

Free Verse Poetry: focus on imagery

Fog

Carl Sandburg

The fog comes
on little cat feet.

It sits looking
over harbor and city
on silent haunches
and then moves on.

When it is Snowing

Siv Cedering

When it is snowing
the blue jay
is the only piece of
sky
in my backyard

Poppies

Roy Scheele

The light in them stands as clear as water
drawn from a well
When the breeze moves across them they totter.
You half expect them to spill.

Driving to Town Late to Mail a Letter

Robert Bly

It is a cold and snowy night. The main street is deserted.
The only things moving are swirls of snow.
As I lift the mailbox door, I feel its cold iron.
There is a privacy I love in this snowy night.
Driving around, I will waste more time.

These first 3 poems (“Fog, When it is Snowing, and Poppies”) share a kind of haiku-like spirit and form. In fact, you might make the argument that they are, indeed, modern versions of haiku. More importantly, though, is their focus on showing—or imagery—rather than telling.

Sandburg uses a metaphor to compare fog directly to a cat. We can see the fog walking on “little cat feet” and see it sitting on “silent haunches” before leaving. He doesn’t interpret the fog for us, doesn’t tell us what or how to think about the fog. Rather, he shows us a distinct picture of the fog in the harbor and leaves readers to infer how they should think and feel.

Cedering uses the imagery of color—stark blue against white—to create a vivid picture of the blue jay here. When he writes that this blue is the “only piece of sky” in his yard, we can sense how thick the snow is—thick enough to block the entire sky, so that the only blue is that from this bird. How are readers to think and feel? He suggests a beauty and wonder in this solitary blue against a sea of white.

Scheele uses imagery also to help readers experience what he has as he looked upon these poppies. “The light in them” helps us see something beautiful and extraordinary at their core, something as “clear as water drawn from a well.” The final image of their fragile stems that might “totter” in the breeze at any moment and the picture of them “spilling” the light as a result is a powerful one. He, too, uses a metaphor to compare the poppies to some type of container from which something can be spilled. He suggests that whatever is inside is valuable and can be “spilled” out in the breeze. Readers may come away with a sense of how fragile and remarkable these flowers are.

In Robert Bly’s poem, he uses imagery that helps readers feel his sense of solitude. The “main street is deserted” and “the only things moving are swirls of snow”. Here, there is a “privacy” he claims to love about being out on this winter night. How much does he love it? He doesn’t come right out and tell us that “I love this more than anything or I love this very much”, but rather he shows us with a final image: “Driving around, I will waste more time.” We can infer from his decision to drive around that he really enjoys winter nights like this one.

Root Cellar

Theodore Roethke

Nothing would sleep in that cellar, dank as a ditch,
Bulbs broke out of boxes hunting for chinks in the dark,
Shoots dangled and drooped,
Lolling obscenely from mildewed crates,
Hung down long yellow evil necks, like tropical snakes.
And what a congress of stinks!--
Roots ripe as old bait,
Pulpy stems, rank, silo-rich,
Leaf-mold, manure, lime, piled against slippery planks.
Nothing would give up life:
Even the dirt kept breathing a small breath.

In this poem, Theodore Roethke uses imagery to help us experience the root cellar as he did. Even though things may appear to be lifeless in a root cellar, he shows us that they are very much alive (“nothing would sleep in that cellar”; “bulbs broke out of boxes hunting for chinks in the dark”; “shoots dangled and drooped” like “tropical snakes”; roots, stems, leaf-mold, manure, lime—none of this “would give up life”; and “even the dirt kept breathing a small breath”). As readers, we can see and even smell (“what a congress of stinks!”) the life in this root cellar. His final image, “Even the dirt kept breathing a small breath” is a powerful one. If even the dirt will not give up life, nothing will. We can infer just how powerful plant life is, even in places we would assume plants cannot grow.

Deserted Farm

Mark Vinz

Where the barn stood
the empty milking stalls rise up
like the skeleton of an ancient sea beast,
exiled forever on shores of prairie.

Decaying timber moans softly in twilight;
the house collapses like a broken prayer.
Tomorrow the heavy lilac blossoms will open,
higher than the roofbeams, reeling in wind.

In this poem, Mark Vinz appeals to our senses of sight and hearing to help us experience this deserted farm as he has. “The empty milking stalls rise up/like the skeleton of an ancient sea beast/exiled forever on shores of prairie.” This opening simile creates a strong picture of a barn’s skeleton that looks like the bones of a whale or sea creature, washed up on the sand. He doesn’t have to tell us that this barn has seen better days because the skeleton image helps us see that there is little left of the original barn.

He appeals to our sense of sound in “decaying timber moans softly”. We can hear the creaks and groans of wood as it decays. When he writes “the house collapses like a broken prayer,” we can see that something once wonderful and promising, like a prayer, falls apart.

The mood, so far, has been depressing: a barn, once majestic and strong, decays and collapses finally. But Vinz changes the mood with his final imagery: “Tomorrow the heavy lilac blossoms will open,/higher than the roofbeams, reeling in the wind.” He gives readers a promise of beauty and life in this final imagery. Something will blossom, in spite of the decay. And these blossoms will rise “higher than the roofbeams”, showing their glory to everyone.