

As poets you'll need to make decisions about tenses, and I don't expect you to abandon the present tense. But just because it is the current convention doesn't mean you are limited to it. There is a naturalness to be gained by telling stories in past tense. That's how we usually tell them: "I pulled into the gas station this morning, and there was a girl in pigtails filling the tires on her bike . . ."

SELECTING THE VERY BEST WORD

When writing even a very brief poem, you have hundreds of decisions to make—choices of words, of syntax, of punctuation, of rhythm, and so on. A poem is a machine of language designed to accomplish something. Whatever the poet hopes to accomplish, the work of writing the poem can't be hurried. Every word must be selected for its appropriateness to the task at hand, just as each part of a machine must contribute to its effectiveness. Each choice the poet makes must bring the poem a little closer to its potential. It is impossible to achieve perfection, but any poem will be more effective if it falls just a little short of perfection rather than a long way short.

Several years ago I developed the following exercise to use in poetry workshops to emphasize how important it can be to get just the right word. It is based on a poem by the late Lorine Niedecker, who wrote many fine short poems.

You'll see that I've left out one of the words. The task is to choose a word that brings the most to the poem, that enlivens or animates it, that, we might say, carries a big charge, a word that is not just a verb but that amplifies or expands upon what the poem seems to be aiming for. You may turn a noun into a verb if you wish. Don't be afraid to have fun. Writing poetry is a kind of play.

☞ POPCORN-CAN COVER

Popcorn-can cover
screwed to the wall
over a hole
so the cold
can't _____ in.

Here are some typical words that students have offered when I've used this exercise: "creep," "squeeze," "sneak," "reach," "seep," "rush," "jump," and "pop." You may have come up with others. I've held workshops in which students came up with a dozen or more.

Now, can you think of one word that might include more than one of these others, that is, that might include some of the characteristics of the others? Is there a word whose meaning contains, say, all these: "creep," "squeeze," and "sneak?"

Well, yes. Here's Niedecker's poem as she published it:

☞ POPCORN-CAN COVER

Popcorn-can cover
screwed to the wall
over a hole
so the cold
can't mouse in.

Niedecker chose the word "mouse," which contains a lot of creepiness, and some squeezing through things, and sneaking around. It is a word that in effect contains all sorts of other words. By choosing the strongest word, the word that contains the most, your poem can gain in its effect on the reader.

Here is another example of using just the right word. I probably won't need to point it out to you. The whole poem, by Robert Francis, hinges upon it.

☞ SHEEP

From where I stand the sheep stand still
As stones against the stony hill.

The stones are gray
And so are they.

And both are weatherworn and round,
Leading the eye back to the ground.

Two mingled flocks—
The sheep, the rocks.

been talking about the advantages of integrating metaphor, about how to make it part of the integral structure of a poem rather than merely dropping it in as ornament.

⇒ NOVEMBER

It is an old drama
this disappearance of the leaves,
this seeming death
of the landscape.
In a later scene,
or earlier,
the trees like gnarled magicians
produce handkerchiefs
of leaves
out of empty branches.

And we watch.
We are like children
at this spectacle
of leaves,
as if one day we too
will open the wooden doors
of our coffins
and come out smiling
and bowing
all over again.

I don't know Linda Pastan, but I strongly suspect that this poem began with a metaphor, that is, leaves appearing at the ends of branches made her think of the handkerchiefs that magicians pull from their sleeves. I say this because this tree/magician metaphor is so deeply integrated in the structure of the poem, holding it together in so many ways, that I doubt if it could be anything other than part of an originating impulse. It would be very difficult to start to write a poem about trees and then to fit such a metaphor over it, like pulling a sock over a foot.

Metaphors are good examples of things being greater than the

sum of their parts—two parts to each metaphor: the tenor (in this instance the tree) and the vehicle (the magician). A carefully controlled metaphor, like any clearly observed association of two dissimilar things or events, can excite the responses of readers because it gives them a glimpse of an order that they might not otherwise have become aware of. If you think of a metaphor as being a bridge between two things, it's not the things that are of the most importance, but the grace and lift of the bridge between them, flying high over the surface. To begin writing a poem around a metaphor gets the author a head start toward poetry that has integral order and transcends the mere sum of its accumulated words.

There are many things about magicians that are not like trees, for example, and many things about trees that are not like magicians. Pastan makes no mention of these, but works exclusively with those features that she can relate back and forth. For example, the magicians are described as being gnarled, which is something that we can say about both people and trees. If she had written

the trees like agile magicians
produce handkerchiefs

the power of the metaphor would be slightly dissipated because though a magician might be agile, we don't think of trees as being agile, being anchored firmly to the ground as they are. And so on. It will serve you well as a poet to put each of your metaphors to this test: have you used some detail on one side of the bridge that can't be logically mirrored on the other? If you observe that a pile of cannonballs looks like a bunch of grapes, avoid mentioning that cannonballs are very heavy and that grapes are sweet. A metaphor that is not carefully controlled is worse for the prospects of a poem than having no metaphor at all.

Though Pastan abandons the specific leaf/handkerchief metaphor at the end of the fourth line of the second stanza, notice that she now picks up and follows through with the magician she has deftly implanted in our imaginations, a magician who, in addition to pulling handkerchiefs out of his sleeves, might miraculously emerge unscathed after being locked in a box. Here she is working for a short time on the vehicle (magician) side of the metaphor, letting herself fly a little, playing