzz of a bee, you must afford it respectful attention. You have to be fully present and not distracted by what you *think* about what you're hearing. To do that, you need to move beyond your ears; to hear things not only in your head, but also in your center. That is to say, not only hear sound, *feel* it.

When you are listening to language, don't attend only to the meaning of the words being spoken. Hear how those words are said, feel the emotions behind them, see the gestures—both broad and minute—that accompany them. Hear, too, the absence of sound: when and where it occurs, what that implies. Notice how silence can be more powerful than words, how it can communicate a wealth of emotion, both positive and negative.

Careful listening without pen in hand is the first step in learning to write believable dialogue. Pay attention to the way people really talk. Notice everything. What are the different speeds and rhythms and levels of volume that you hear in speech? Is the phrasing so lyrical as to be musical

or so flat as to be a monotone? What varieties are there in accents? How can someone's attitude toward life in general be conveyed by what he says in a few sentences, and how he says it? What kind of breathing occurs between sentences? How and why do people stutter and stammer, hem and haw? What is the difference between a name being said as a caress versus a reprimand?

A good description of ambient sound can help readers visualize a place, thus making them better able to put themselves into the scene you're creating. If, for example, you were writing a scene that took place in an airport, what sounds would make it seem more real? How about a hair salon? A funeral parlor? A kitchen? A bar?

Sound can fine-tune the description of a place, too. Consider what you might hear at 7:30 in the evening at these three places, all of them restaurants: a four-star hotel dining room, a truck stop, a Dairy Queen on a hot summer night.

The mood of a scene, too, can be created or greatly enhanced by sound. What do these things suggest: a grandfather clock ticking; a dog howling; the keys of a computer clacking; thunder booming; birds singing; a train whistle fading away; the rattle of a window in winter wind; one finger tapping on a tabletop; a cigarette being ground out in a metal ashtray; a child softly singing; a woman sobbing; a radio station being changed, then changed again, then changed again; a door slamming versus a door being slowly creaked open.

Consider, too, the myriad reactions we have to sound. What strong feelings can be called up by what we hear? Nostalgia? Fear? Loss? Lust? Sadness? Joy? Bravado?

Tasting

One of the reasons babies put everything in their mouths is that they haven't yet learned it's a socially unacceptable way to find out about something. But you can understand the inclination: The tongue is a very earnest and talented explorer. You can find out a lot from putting various things in your mouth, be it a No. 2 pencil, a fireball piece of candy, or your lover's earlobe. Pay attention. When you taste something, go beyond a single sensation: Try to be aware of the many components present, which we limit by describing with only one word.

The sensation of taste can quite successfully transmigrate. "Sweet," for example, can describe not only a Godiva chocolate, but also a certain kind of kiss or an old, familiar movement—or moment. "Sour" can apply to a relationship gone wrong or an unpleasant disposition.

There is a great deal of pleasure associated with taste, and this can be wonderfully well represented in what you write. Think not only of the satisfaction found in tasting food, of course. Consider things like the salty pleasure found in the pocket of the elbow, the blank sweetness of wax, the clean green taste at the white end of a weed.

The mechanics of tasting yield an amazing variety of method and effect. Notice what you do with your mouth when you eat a caramel versus a potato chip versus a spoonful of soup. What are the movements that occur when you kiss your lover, let ice cream melt on your tongue, tear into an Italian sub?

Can you think of how richly a person's character can be defined by how—or what—he chews? When I was a little

girl, a man who once ate dinner at our house chewed so wildly open-mouthed (and otherwise had such appalling table manners) that he literally nauseated my mother. (Of course, he thrilled us kids.)

On the other hand, I once knew a woman who made eating ice cubes seem comparable to dining at Le Cirque. She did it only in the summer, sitting outside in the backyard in a chaise lounge, wearing shorts and a halter top, and pin curls in her hair. She painted her toenails, smoked and read magazines, and chewed ice cubes that dropped one by one from a magenta-colored aluminum tumbler into her heavily lipsticked mouth, and I have yet to see anyone make anything look more delicious.

How do the images of these two people compare or contrast to that of a bowlegged cowboy scooping up beans from a tin plate? Or an old woman sitting alone at her tiny kitchen table gumming a chicken leg to death?

You can use taste to describe fear, but please, please, *please* do not use, "the metallic taste of fear," even though fear *does* taste metallic. Think of what *else* it tastes like, or describe fear another way. If one more person uses that overworked metaphor, all writers will be struck dead by the god of vocabulary.

You can conjure up nostalgia by describing the taste of a Thanksgiving dinner, or Aunt Sylvia's matzoh balls, or a hot dog at the ballpark on a day when you sat knee to knee with your hero dad. You can use taste to provide humor to a scene, too: Have your characters savor very unusual things; or common things at uncommon times. (Imagine a scene where one character might say to another, "Do you have to eat that *now*?")

You can show an indecisive person trying to decide what to eat, tasting every single thing in the refrigerator, including the baking soda. You can also bring levity to an otherwise sorrowful scene: A heartbroken woman sits at the kitchen table in her bathrobe, regularly interrupting her pathetic crying jag by taking huge bites from a Dutch oven full of mashed potatoes and butter.

Touching

What amazing variety is at our disposal when we want to gather information from this most sensuous of senses! Think: the petals of a rose, the surface of a desk, the underbelly of a kitten, the skin of a snake, the bark of a tree. Mud. Cactus. The edges of endive. Cold cream. The sharp end of a straight pin.

And what a wide range of responses we can have to someone touching *us*: an eager alertness, teeth-clenching irritability, a comfortable leaning into, a fearful pulling back.

Think of how touch works. Where does an impulse come from? Where does it go, and in what ways does it manifest itself? How does it feel to become deeply aware of touch? What is the difference, say, in absentmindedly touching the valley at the base of your neck when you're watching television or talking on the phone versus lying alone in a dark room, concentrating on nothing but that?

Sometimes touch in writing can be so dramatic, it is best for you to *under*play it. Someone I know once wrote about his father beating him with a board when he was a small child. The horror of that act is in the act itself; it would suffer from

embellishment. But to describe a good kiss requires more than your saying "It was a good kiss." A reader wants to know *why* it was a good kiss, how it felt; he or she wants to feel it, too.

Often, as in other senses, there are conflicting emotions in touch: Consider a woman who is not encouraged to socialize with other men at a party; her husband keeps his arm around her, but it feels less like affection than a leash. Or imagine a man who is cruelly belittled by his lover, then given a kiss. What would that kiss feel like? What mixed feelings are in the embrace of a mother saying good-bye to her college-bound firstborn?

Touch can say so much in writing, with such economy. It can be one of the best tools at your disposal for showing personality in an indirect way. Have your characters communicate with touch in addition to language, but try to avoid clichés here as well. Look for the unusual, for the not so obvious. Watch people and the way they touch themselves and each other: There really is a language of the body. Notice how the face may be saying one thing, but the hands another, as when someone is smiling with fists clenched so tightly their knuckles are white. Be aware of subtlety: A person who is nervous doesn't usually emulate the ever tremulous Don Knótts; that emotion more often shows itself in the tiniest of ways: a finger to the eyebrow—twice. A too quick smile. The placement of the pocketbook in the exact center of the lap. A show of red at the top of the ears. The quietest of throat clearings.

To best use touch in your writing, heighten your own awareness. You can build up sensory ability in the same way that you can build up your body—"exercise" both the part

of you that allows you to differentiate between cactus and velvet as well as the part of you that makes you respond with everything from adoration to disdain. It doesn't have to be difficult or complicated to do this. For example, one of my favorite gifts is a box of fabric swatches that a friend gave me. Inside the box are pieces of leather, suede, velvet, silk, cotton, and more. On top of the box is one word: *touch*. And I do, both for the pleasure and the practice.

As for "exercising" your responses, sharing them openly and more fully—and with more people—ought to help a lot.

Smelling

One of the reasons old people lose their appetite is that they lose their sense of smell. One of the reasons the perfume industry makes so much money is because of our Pied Piper–like response to an alluring scent. One of the reasons given for the phenomenon of falling in love is pheromones.

So smell is very important. It is also probably the most underutilized of all the senses in writing. But in the same way that a movie in "real life" is enhanced by the smell of popcorn, a written scene about a hospital is enhanced by describing the antiseptic smell. As an ocean scene is enhanced by evoking a saltwater smell. As a scene of going home is enhanced by including the smell of meatloaf coming from your mother's oven.

Don't overuse smell in your writing—as in life, a little goes a long way. But don't overlook it, either. And remember to look for new ways of describing things: What does bread smell like *besides* yeasty?

Don't be afraid to try more creative ways of using smell, either. Can the scent of a perfume be described by a color? Can a certain odor best be described by an emotion, as in "the defeating smell of the subway" or "the stuck-up smell of the first-class lounge"? How about "the musky leftovers of an afternoon of pleasure" or "the acrid evidence of fear"?

By taking advantage of all that your senses offer, you'll become a much more interesting and versatile writer. You'll be able to move past superficial and predictable writing and into the kind of description that evokes real feeling in your readers. Your own passion will be felt by them. You'll connect.