Chapter Three

Imagery

Getting to the Heart of It

> Don't tell me the moon is shining; show me the glint of light on broken glass.
>
> —Anton Chekhov

Poets use imagery like painters use color and paintbrushes. Imagery is the heart of poetry, and it is the essential tool of the craft. How does a poet choose an image? How does a certain image connect emotionally and meaningfully to the content of the poem? This connecting of emotion to the poem's content is deeply important to a poem's strength and beauty. An image is more than a picture created in the reader's mind. At its best, an image is a powerful tool for constructing and connecting with the emotional heart of the poem.

As stated in chapter 1's primary modeling exercise, the choice of imagery relies on concrete details (sight, sound, smell, touch, taste, size, color, shape) as well as leaps of mind into more abstract or beyond-the-ordinary metaphors. A strong poem conveys powerful imagery that sets the situation in time and place; it opens like a creative door into the poet's heart. The Imagists of mid-twentieth-century American poetry relied on imagery to convey experience, but poetry from any century uses imagery as its primary tool.

As poets examine their surroundings—both ordinary and beyond the ordinary—and begin to enter a poem, they must choose the details to convey in images. Remember to choose the unexpected details; surprise the reader with the beyond-the-ordinary perspective. Another good thing to remember is not to overwhelm the reader with too many images and too many details. Choose one or a few; make them powerful and unusual.

Finally, the imagery selected and conveyed in words will create its own tone, and this tone will influence meaning and what readers get from the

poem. Throughout the process of editing and revision, it's important to remember that. But imagery contains more than this. American poet Mary Oliver says that poets have a responsibility to readers when choosing and delivering imagery because the images remain in the readers' minds thereafter.

When we coach emerging poets, we want to warn them to be careful about that; be daring and fearless, yes, we tell them; be accurate and detailed and go after the extraordinary details that create imagery, but remain aware *that art is a relationship with its public*. We need to encourage them to self-edit, although it can be painful as we come to love our own words and phrasings. Writers need to learn to weed and prune, weed and prune. The best poets achieve spare and pure imagery.

Most importantly, effective poems never tell readers how to feel, how they felt, how anyone should feel about the whole thing. The most effective poets—the master poets—don't explain. They trust the imagery; they expect readers to get it without any further explanation.

Such poets establish an intimate dialogue with their readers; they believe readers will see and hear and sense their imagery; they know the readers will take that leap at the end of the poem with them, from the literal to the figurative, from the concrete to the imaginative, without blinking.

TERMS USED IN THIS CHAPTER

Denotation/Connotation: Both terms have to do with definition and meaning of any word. While *denotation* means a dictionary and literal meaning, *connotation* implies the deeper figurative meaning associated with the use of a word.

Extended Metaphor or Poetic Conceit: In poetry, an extended metaphor that controls the entire poem from beginning to end is called a poetic conceit.

Irony: Irony is a sophisticated rhetorical device used in all of literature and composition/rhetoric. There are many types of irony, including but not limited to dramatic, situational, and cosmic ironies. Irony takes place when the opposite of what was expected or intended occurs, causing a sense of surprise and perhaps epiphany.

Stanza: A stanza is a poetic paragraph.

Terza Rima: From the Italian meaning "third rhyme," a fixed form of poetry using a series of tercets (three-line stanzas) with an interlaced end-rhyme pattern (ABA, BCB, CDC, DED, EFE, etc.).

Tone: Tone means the mood of a piece of text or a poem that conveys the speaker's emotion. It is primarily created by the choice of language, the syntax, and the speaker's attitude toward the poem's contents and toward the audience.

THE MODEL POEM

First Snow in Alsace

by Richard Wilbur

The snow came down last night like moths
Burned on the moon; it fell till dawn,
Covered the town with simple cloths.

Absolute snow lies rumpled on
What shellbursts scattered and deranged,
Entangled railings, crevassed lawns.

As if it did not know they'd changed,
Snow smoothly clasps the roofs of homes
Fear-gutted, trustless and estranged.

The ration stacks are milky domes;
Across the ammunition pile
The snow has climbed in sparkling combs.

You think: beyond the town a mile
Or two, this snowfall fills the eyes
Of soldiers dead a little while.

Persons and persons in disguise,
Walking the new air white and fine,
Trade glances quick with shared surprise.

At children's windows, heaped, benign,
As always, winter shines the most,
And frost makes marvelous designs.

The night guard coming from his post,
Ten first-snows back in thought, walks slow
And warms him with a boyish boast:

He was the first to see the snow.

THE EXPLICATION

Richard Wilbur's talent for creating images is illustrated in his poem "First Snow in Alsace." The images in this poem are full-bodied and extravagant, weaving deftly down through the poem.

The reader enters the poem through a startling image: "The snow came down last night like moths / Burned on the moon." The snow is compared to moths but not just any moths. These have been "burned on the moon"; thus the implication is burned moths, smoke, ashes, leftover and fading flame. So right away readers get a dark/light juxtaposition that suggests something terrible has happened recently but now the snow is falling. The snow is not quite clean, the reader senses; it is, rather, the color of burned moths. What is happening here? See how a well-drawn image leads a reader into a poem?

This burned snow "fell till dawn," but more importantly "Covered the town with simple cloths." Snow is a natural phenomenon, a part of nature in its glory; therefore, the snow is compared with "simple cloths," as if the making of snow by nature is a simple process, one that is able to cover the world like cloth covers the table. *Simple* can also be a noun that means an herbal remedy or a natural remedy. Thus the noun choice is a deft one.

In terms of craft, Wilbur rhymes the first line with the third line. It's a structured poem, a type called terza rima comprised of eight tercets and one single line. (Chapter 15 discusses more of these wonderful fixed-form poems.) It has an interwoven rhyme pattern of ABA as does the entire poem. To find the rhyme pattern, look at the final word in each line. Call the first rhyme A, the second B, and so forth. That's how you can chart the rhyme scheme.

The rhymes are graceful and unforced, so the poem moves smoothly down the page in three-line stanzas, except the last line, which stands on its own after a stanza break.

Wilbur continues with "absolute snow lies rumpled on / What shellbursts scattered and deranged, / Entangled railings, crevassed lawns." The speaker begins to complicate the image of the snow by having it cover the remnants

of brutal war and a recent battle in which “shellbursts” lie “scattered and deranged”; railings are “entangled,” lawns “crevassed.”

Wilbur’s use of the word *absolute* to describe this snow, and also *rumpled*, suggests that snow has the uncanny ability to cover over human carnage. The reader cannot help but think of a rumpled bed, a place of comfort. Wilbur’s use of concrete images redefines our thoughts of what snow can do.

The reader also recognizes the juxtaposition of white and black, the opposites, which reflect both good and evil on a metaphorical level, or pristine white snow and the black marks left behind to scar the landscape on a literal level. In the next stanza the speaker personifies the snow, saying: “As if it did not know they’d changed, / snow smoothly clasps the roofs of homes / fear-gutted, trustless and estranged.”

Here the snow fails to recognize the ravages of war on the houses in this town, and it covers the roofs as if everything is normal, but the houses remain “fear-gutted.” Still, the snow attempts to cover all signs of war. The snow turns “ration stacks” into “milky domes,” and the snow also manages to transform the “ammunition pile” into “sparkling combs.”

Note how the poet juxtaposes destruction with salvation throughout this poem: The town is mangled, battered, and crushed by war, but those soldiers and no doubt civilians who survived the battle have awakened to a new world, it seems, a redeemed world.

Wilbur stacks the images of war one by one into the poem, then evokes the image of the snow filling “the eyes / Of soldiers dead a little while” just a mile or two away from the town. It is a curious line that suggests a field filled with dead soldiers lying on their backs and being covered with snow.

Wilbur does not comment on the war. He simply juxtaposes the white snow against the images of horror, which makes a comment all its own.

The poem tells us “persons and persons in disguise” are “walking the new air white and fine.” Two interpretations are possible here: One is that some of the persons “walking” the air are ghosts now pure and redeemed; the other is that those who remain, now covered in snow as well as shocked by tragedy, appear shocked to be alive.

They are literally and figuratively changed by what has happened. It becomes both tragedy and miracle. They “trade glances quick with shared surprise.” Wilbur’s images accentuate the amazement of the people.

The snow creates a surreal and even miraculous vision of the world with its stark white snowdrifts. Even through "children's windows," "frost makes marvelous designs." The snow seems to redeem for a moment the people and children in this town, and even the soldiers passing through seem redeemed. The tone has changed from the weird, rust-colored snow and deranged landscape to one of peace, of hope, of beauty.

As the "night guard" comes "from his post," walking slowly, thinking about "ten first-snows back," he "boasts" "He was the first to see the snow." This simple moment shows an almost miraculous childlike innocence. One wonders who that night guard was; perhaps the poet himself? A night guard who spoke to the speaker? Is the speaker Wilbur himself? We don't know. And it doesn't matter. This poem has verisimilitude. The scene registers as true to readers. We believe this. We are transported by the poem's honesty and clarity of imagery.

Wilbur's use of powerful images here suggests that nature offers a kind of grace, a mystical healing of the ravages of war and the devastations caused by human beings at war. This grace is a kind of redemption. The poem's tone is so tender that it sounds almost hymnal in places.

Wilbur uses strong images created by an attentive eye, a writer on whom nothing is lost in his witnessing of it. He looks at the world or at the world of memory and from it withdraws one morning in which something miraculous seems to happen. Others notice this, but he, the poet, recorded it here, and more than that, he created images of sight, sound, smell, color, size, and shape.

EXERCISES FOR STUDENTS

Quick Exercise 1. Creating Imagery through Word Choice (15 minutes)

Look up the words *melancholy* and *despair* in a dictionary. It doesn't matter that you already know what the words mean; what matters is that the dictionary will often give you new insights into a common word. Ask a few questions: What is the difference between sadness and melancholy? Despair and melancholy?

Your task is to learn how to create imagery that expresses a particular mood. Brainstorm a list of images that capture the mood of the word *melancholy* and the word *despair*. Jot down your phrases. See if you can create images that suggest melancholy and despair without using those words. Share these phrases with the class or a writing partner at the end of fifteen minutes.

Quick Exercise 2. Brainstorm a List of Images about a Specific Place (15 minutes)

In your mind's eye, pick a place in nature or from your childhood. Make sure it is a specific and real place. Jot down details about that place. How did/does it smell there? What colors do you see? Concentrate on sight, sound, smell, touch, taste, size, color, and shape.

These are the kinds of details that create imagery. Remember what you learned in chapters 1 and 2 about a poet's perception. Think about Wright's imagery that moves back and forth between the real and the surreal; think about Wilbur's poem and how the imagery creates tone and mood from the first line. Remember not to offer the obvious but to notice and share the images others might miss.

Make your imagery startling, unique, and packed with meaning. List your images. If you have time, edit and polish them. Share with the class. Use this exercise to move into the modeling assignment below.

THE MODEL EXERCISE

Write a poem about nature's ability to heal the world in a particular place. It's important to choose one specific spot, not write about nature in general, which is too broad for details. Title your poem something that includes the name of the area, place, or region. Think about Wilbur's title and how it affects meaning.

Regarding the form and structure, you can try to write a rhymed poem, or try the challenging rhymed tercets (or unrhymed). Sometimes attempting end rhyme is awkward for emerging poets. However, if you feel comfortable giving it a try, please feel free to do so. Try not to invert wordings to fit a rhyme in but rather strive to find a melodic rhyme (even a slant rhyme).

Can you include any irony? Try to do so.

Imagine the place you are writing about and jot down a series of images about it. Start with a strong image that surprises and intrigues the reader.

Do not use "I" but instead, like Wilbur, use third person. Let this speaker describe in the subsequent tercets nature. What happened in this place? How was the landscape harmed or ruined? How does it look now? Maybe your chosen spot is a childhood home that has now gone to ruin; maybe your poem is about a house in the neighborhood that has fallen to ruin and now the plants and wild things have overtaken it.

Remember to learn from Wilbur about careful and deliberate word choice, particularly verb choice. Do not let adjectives or adverbs tell the story; let the well-chosen action verbs, imagistic verbs, tell the tale. Remember that each word you choose creates tone and affects the reader. Know what tone you want to create, and choose words that convey and create that tone. Consider the connotation of words selected. Words have both literal and interpretative meanings and associations.

Is there a person or are there people in your poem? Paint them in with details as the poem moves down the page. What do they say to one another or think to themselves? How does that contribute to your poem's meaning?

As always, after the first draft, let the poem sit for a while. Come back to it to edit and revise lines, words, and phrases. Share it with your group. Ask what tone or tones are conveyed in your poem. Ask which of your imagery is fresh and meaningful and which just doesn't work or is simply too banal to be effective (something others have heard before).

SAMPLE STUDENT POEMS

Glass Earth

by Ethan Marcus Goode

Manhattan smog clouds shutter the sunrise,
the Pacific chokes on its diet of refuse,
a polar bear drowns in the melted Arctic,
while mankind sits on his crumbling throne
and smiles at the breaking of the world.

Northern Winters

by Tricia Windowmaker

A fresh smell blows upon the wind
Moisture touches your skin

Snowflakes fall;
The night air crawls

The stars begin to spin
And then you see

Colors dance to notes from songs
That softly play in tune.

Accolade to the Morning

by Lacey Hudspeth

Darkness overbears the horizon
While mist holds longingly to the tips of the grass.
Mandolin plays a soft ballad background
Gently plucking the notes of
A crescendo to morning.

Darkness begins to lessen its grip.

Clouds resemble cider down
Blowing sweetly this way and that.
Sink back into my rocking chair
While my coffee blows whiffs of cinnamon and hazelnut
And warms my chest as it settles there.

What playful darkness . . .

A game of cat and mouse with the dawn.
I inhale—preparation for another day.
Tranquility shakes my hand—
Signing a peace treaty to the war.

Darkness crawls into a hole.
Dawn captures the mouse again.

The rising of the sun.
The trajectory of life.

NOTE