CHAPTER FOUR

Developing Imagery

> *Poetry has to be something more than a conception of the mind. It has to be a revelation of nature. Conceptions are artificial. Perceptions are essential.*[1]
> —Wallace Stevens

THINKING IN IMAGES

You can't write an enjoyable poem simply by summarizing a story or arguing a theory in abstract language—the only exceptions to that rule are epigrams and the occasional comic or experimental poem. Poetry engages the senses; it works by representing ideas and emotions with **concrete images**. Those images can be objects, plants, animals, atmospheric conditions, landscapes, bodies of water, celestial bodies, and people—anything you can perceive with your senses. Although the word "image" may suggest a visual bias, images can evoke tactile, olfactory, auditory, and gustatory sensations. Scenes aren't simply pictures; they contain sounds, smells, textures, awareness of heat and cold, possibly even tastes. When you're drafting a poem, try to engage at least one—and preferably more than one—of the reader's senses.

The emphasis on imagery as opposed to rhetoric is to some degree a modern bias and specifically an article of faith among the modernist poets of the early twentieth century. Nineteenth-century poets tended to lean heavily on narrative, and their eighteenth-century counterparts often wrote poems that were essentially arguments or "essays." Though the poems we associate with those premodern poets were more discursive than the high-modernist works of Ezra Pound, Marianne Moore, T.S. Eliot, H. D., Mina Loy, and W.C. Williams, they still relied on imagery for their impact. Aside from the relatively rare exceptions already mentioned, a poem without imagery is a bird without wings.

1 Wallace Stevens, *Opus Posthumous*, ed. Milton J. Bates, revised, enlarged, and corrected edition (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 191.

TECHNIQUES FOR DESCRIPTION

Engaging the Senses

The primary technique for engaging the reader's senses is the use of concrete, specific diction. Casual readers may think that poems should consist of philosophical language, but, in fact, poets generally shy away from "big" concept words. "Go in fear of abstractions" is an old and still-useful injunction. Telling our readers that we're "happy" or "sad" or "content" or "afraid" doesn't accomplish much. The concept or emotion remains within the consciousness of the poet (or the voice that's telling the poem, at least); it's opaque to the reader. In order to make the reader understand the idea we want to communicate, we have to give him or her images that he or she can perceive and react to on a visceral level. The conviction that representing is more effective than explaining cuts across the various literary genres: "show; don't tell" is the prime directive of fiction workshops, and that concept applies equally well to writing poetry.

Suzanne Buffam's poem (below) begins with rhetoric: "I was ready for a new experience." The key words "new" and "experience" are both **abstractions**. Notice how she moves quickly from abstract to concrete by "backing up" her rhetoric with concrete images. Experiences are "burned out." That's a common locution; we speak of being "burned out" if we no longer bring any enthusiasm to an undertaking. Buffam continues that "burning" metaphor, envisioning the abstract experiences as "little ashy heaps" and using related words such as "smoke" and "smouldering." Notice, as well, that she returns to rhetoric for the resolution, which appears in stanzas 9 and 10 ("nothing worth doing is worth doing / For the sake of experience alone") and then circles back to the first image—"burned out"—for that witty reference to the sun.

The New Experience
by Suzanne Buffam

I was ready for a new experience.
All the old ones had burned out.

They lay in little ashy heaps along the roadside
And blew in drifts across the fairgrounds and fields.

From a distance some appeared to be smouldering
But when I approached with my hat in my hands

They let out small puffs of smoke and expired.
Through the windows of houses I saw lives lit up

With the otherworldly glow of TV
And these were smoking a little bit too.

I flew to Rome. I flew to Greece.
I sat on a rock in the shade of the Acropolis

And conjured dusky columns in the clouds.
I watched waves lap the crumbling coast.

I heard wind strip the woods.
I saw the last living snow leopard

Pacing in the dirt. Experience taught me
That nothing worth doing is worth doing

For the sake of experience alone.
I bit into an apple that tasted sweetly of time.

The sun came out. It was the old sun
With only a few billion years left to shine.

Like a good photographer, the poet choses details from the natural world and its inhabitants to represent ideas and emotions, frames aspects of the scene, crops anything irrelevant, and tries to see clearly and with as little "noise" and "grain" as possible. That **analogy**, of course, is inadequate: the photographer represents the visual world, but the poet must also cultivate an awareness of the information that flows into the mind and the heart through the other senses—smells, tastes, textures and temperatures, balance and disequilibrium, the universe of sounds and silences, the movement of everything growing and crumbling and trembling with the vibrancy of life as it passes through time.

The images that well up from the imagination aren't necessarily metaphors, unless we subject them to some Freudian or Jungian analysis and insist on seeing them as the symptoms of some pathology or the symbols of the collective unconscious. Within the logic of the poem, they're as palpable as perceptions of the empirical world. The poet's mind connects each image to the other images in the poem. A poem is a composition, not just in terms of its phonological dimension, its music, but also in terms of its representative dimension, its imagery.

The poem that follows began with the observation of a simple act: a toddler encountering a book, remembering perhaps that books could be fun, and pretending to eat the delicious words and pictures on the pages. The volume in question was an illustrated collection of fairy tales, so the folk-tale imagery suggested itself readily. Selecting *which* tales to glean images from took a little more thought: the idea of eating the words of a book mandated a bias towards gustatory images—tastes such as "salt," "ice," "candies," "berries," or the sensation of holding a stone on your tongue. Rumpelstiltskin's trick of weaving gold from straw seemed to suit the theme of transformation, words to edibles, and so did the idea of animals becoming human—the "half-transformed foxes." Then there are some standard folk-tale motifs such as smiling wolves, a wicked queen, a wood-chopper, and so on. Some snow bears even make a guest appearance, drifting in from Hans Christian Andersen.

Language Arts
by Stephen Guppy

My daughter, who is 20 months,
is lying on the living-room floor,
plucking words from her brother's story-book
as if they were Cheerios
or berries from the garden plot
and eating them like candies.

Each time she believes
she's caught a word, she places the tips
of her stubby fingers up to her mouth,
makes a sucking noise, just as if she were pulping
the memory of each luscious sound
she's ever heard or dreamed of,
and giggles as she reaches for
the next word of the fable.

Curious, I lie down on the carpet
next to my little girl and, reaching
past her busy hands,
pretend to take a couple of words
from the illustrated story. She giggles again
and grins at me as I pluck my words
like windfalls from the virtual shade
of the fairy-tale forest
and touch them to my lips. She's right: they're good;

they taste like night, like the smiles
of wolves; you can hold them in your mouth,
cup them on your tongue like stones
worn smooth by the pads of snow bears.

They taste like salt, like the skin of your hand
when you lick it after hours of work
weaving straws of gold from golden straw
in the blunt crayon sunlight of August.

They taste like the ice
in the Wicked Queen's heart,
so cold that your bones burn like x-rays
and your teeth are the strokes of the wood-chopper's axe
in the bodies of half-transformed foxes.

"Daddy eat!" my little daughter says, and I do
just what she tells me: pick
the bitter, inky fruit from trees
and spiky bushes bright as blood;
crush them on my tongue and taste
the winter hush before my birth,
the chrysalis, the blind brown seed,

primaeval forest shade between
the winding paths of stories.

Eliminating the Observer

Verse can work as a kind of shorthand; we can often eliminate the words and phrases that explain or background our perception of the image and just give the reader the image itself. In the example below, the first-person narrator explains that he or she is perceiving a butterfly.

Example 1: I see a butterfly that resembles a swatch of calico.

The "I see" probably isn't essential to our appreciation of the image of the butterfly. We don't need to be told that someone sees it; what's important is that we, the readers, see it for ourselves. Telling us that the butterfly "resembles" the cloth is also redundant: just put one term of the comparison next to the other, and we'll process the connection between them. So instead of the wordy

and cumbersome Example 1, we have the more efficient Example 2. In that version of the description, we've used a line break to arrange the two terms of the comparison in visual space; the visual juxtaposition does the same job as the phrase "that resembles." The emphasis, you'll notice, has moved from the narrator to the reader.

Example 2: a butterfly
a swatch of calico.

Between the first example and the second, we've gone from the wordiness of prose to the efficiency of verse, and we've focused the reader's attention on the concrete image. When we read Example 1, we're being told about someone else's experience; when we read Example 2, we're experiencing a perception of our own.

Using Synaesthesia

Synaesthesia is, in literary terms, the mixing of senses in an image. (It's also a psychological condition, but that's another story.) When a decorator recommends painting a room in "warm colours," he or she is using synaesthesia as a descriptive tool by assigning a tactile sensation (warmth) to a visual image (colour). The same thing happens when we complain about our uncle's "loud" Hawaiian shirt or say that our new Fender Stratocaster has a "bright" tone. Poets employ that blending of senses as a strategy for engaging readers on a sensory level. John Keats mixes the auditory sense with the visual when he speaks of a "melodious plot / Of beechen green" ("Ode to a Nightingale") and then blends vision and sound with taste in the next stanza:

> O for a draught of vintage! that hath been
> Cool'd a long age in the deep-delved earth,
> Tasting of Flora and the country green,
> Dance, and Provençal song, and sunburnt mirth!

You may have noticed a moment of synaesthesia in "Language Arts" (above): "taste like night."

Keeping Images "In Key"

When you're writing a poem, it's usually a good idea to keep all the images within the same general frame of reference. They shouldn't be scattered or incoherent; they should work together to create a unified impression. Some poems revolve

around organic imagery, others around images of machines or clockwork, still others around water or fire or the seasons. You can think of this as keeping the images in the same "key," to use a metaphor from music. Think of your images as notes in a musical composition and make them resonate with each other; if you wander from one context to another, make sure that the transition is constructive and adds to the impact of the poem in the same way that changing keys might add to the impact of a song.

Don McKay's "Astonished" is built around a geological motif; the imagery elaborates that motif and doesn't deviate from it, even portraying the auditor's face as a "crater" and relating the auditor's persona and situation to the accumulation of sediments and the dissolution of minerals in the sea.

Astonished —
by Don McKay

astounded, astonied, astunned, stopped short
and turned toward stone, the moment
filling with its slow
stratified time. Standing there, your face
cratered by its gawk,
you might be the symbol signifying eon.
What are you, empty or pregnant? Somewhere
sediments accumulate on seabeds, seabeds
rear up into mountains, ammonites
fossilize into gems. Are you thinking
or being thought? Cities
as sand dunes, epics
as e-mail. Astonished
you are famous and anonymous, the border
washed out by so soft a thing as weather. Someone
inside you steps from the forest and across the beach
toward the nameless all-dissolving ocean.

Although most lyric poems can gain strength and coherence from the elaboration of one field of imagery, there are exceptions to that guideline. In a poem that's surreal or whimsical, it can be effective to offer a few different metaphors for the subject of a description. Surrealist poems often feature a "scattergun" approach to imagery that reflects the genre's emphasis on the irrational. It's also most effective if the kaleidoscopic quality of the images reflects the theme of the poem. Consider the two short poems below: each develops varied metaphors in the context of a poem in which the subject undergoes a kind of metamorphosis.

When You Wear Clothes
by Nelly Kazenbroot

I'll miss seeing you naked
Your skin soft and seamless
Like Emmenthal sliced straight
Pink cigars unrolling at
Your neck, the crease between
Your buttocks pressed flat
In that blind male gap
Below the little jointless finger
Of your sex. When you wear clothes
That shadow you in indigo
And silver studs decorate the
Replica of your grandfather's nose
I'll acquire tunnel vision
From my blue eyes through yours
To where your tattooed skin peels back
And your lazy-bones shrink
Waxy and bird-white bright
To fit the naked baby-doll
That jittered slug toes
Upon my lap.

In the Airport
by Eleni Sikelianos

A man called Dad walks by
then another one does. Dad, you say
and he turns, forever turning, forever
being called. Dad, he turns, and looks
at you, bewildered, his face a moving
wreck of skin, a gravity-bound question
mark, a fruit ripped in two, an animal
that can't escape the field.

Conducting an "Image Inventory"

Ask yourself whether you've followed your images through the poem from beginning to end. Too often, poets create an exciting image in the first stanza of a poem and then forget all about it. The images in a lyric poem should support

each other and work together to create a unified impression. It's often useful to inventory the images you've included in a draft of the poem you're working on (see Exercise 4/3).

POETIC MYTHOLOGY

In his introduction to *The Penguin Book of Irish Verse*, Brendan Kennelly wrote, "A poet without a myth is a man confronting famine. Like the body, the imagination gets tired and hungry: myth is a food, a sustaining structure outside the poet that nourishes his inner life and helps him express it."[2]

Learning to write poems well isn't just a matter of learning tricks and techniques; it's also important to learn how to *think like a poet*. Poets are masters of language, but they're also adept at communicating in higher-order symbolic language. In "Yeats and the Language of Symbolism," Northrop Frye wrote that "just as the words of a language are a set of verbal conventions, so the imagery of poetry is a set of symbolic conventions."[3] Just as mathematicians, physicists, and computer scientists must assimilate the abstract signs used in their disciplines, poets have to learn the symbolic language of poetry, which is a language of things and the relationships between things. In the poet's mind, objects, plants, and animals have meaning: all the elements of our world are meaningful. This lexicon of meaningful things is sometimes called "stock symbolism," though the term "stock" implies the rote invocation of familiar and potentially stale analogies, and poets are always capable of spinning the old correspondences in fresh and inventive ways.

The most common analogies used by poets would have been familiar to our earliest forebears. In ancient times, people's lives were governed by the cycle of day and night and the larger cycle of the seasons. The profound influence of the transition from day to night and of the circular movement from one season to another has been reflected in the imagery chosen by poets throughout the history of literature.

Seasonal Symbolism

The most important symbol for poets has always been the wheel of the seasons. That cycle governed our ability to hunt and gather our food; to plant, tend, and harvest our crops; and to prepare appropriate clothing and shelter.

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2 Brendan Kennelly, "Introduction," in *The Penguin Book of Irish Verse*, ed. Brendan Kennelly (London: Penguin, 1970), 26.

3 Northrop Frye, "Yeats and the Language of Symbolism," in *Fables of Identity: Studies in Poetic Mythology*, 218–38 (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1963), 218.

It wasn't so long ago that everyone thought in terms of the importance of the time of year to agriculture, hunting, and such everyday concerns as getting from place to place and keeping warm; we're all affected by the change of seasons to some extent even today, though for most modern people living in cities the issue is less a matter of life and death than it was for our ancestors. Still, the change from spring to summer to autumn and finally to winter has associations to which we can all relate. Spring is the time of birth, childhood, innocence, hope, and the joy of first love. Summer brings the full heat of vigorous youth. Autumn may provide the prosperity and sense of achievement and fulfilment symbolized by the harvest, but it also signals the fading of our dreams and the lengthening shadows of old age, infirmity, and loss. Winter, finally, brings us to the end of our life cycle, and we enter the stillness and frigidity of death, though we gain the clarity of vision that comes with experience and age.

Seasonal imagery is best understood as a language, a simple but resonant set of signs: each season corresponds to a phase of our life cycle and of the life cycles of all of the myriad aspects of the natural world. If we're writing about the advent of new life and new love, then it makes sense to use the imagery of springtime in our poem. If, conversely, we're writing an elegy about a friend or public figure, then autumn, the season of loss, is perhaps the best source of imagery. Autumn provides a ready symbol for the loss of youth, love, and happiness. Elizabeth Barrett Browning encapsulated that idea in the following lines from "To Autumn":

> Youth fades; and then, the joys of youth,
> Which once refresh'd our mind,
> Shall come—as, on those sighing woods,
> The chilling autumn wind.

While it's standard practice to match the season to the subject, sometimes poets contrast imagery and theme: an elegy or a poem of lost love might normally be set in autumn but by setting it against the freshness and hopefulness of spring, we could create an effective sense of irony. There's something particularly painful about someone dying or a love affair ending in the spring: suffering loss in that season seems to go against Nature. Shakespeare expresses that feeling when, in "Sonnet XCVII," he writes,

> From you have I been absent in the spring,
> When proud pied April, dressed in all his trim,
> Hath put a spirit of youth in everything.

If spring is the time of budding romance, then summer equates to marriage and the consummation of a relationship. Beyond summer lies the decline into autumn and winter—the pages of the calendar have turned, and the book of life is closing. Deborah Landau draws on those associations in her meditation on the inevitability of aging.

I Don't Have a Pill for That
by Deborah Landau

It scares me to watch
a woman hobble along
the sidewalk, hunched adagio

leaning on—
there's so much fear
I could draw you a diagram

of the great reduction
all of us will soon
be way-back-when.

The wedding is over.
Summer is over.
Life please explain.

This book is nearly halfway read.
I don't have a pill for that,
the doctor said.

Diurnal and Nocturnal Symbolism

Daylight brought our ancestors the ability to work and explore and communicate, and light became associated with both rational thought and spiritual revelation. Night was a dangerous time for our hunter-and-gatherer forbears, and they populated those hours with evil spirits and taboos, but they also saw in them the fluidity and magic of dreams and the intimacy of shelter and community.

Like the wheel of the seasons, the cycle of day and night is traditionally associated with our own life cycle: dawn brings rebirth; morning corresponds with the vitality of youth; noon sees us in the power of our prime; afternoon shifts our thoughts to the contemplative and elegiac, and we consider the fall

of the mighty or the loss of our own vitality; in the evening, we confront the eternal and consider the lessons our lives have taught us; finally, night brings the end of life—but it also gives us entrance to the underworld of dreams and magic and reunites us with the spirits of those we have lost.

P.B. Shelley mines the connection between night and death in his "To Night," which, as the title implies, is an apostrophe addressed to darkness and death.

To Night
by Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792–1822)

1

Swiftly walk o'er the western wave,
Spirit of Night!
Out of the misty eastern cave,
Where, all the long and lone daylight,
Thou wovest dreams of joy and fear,
Which make thee terrible and dear,—
Swift be thy flight!

2

Wrap thy form in a mantle gray,
Star-inwrought!
Blind with thine hair the eyes of Day;
Kiss her until she be wearied out,
Then wander o'er city, and sea, and land,
Touching all with thine opiate wand—
Come, long-sought!

3

When I arose and saw the dawn,
I sighed for thee;
When light rode high, and the dew was gone,
And noon lay heavy on flower and tree,
And the weary Day turned to his rest,
Lingering like an unloved guest.
I sighed for thee.

4

Thy brother Death came, and cried,
Wouldst thou me?

Thy sweet child Sleep, thy filmy-eyed,
Murmured like a noontide bee,
Shall I nestle near thy side?
Wouldst thou me?—And I replied,
No, not thee!

5
Death will come when thou art dead,
Soon, too soon—
Sleep will come when thou art fled;
Of neither would I ask the boon
I ask of thee, beloved Night—
Swift be thine approaching flight,
Come soon, soon!

Other Popular Motifs

Closely related to the symbolism of day and night is the association of celestial bodies with states of mind. For our ancestors, stars symbolized the eternal and planets the cyclical; the sun was the source of power, fertility, inspiration, and wisdom, but it could also be blinding and lethal. The moon, conversely, seemed hauntingly close to the earth, and its association with the tides suggested an almost magical power over the elements. We saw beauty and romance in moonlight, but the face of the moon seemed pale as death.

Emily Brontë explores the connotations of moonlight and summer in the rhymed quatrains below. The imagery of the poem evokes a typical "romantic landscape" from a Victorian painting.

XVIII: 'Tis Moonlight, Summer Moonlight
by Emily Brontë (1818–48)

'Tis moonlight, summer moonlight,
All soft and still and fair
The solemn hours of midnight
Breathes sweet thoughts everywhere

But most where trees are sending
Their breezy boughs on high,
Or stooping low are lending
A shelter from the sky.

And there in those wild bowers
A lovely form is laid
Green grass and dew-steeped flowers
Wave gently round her head

The landscape around us, whether mountain, forest, or prairie, suggested its own lexicon of meaningful images, and so did our own bodies and those of the animals with which we shared our world. Processes such as cooking, carving, gathering, trapping, and butchering could all be seen as metaphors for various states of mind and emotions. As we entered the age of relatively advanced technology, we naturally reached for analogies in the new crafts of clockwork, metallurgy, steam power, internal combustion, and other aspects of the mechanical. Read a novel or memoir from the 1840s, and you may notice that the author draws on images of assembly lines, railroads, steamships, and so on. Twentieth-century writers reference electricity and electronics, and poets of the twenty-first century are assimilating the "mythology" of a global Internet. Whatever we behold, we turn into imagery.

Any aspect of our world could conceivably serve as a field of imagery in a poem; here's a brief list of some of the more popular motifs:

- *Celestial*: images of stars, planets, galaxies
- *Climatic*: clouds, rain, sunlight, wind
- *Topographical*: mountains, plains, cliffs, hillsides, riverbeds, estuaries
- *Mechanical*: gears, pulleys, wheels, pistons and connecting rods, engines
- *Electrical*: sparks, lightning, wiring, dynamo, light bulbs
- *Pastoral*: fields, forests, lakes, groves, trails, wildflowers, rivers and creeks
- *Nautical*: ship, compass, oar, sail, waves, seaweed, barnacles, docks and jetties
- *Urban/architectural*: buildings, paved roads, freeway overpasses, sidewalks, signage
- *Physiological*: any part or process of the human body
- *Organic*: roots, leaves, gardens vegetables, soil, fruit, mulch, compost
- *Culinary*: stoves, pots and pans, charring and simmering, boiling water