Significant Detail
from Writing Fiction by Janet Burroway

In The Elements of Style, William Strunk, Jr., writes:

If those who have studied the art of writing are in accord on any one point, it is on this: the surest way to arouse and hold the attention of the reader is by being specific, definite and concrete. The greatest writers... are effective largely because they deal in particulars and report the details that matter.

Specific; definite, concrete, particular details-these are the life of writing.

Details (as every good liar knows) are the stuff of persuasiveness. Mary is sure that Ed forgot to go pay the gas bill last Tuesday, but Ed says, "I know I went, because this old guy in a knit vest was in front of me in the line, and went on and on about his twin granddaughters"—and it is hard to refute a knit vest and twins even if the furnace doesn't work. John Gardner in The Art of Fiction speaks of details as "proofs," rather like those in a geometric theorem or a statistical argument. The novelist, he says, "gives us such details about the streets, stores, weather, politics, and concerns of Cleveland (or wherever the setting is) and such details about the looks, gestures, and experiences of his characters that we cannot help believing that the story he tells us is true."

A detail is "definite" and "concrete" when it appeals to the senses. It should be seen, heard, smelled, tasted, or touched. The most superficial survey of any bookshelf of published fiction will turn up dozens of examples of this principle. Here is a fairly obvious one:

It was a narrow room, with a rather high ceiling, and crowded from floor to ceiling with goodies. There were rows and rows of hams and sausages of all shapes and colors-white, yellow, red and black; fat and lean and round and long-rows of canned preserves, cocoa and tea, bright translucent glass bottles of honey, marmalade and jam.

I stood enchanted, straining my ears and breathing in the delightful atmosphere and the mixed fragrance of chocolate and smoked fish and earthy truffles. I spoke into the silence, saying: "Good day" in quite a loud voice; I can still remember how my strained, unnatural tones died away in the stillness. No one answered. And my mouth literally began to water like a spring. One quick, noiseless step and I was beside one of the laden tables. I made one rapturous grab into the nearest glass urn, filled as it chanced with chocolate creams, slipped a fistful into my coat pocket, then reached the door, and in the next second was safely round the corner.

Thomas Mann, Confessions of Felix Krull, Confidence Man

The shape of this passage is a tour through the five senses. Mann lets us see: narrow room, high ceiling, hams, sausages, preserves, cocoa; tea, glass bottles, honey, marmalade, jam. He lets us smell: fragrance of chocolate, smoked fish, earthy truffles. He lets us hear: "Good
day," unnatural tones, stillness. He lets us taste: mouth, water like a spring. He lets us touch: grab, chocolate creams, slipped, fistful into my coat pocket. The writing is alive because we do in fact live through our sense perceptions, and Mann takes us past words and through thought to let us perceive the scene in this way.

In this process, a number of ideas not stated reverberate off the sense images, so that we are also aware of a number of generalizations the author might have made but does not need to make: We will make them ourselves. Mann could have had his character "tell" us: I was quite poor, and I was not used to seeing such a profusion of food, so that although I was very afraid there might be someone in the room and that I might be caught stealing, I couldn't resist taking the risk. This version would be very flat, and none of it is necessary. The character's relative poverty is inherent in the tumble of images of sight and smell; if he were used to such displays, his eyes and nose would not dart about as they do. His fear is inherent in the "strained, unnatural tones" and their dying away in the stillness. His desire is in his watering mouth, his fear in the furtive speed of "quick" and "grab" and "slipped."

The points to be made here are two, and they are both important. The first is that the writer must deal in sense detail. The second is that these must be details "that matter." As a writer of fiction you are at constant pains not simply to say what you mean, but to mean more than you say. Much of what you mean will be an abstraction or a judgment. But if you write in abstractions or judgments, you are writing an essay, whereas if you let us use our senses and do our own generalizing and interpreting, we will be involved as participants in a real way. Much of the pleasure of reading comes from the egotistical sense that we are clever enough to understand. When the author explains to us or interprets for us, we suspect that he or she doesn't think us bright enough to do it for ourselves. A detail is concrete if it appeals to one of the five senses; it is significant if it also conveys an idea or a judgment or both.
Sole Custody

Today he’ll ride his bike to Safeway
in his death’s head earring and mismatched socks
where the checkers all know his name. He’ll buy
Cheetos and Kool Aid before coming home to bathe
in the rusty light from the TV, until I get off work
and collapse on the fake velvet sofa, a double order
of fast food bleeding grease through a bag in my fist.
He hasn’t eaten anything green in a week
and I see the dirt under his fingernail when he points
to the surfboard he drew on his sneaker.
What would we do if I got fired, I wonder,
listening to the wind outside and the evening’s
lead story
announcing more layoffs in the South Bay.
There’s enough
in the bank for his school clothes, and the rent’s
almost paid again. I should be happier.
He’s been watching the talk shows. Have
you ever done it with someone you didn’t love,
he asks, his old guitar resting against the wall
like an abandoned girlfriend, and the pleats
of the hound’s-tooth, flea market slacks
gathered around his small waist
like the leaves of a sunflower calyx.
Eat slowly, I say, as he smiles at me
around a mouthful of fries, points the clicker
at my chest and says I’m getting fat.
We’re bound together like sailors, swaying across
a dark ocean, resigned to each other’s odd humors
and unable to see the stars overhead
as we stagger around in the engine room
of a ship with a foreign name.

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