Chapter Two

Beyond the Ordinary

Witnessing the World as a Poet

> The work of the eyes is done. Go now and do the heart-work on the images imprisoned within you.
>
> —Rainer Maria Rilke, from *Letters to a Young Poet*

Because poetry stretches beyond the ordinary world of perception, we suggest it is "beyond the real" or "surreal" in nature. As defined by the artists, surrealism is a style of artistic expression that heeds and uses the subconscious or unconscious human mind, including dreams and dreamlike imagery, as well as focuses on and creates imagery arrived at by unexpected juxtapositions. However, we do not apply the word *surrealism* as used in the past to describe art or any era of writing.

Instead, in this book, we use the word *surreal* simply, broadly, to describe the way poets examine and describe the world in an extraordinary fashion, one that makes unusual and fresh connections, leaps, and one that creates fresh understanding and insight.

Much of this is true of poetry in general; therefore, we frequently use the term *surreal* to describe the *beyond the ordinary* perception and creativity necessary in poetry. The reason we chose to begin the book this way is because it is a very strong element of poetic craft. It may indeed be part of the tradition of poetry throughout the ages as represented by various poets long before the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and long before it had a name. Consider Dante's descent into the circles of hell, for example, or Milton's dreamlike world in *Paradise Lost*.

Poetry implies the use of images that stretch beyond the ordinary into the extraordinary, beyond the rational image into the subtle tones of irrational thoughts bound up in an image. Poetry demands and includes imagery both concrete and literal as well as interpretive as it moves into the "other" realm of existence, into the place where the real meets the unreal and where the

imagination takes a grand leap into the image of dreams or into our intuitive mind.

This is an important craft element that some of the great poets use in such a way as to make the poem carry the reader off into another imaginary world.

TERMS USED IN THIS CHAPTER

Allusion: An indirect reference to another work of art or literature, such as "On my own road to Damascus, I saw a light . . . ," an allusion to Saul's conversion to Christianity and his new life in Christ as Paul. An allusion can be an implicit mention or connection to another thing, person, or other known thing. The point is the allusion serves the theme of the poem in some relevant fashion.

Caesura: A poetic device in some ways opposite to enjambment. Caesura is the use of full-stop punctuation midline or in an unexpected place midpoem that forces readers to stop, pause, pay attention**.**

Enjambment: Enjambment is a device that encourages the reader to leap to the following line, usually through the use of no punctuation at line's end. As such, readers take no breath at line's end and understand the line "wraps around" to the next line for meaning. Both caesura and enjambment serve poets well in controlling pace and tone.

Craft: As used in this book, refers to the way a poet learns to employ the tools of poetry in order to create a poem of literary quality (in contrast to simplistic verse). As actors refer to their art as a "craft," poets master tools of craft to create art.

Image: The art of painting word pictures in a reader's mind, particularly useful in poetry. Images are created of concrete sensory experiences of sight, sound, smell, touch, taste, size, color, and shape.

Imagery: The poetic device created by the construction of images (see above).

Juxtaposition: The poetic (and rhetorical) device used to place two opposing ideas, thoughts, images, or feelings side by side in order to accentuate the difference between and the meaning of each.

Mood: The tone of any given part of a poem or entire poem (or work of literature). In most strong poems, the tone changes at least once, offering a

contrast between two conflicting emotions or conditions.

Personification: The device of giving human qualities to a nonliving thing. Personification is different from anthropomorphizing in that the former is an obvious device to evoke an unusual comparison for poetic purposes while the latter is a philosophical or scientific fallacy.

Surrealism: A type of artistic expression that lends credence to dreamlike images and imagery of the unconscious/subconscious mind. Surrealism was an artistic movement begun in Europe in the early twentieth century. Its tenets or major points of belief are that the unconscious mind and the dreaming mind offer insights into being that can be expressed as art.

  In this text, we do not mean to suggest that all poetry is surrealistic; we do suggest nonetheless that looking at the world as an artist demands a unique vision. *Surrealism* as we use the term allows the writer freedom to use all forms of emotional, physical, psychical, and dreamlike images and "truths." It allows art to be freed from the constraints of truth as provable and actual.

Theme: Theme is the totality of what a work of art means in its deepest and most complex sense. Theme is the result of the gestalt in any work of art, the sum of the equation, the intended as well as the serendipitous result, the connecting of all the dots. It is not what happens or whom it happens to but what all of those things mean.

THE MODEL POEM

Beginning

by James Wright

The moon drops one or two feathers into the field.
The dark wheat listens.
Be still.
Now.
There they are, the moon's young, trying
Their wings.
Between trees, a slender woman lifts up the lovely shadow
Of her face, and now she steps into the air, now she is gone.
Wholly, into the air.
I stand alone by an elder tree, I do not dare breathe
Or move.

I listen.
The wheat leans back toward its own darkness,
And I lean toward mine.

THE EXPLICATION

From his book *The Branch Will Not Break*, James Wright offers a poem titled "Beginning." If readers take a close look, they will discover the nature of the surreal image along with several other important elements of craft such as the one-word line, the layering of texture onto the page, important line breaks, personification, juxtaposition, a thematic title, and control of mood and pacing.

Wright begins this poem with this image: "The moon drops one or two feathers into the field." Imagine. There are feathers floating down from the moon in the air above the field. The speaker is standing there watching as if in amazement. Perhaps he did not know the moon embodied feathers, but in this curious world it does.

And in this moment the "dark wheat listens," and the entire world of human and natural existence turns its head toward the makings of the moon above, a surreal landscape where the human meets the weird freedom of imagination. Only in imagination can such an image begin and only in the soul can it be believed. This conveys the nature of the surreal image, a merging of the imagined with the real, the imaginary with the actual. Think about that for a moment.

The moment resonates with the speaker. He says, "Be still. / Now.", as if reminding himself to hush, pause, and listen just as he admonishes the reader to do the same. Wright brings the poem to a complete stop in the middle of the lines; this full stop midline is called "caesura," a powerful device of both sound and meaning.

The speaker *slows the pace* by first using a two-word command and then a one-word command so that the reader stops in midpoem and takes the whole first section into consideration. Surely this act performed by the moon must be serious, or why would the speaker stop the reader in midpoem?

The answer becomes obvious: because the speaker wants to make sure his reader recognizes the significance of this event. Not every day does the

moon drop feathers into a field. Not every day does the world of spirit engage with the human world, the world of nature, which is also engaged in the moment.

We live in a mundane world, in a world of the ordinary, but Wright's world is anything but ordinary. He sees beyond the obvious into a broader view of the universe and what this universe has to offer us as human beings. He gives the reader a new vision and new hope for what tomorrow may bring. Notice the layering of texture and how Wright has taken the feathers and turned them into an image, a surreal image, of the moon's young. See how he stretches beyond the ordinary into the realm of the imagined.

Now Wright stretches the mind of the reader even further, far enough to include the image of something more. "Between trees, a slender woman lifts up the lovely shadow / Of her face. . . ." The poem has gone from the moon's young to the image of a "lovely" woman's face in the moonlight, a woman who "steps into the air. . . ." Perhaps the speaker is lonely, and in his loneliness he imagines this slender woman stepping out of the very ether around him into his world, but only for a brief moment.

Just for a moment she appears and then "she is gone. / Wholly, into the air." He lies stricken with just a glance of this imagined woman, the woman of his desire. And so the speaker stands in the dark field alone. Watching this event, he stands "alone by an elder tree," and does "not dare breathe / Or move" lest this vision disappear as it already has.

The poem has a total of fourteen lines, the length of a sonnet. But in this case some of the lines are only two words and one of the lines is only one word. We can't, therefore, call it a sonnet. In just a few short lines and even fewer words the poet manages to capture a newly imagined world.

Wright creates a title that reflects the poem's mood and meaning. The poem, titled "Beginning," obviously is the beginning of an adventure into the other world, the world beyond the ordinary realm into the extraordinary. In this world anything might be possible. Feathers drop from the moon, the moon has tiny young moons, and slender young women magically appear.

Wright ends this clever, daring poem with the lonely image of the wheat leaning "back toward its own darkness," and the speaker leaning back "toward mine," an image of longing. For a moment the world was alive and fleeting and the speaker was spellbound by the happenings in his life. His heart was lifted and his spirit was moved into longing for a woman who

does not exist in our world, yet Wright creates her in such a way that the reader believes she does, in fact, exist.

So what happens in the end? The natural world and the human world revert back to the darkness of their place in the real world, that dark world of human existence. Beyond that existence, Wright suggests magic can be found, things we can only imagine, but things that are a special kind of "real" if readers open their eyes to them, otherworldly things, spiritual things.

EXERCISES FOR STUDENTS

Quick Exercise 1. Find the Magic in Personification and Imagery (15 minutes)

Spend fifteen minutes in class (or out!) working with the devices of personification and imagery. Examine (in your imagination or in the actual world) some *thing*. Create several personifications of what this thing might say, do, look like, things that of course are impossible in "reality" such as the sky frowning, a tree breathing, a room waiting for someone's return. List as many as you can. Think about them when you are done and choose a couple of your best ones to share with the class.

Quick Exercise 2. Leaping from the Concrete to the Abstract (15 minutes)

Brainstorm an idea of a poem with a title, but don't write the poem yet. Start with a title just for fun. Like Wright, imagine another kind of reality where magic occurs regularly. In your mind (or in actuality if you can leave the classroom), find a "spot" for this magical place. You can use a tree like Wright did to inspire him. Follow his lead. What drops from your tree? What imagery does your tree create? Imagine this spot as a place where any kind of magic can happen. Generate a list of details that are both concrete and abstract. Perhaps this will allow you to use personification.

THE MODEL EXERCISE

Write a short poem from five to ten lines describing a particular spot. Use the quick exercises to prompt you. Use Wright's poem as your model. Use

the ideas you engendered in either one or both of the quick exercises or write an entirely new and different poem. Your goal is to create a poem that steps across the lines of real into the surreal and extraordinary, a poem that jumps back and forth between the possible and impossible, the actual and the imaginary.

See, read, think about, and perhaps discuss with others the sample student poems at chapter's end. Perhaps, for example, your poem will be a dialogue between you and some *thing* in nature's world, something impossible in the "actual" but not the extraordinary, surreal world of artistic perception.

You might use your imagination to place yourself at a moment from memory, a difficult or challenging moment, a moment that called up your courage and your kindness. Make sure you gather the same concrete details from memory as you would for a "real" spot.

It can be as simple as choosing a spot, writing down the details and descriptions. Then turn those details into imagery. Lay those images down line by line into some poetic form on the page. Do not try to rhyme any lines, please. Let this be a free-form poem in every respect.

Allow your poem to move beyond the ordinary in its fearless plumbing of the abstract world in the fashion of Wright's poem.

Here are some helpful guidelines: Find a point of observation. Begin your poem in a setting the reader will be able to see. Pretend you are an observer (or perhaps you really were) from a particular, concrete place like "I stand alone by an elder tree." Perhaps you encounter, either actually or imaginatively, an animal or a wild creature. *Begin with an image* like "The moon drops . . . " or "The sun showers down. . . ." It is generally good advice to begin with an image.

Consider the speaker. Who is telling your poem? Remember the speaker does not have to be you. Just think about who is speaking and to whom, with what kind of voice and tone?

Select well-chosen, strong verbs to show movement and add to the visual or sensory imagery you create. Free yourself and encourage yourself to look at the world as a surreal place where you may witness the ordinary and the extraordinary and where you may combine the two fearlessly.

When you put the images you have brainstormed on the page, consider your line lengths and line endings. Control the poem's pace by using pauses of two or more very short lines to create a kind of stop time.

To create imagery: Ask, what is happening here? Where am I transported in this moment? What does this scene make me think about? What connections can I make from past feelings or experiences? Be specific. Be concrete with sensory details: sight, sound, smell, touch, taste, size, color, shape, but don't overwhelm the poem with details. Choose the most unexpected details.

Complete your poem with a motion or an action or interplay between yourself and the images. End with a strong, concrete image. Do not tell the reader what to know or feel. Trust the image to speak for itself. Tread fearlessly into the surreal landscape, blurring the line between the real and the imagined. Title your poem something thematically suggestive, not obvious in the poem itself.

Let your poem lie for a day or two; return to it as a reader. Edit out any unnecessary words or phrases. Watch out for redundancy and eliminate it. Prune, prune, prune.

SAMPLE STUDENT POEMS

Magnolia Avenue

by Natalie Lyons

Miracle Mile jumped the tracks and spread to Union Station
where Greyhound bus riders and Amtrak train viewers wait
surrounded by manicured beauty of red brick buildings
accented with purple petunias and yellow alamanda vines.
DeeDee's Hot Dog House hung a new plastic sign
and a magenta awning to shade the sparkling window
that rattles when the train rumbles past.
The architect Andrew Copeland has spread
the good fortune across the street where the Avenue
divides. His stucco station with a barrel tile roof
fills the center of the "Y." Twin islands out front hint
at what used to be, round top gas pumps where attendants
with name tag patches sewn on their tucked-in shirts
ran to hear "fill-er-up" as customers sat
in the comfort of Fords and Chevys.
The miracle stopped at the Salvation Army building
where years ago ugly metal shutters rolled down
over plate glass windows—perhaps for a hurricane,
and no one since has taken them away. No flowers here,

only cigarette butts and those down on their luck litter
the parking lot. Next door Toffaletti's Hardware store,
where mom bought spatterware bowls and dad
bought nuts and bolts in odd sizes, has boarded the door
that held an Open/Closed sign hanging from a chain.

Intermission

by Shan Wimberly

The water oak reaches to grab heaven.
Peering through the branches
a lone wolf.
Waits.
The last brown leaf surrenders,
to the creeping leaves of three.
An old frail woman draped in red
points northward.
Her cape flows like the Red Sea
through the strait-narrowed way.
Thunder claps.
A branch from the water oak snaps,
ushering in my last curtain call.
The water oak, imperfect, extends
its reach to heaven.

NOTE