

Imagine That

“Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherized upon a table.”

We’ve all gone with this guy, this T.S. Eliot, through his “half-deserted streets,” his “one-night cheap hotels” and “sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells.” But I have been thinking about how he gets us to go along with him. I’ve been thinking about images and how writers use them.

I began an earlier draft of this question by trying to build some images from my parents’ little grocery store: The crisp smell of the apples as you stepped through the swinging double hinged doors, the greasy sweet smell that rolled out of the meat case from the fat cylinders of salami and bologna, the smell of the occasional putrid rotten potato buried somewhere in the trash set by the stockroom door.

To walk through that store, like walking through Eliot’s “half-deserted streets,” is to walk through all sorts of images. Visual images, of course, because we are animals that rely mostly on sight. But also smell images, sound images, touch and even taste. Without reaching into the meat case and swiping one of the loose wieners from its pasteboard box, the smell alone could trigger my taste buds. And I think of our customers who thought the ripeness of a cantaloupe could be determined by smelling it, who thought the ripeness of a watermelon could be determined by thumping it.

Our senses are in the business of actively pick up images. In her wonderful book, [A Natural History of the Senses](#), poet Diane Ackerman leads us through how each of our senses works for us, both consciously and unconsciously. This book is a great place for writers to go when considering how to better use our senses contribute to our work. Ackerman has suggested in that we cannot store smell images in the same way we save visual or auditory images. We know a smell when we re-encounter it, but cannot bring it to mind independently. Try this at home.

Meanwhile, our job as writers is to take those images we absorb and translate them into words. The word image itself is derived from *imago*, an imitation or copy. So from the very beginning, those images in our head must be copies and our copies are necessarily flawed. Our language, rich as it seems, is finally limiting.

As Eliot’s narrator in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” exclaims, “It is impossible to say just what I mean!”

That’s the problem. But we can’t write without images, and we need to teach ourselves as writers to render those images as well as we can.

Here's a little picture I draw on the blackboard (or white board—see how that one little word changes this detail and changes an image you might have in mind, reader of my drawing this diagram? In one I can dust my chalky hand on my pants, in the other I can crankily complain about the dried up marker with ink now too faint to be seen from the back of the room).

The picture itself? On one side, at the base of a big arc, I write the word “particular,” at the top of the arc I write the word “general,” and at the other base I write again the word “particular.” What we don't want to do is to start a description, start building an image from the top of that arc, from the general. We don't want to ask readers to visualize a place, any old place; we want them to visualize a very particular place, those “narrow streets” where Eliot's narrator “watched the smoke that rises from the pipes/Of lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows[.]”

Can we see this? If we do, we do so through a complicated cooperation between the image offered by Eliot and our own participatory imaginations. We would have to time travel back decades and shift ourselves to crowded city streets maybe with tenement buildings on either sides. Maybe at some time we've seen pictures of such places, or maybe we'll just have to stretch a bit farther to get it.

And in some cases, we won't get the image at all. A writer asks a reader to travel across that arc I drew as illustration from the very particular image he offers through a sort of generalizing process and convert it to an image that reader can create in his own head.

This might be a good point to return to Diane Ackerman's contention about smell retention. Ever smell a rotten potato? Not like a dead skunk, not like a many-days-old sun baked dead possum, not like a rotten apple's vinegary sweetness. Not it's something else entirely, and if you've never smelled a rotten potato, I'm not sure any number of piled up adjectives will get you there.

Which is to say that the movement from my particulars to a reader's will never be totally successful. Still, we have to try. To begin from vague, general images gets readers nowhere.

In those opening lines from “Prufrock” Eliot slides from image into image via a simile. These are inviting imagines. “...the evening spread across the sky...”? We can get ourselves there. We all have an image of that scene even if it's from a stock shot postcard a friend sent from a trip to the beach. But “a patient etherized upon a table”? That image requires an imaginative participatory leap. Most likely, the naïve reader, coming on the poem for the first time has never considered what seems to be a cityscape as a etherized patient, but once the imagination enters in, it works in rich, rewarding ways. It's an image with some considerable metaphorical weight behind it.

Imagination? How about this definition: “the power of forming mental images of what is not actually present.” Yep, that’s just what T.S. Eliot has asked us to do. Did he pull it off? I’m willing to bet he did. That’s what we’re after here: images that drive the imagination of our readers. At best our images will work this way: leading the reader to imaginatively enter into our work and build parallel images of his or her own. To begin to be a co-author, a partial owner of the poem.