

***Writing Exercise: Place, occupation, emotion**

Think of a type of place -- this can be from memory or experience. When I say "type" of place, I mean think of a place with a particular function. A doctor's office or medical lab where you go for a blood test; a grocery store; a gas station; an art museum; a gopher museum.

Set a timer for two minutes and make a list of as many nouns as you can relating to that place. Be as specific as you can: Cash register. Conveyor belt. Plastic bag. Shopping cart. Freezer. Pizza aisle.

Then think of an occupation unrelated to that place -- and I understand that an occupation does not define one's identity. So the occupation need not be a "job" -- it can be an avocation or even a hobby. Sewing; restoring motorcycles; nursing; bicycle courier. What sort of special vocabulary does such an occupation have? Make a list of workplace vocabulary words. Now imagine a character who has that profession, in that place.

But wait! Before you write, imagine an emotion that character is feeling -- grief, joy, frustration, depression, mania, paranoia. Set your timer for 5 or 7 or however long you want. Using as many words as you can, write a scene of that character in that place experiencing an emotion -- if possible without mentioning the emotion.

Edit or revise as necessary.

I've attached an example of one I wrote about 5 or 6 years ago:

Short short story by W. Mark Giles

Sonny

The nurse set the box of Quaker Oats back on the store shelf, among the orderly rows of Postum and Cream of Wheat. Sonny Jim. His mother called him Sonny Jim and how he hated that.

The grocery store teemed with sickness. Shopping-cart gurneys bearing foodstuffs like so many casualties. Over the PA a machine voice announced: "Service Desk call two-zero-one." Coca Cola IV drips. Steer your wheelchair to the trans-fat aisle for a course of pork-rind therapy. Bandage your ulcers with Pepto-Bismol from the pharmacy section. "Service Desk call two-zero-one."

The nurse leaned his head against the cereal shelf. When he closed his eyes, he could hear the hum of the machines circulating air. From behind, someone approached, pushing a cart with a wobbly wheel. A hand touched his arm just above his elbow. "Are you OK," a woman asked. He didn't move. He screwed his eyes tighter until cones and rods fired light patterns on the inside of his eyelids. "I'm all right. Leave me. Go. Don't touch my arm." The hand above the elbow went away. The wobbly wheel shuddered its retreating cadence on the polished floor. The edge of his forehead pressed into the metal. It would leave an imprint of parallel lines across his brow. He opened one eye.

"So much depends," he said.

Mother. Her wobbly-wheeled gurney. Tube down her throat. He had sat in the poorly-designed visitor chair, day upon day. Waiting.

"Hey, Mac. Can I get some shredded wheat?" He hadn't heard the man in the soft-soled shoes. The nurse mumbled, moved away. He raised his hand to his brow and felt the grooves in his flesh. Where was -- Sonny Boy, like the cereal -- she had called him Sonny *Boy*.

"You look like you need a drink," the man said to the nurse. "C'mon, Mac, we won the gold medal in hockey. Lighten up." The man suddenly turned, deking one way then moving the other, and looked for an open wing.

"The white chickens," the nurse whispered.