

# Sounds of Story

by Judy Fort Brenneman

Early morning, very cold, but not the subzero it's been recently. I shuffle, ever mindful of the ice, to where the drive meets the curve of the cul-de-sac. Still half-asleep, I uproot frozen newspapers from the asphalt, straighten up, and—

*Hoo-hoo. Hoo-hoo.*

What?

*Hoo-hoo. Hoo-hoo-hooooo-hoo*—accompanied by a tumble of cawcackleshriekcackle.

I am wide awake.

Mourning doves, singing the soft melody line. Crows, maybe jays (maybe both), adding percussive counterpoint.

Today, this morning, this *moment*, I realize these sounds have been absent for days, possibly weeks. Until now, I didn't consciously realize they were absent.

The sun breached the horizon no more than 20 seconds ago, and the air swells with life I'd forgotten existed. Bird song shatters the cold air with promise.

I skate back to the porch and just as I'm about to go inside, an unmistakable snare drum announces a flicker riveting a hole in my roof. I smack the newspapers against the siding in poor but loud imitation. A flutter of russet wings itself away but makes no sound when it alights on my neighbor's tall evergreen.

Is this the sound of spring? Or a false promise, like the warm moist Chinook wind that tries to persuade us to pack away our parkas?

Over the next few days, I notice the squirrels are in the backyard again. They are fat and extra fluffy, digging up treasure while their tails twitch questions. When did I stop noticing that it had been a while since I'd heard the patter of their 8:00 a.m. run across my roof (I swear they must punch a time-clock) to launch themselves into the cottonwood tree?

When they're not tugging at what I'd swear is dead grass, Canada geese promenade across boulevards with no regard for crosswalks or traffic cones. They hunker so flat into meadow and street, defiantly hissing, *Who says a nest can't be on asphalt?* that I suspect they've taken root.

I have been asleep—for days, perhaps weeks—without knowing it. And today, I am awake, because of sound. I am paying attention, because of sound.

Sound—the sound of the world around us, the sound of music, the sound of language—is a powerful tool.

Individual sounds combine to create and convey meaning. The sounds of the words we use, individually and in sequence, carry meaning that flows through and intertwines with the individual words, the sentences and paragraphs formed by their sequences, and the stories that emerge.

Read your writing out loud. What sounds do you notice? Is your preferred vocabulary peppered with plosives (like this sentence)? Does it crack and crackle, clicking at a brisk clip? Or mosey, rolling and reveling in languorous susurrations? What happens if you switch out one type of sound for another?

Do you play with onomatopoeia? How about its cousin, phonesthesia? Onomatopoeia has sounds that are the actual sound something makes (screech! BAM! Zip, gargle, gobble, slurp, chatter). Phonesthetic words have sounds that we associate with the qualities of a subject (sneer, snarl, snide, snarky; glimmer, glisten, glossy).

The sounds we use can emphasize and reinforce—or interfere with and contradict—the meaning we're trying to communicate. A mourning dove and a crow may live in the same neighborhood, but their voices—and their stories—are not the same.

Hush, listen—

It's the sound of a story.

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