

WRITING EXERCISE: UNPHOTOGRAPHED

Photographer Michael David Murphy may have chosen one of the most difficult tasks possible: to capture the photographs he did not or was not able to take. Murphy, who depicts the missed photograph in words, says of his project:

Unphotographable (www.unphotographable.com) is a catalog of exceptional mistakes. Photos never taken that weren't meant to be forgotten. Opportunities missed. Simple failures. Occasions when I wished I'd taken the picture, or not forgotten the camera, or had been brave enough to click the shutter. I'm a photographer. But I'm not the kind of photographer who prefers looking at life through a lens. If we take photographs to remember, what do we do when we're *not* taking photographs?

Indeed there are moments that we wish we could have recorded, particularly in their visual sense, but for whatever reason we could not or did not. This exercise offers the opportunity to record the sense of that moment in words.

Exercise

Visually describe a scene that you wish you were able to photograph. As you write, imagine yourself going further than description—think of it as a depiction of an experience. As you describe / depict, allow other senses or movement or characters to be suggested and implied just as they are in a photograph. Let imagery carry the work of communicating tone (as with the images of anxiety in “Courthouse Bench” and images of awe in “Come On, Man” below).

Examples

Courthouse Bench

This is a picture I did not take of an unshaved man in a plaid button-down, holding the butt-end of his Marlboro red, sitting outside on a courthouse bench that advertises for the bail-bondsman, waiting, wavering, sucking his thumb.

—Alexandra Bishop

Come On, Man

I didn't photograph you levitating. I couldn't have. No one believed you could do it, because come on, levitation? But there you were—at the top of the brick pile, everything around you sunlight and bamboo, birds, a gathering crowd. “Come on, man,” someone said in Thai, “get down.” But slowly you rose and joined the

movement all around you, clouds, leaves, wind, your back turned to us, hovering a few inches above the bricks. We figure out most of your magic tricks immediately, force you to tell us, research them online. But with this one we are amazed. We believe it so earnestly, and watch in awe. You are so beautiful, levitating above the bricks, as if to rise into the forest. We don't speak. No one speaks. The birds chirp and the traffic behind us exhales but there is no scar in this moment—everything in balance. You come back down before we even think to take a photograph.

—Lilly Lerer