

## **Pulling White Rabbits Out of the Air**

Last April I was in Tulsa doing a poetry program in the schools. I asked the kids, “What is a poet?”

One of the boys in sixth grade shot up his hand and said, “A poet is someone who says some words, and then something happens.”

“Something happens?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he said. “It’s like magic.”

Give that kid an A+. That’s exactly what poets are trying to do with our words. Into thin air, we introduce rhythms, cadence and images. And Presto! Sometimes in the audience, the white rabbits do appear in the form of a nod, a tear, a guffaw or that stunning silence that comes just after the poem is done and just before the audience says “mmmm.”

And of course, sometimes the magic doesn’t work, and Uh Oh! Instead of white rabbits, we produce a blank stare, a yawn, or an awkward silence followed by clumsy applause.

It’s not all abracadabra.

And of course, the poems don’t just leap out of a hat, either. They come from hours of tugging at verbs and twisting at lines to create just the right effect.

I’m often surprised by people who just write in their journals and pronounce the entry a finished poem. The Beats are, in part, responsible for this with their mantra “First thought, best thought.”

I agree, you can destroy a poem by tweaking it until you’ve wrung out whatever emotional intensity sparked it. In fact, one of my biggest complaints with published poems today is that they seem like academic exercises: neat rhymes and perfect rhythms, but no guts.

But for the most part, the first-draft poems that I’ve seen in workshops and heard at readings have glimmers of presto surrounded by clunky gunk.

To elaborate on the sixth grader’s definition: A poet, like a magician, is someone who commits to practicing and perfecting his or her craft so that the end result looks like magic—easy and artless—but when you look behind the scenes, you see a lot more going on.

Robert Lowell, when writing “The Skunk Hour,” first began the seventh stanza:

And the skunks search,  
All elbows, for a bite to eat.  
They are roaming out on Main Street:

White stripes in moonlight, eyes' red fire

But his final version, the one that sparkles, reads:

only skunks that search  
in the moonlight for a bite to eat.  
They march on their soles up Main Street:  
white stripes, moonstruck eyes' red fire

What a difference a sole makes.

Words can indeed be magic, but only when set correctly. Say the word “sole” by itself, and it has no particular power. Ah, but slip it into a line such as Lowell’s, and suddenly it reverberates with homophonic and visual innuendo.

And herein lies the true calling of the poet: from all the available words in the world, to choose just the right ones and put them in just the right place so that they will sing together to create an image, a moment, a feeling.

The words need not be supercallifragalistically special. Even the most quotidian word can rise to brilliance when we place it, gemlike, in the right setting. I learned this from another group of students just a few weeks ago.

The Coal Creek Canyon K-8 School brought me in to do a poetry program for children in kindergarten through third grade. Inspired by the Tulsa boy, I’d designed a program around the “poetry-as-magic-words” theme.

The kids sat in the choir room on risers—75 wiggly, tiny little bodies giddy with energy. Every time I asked a question, 75 hands would shoot into the air. I love that about young kids—they’re not afraid to show interest. Sometimes, the super enthusiastic students would put both hands in the air.

“Who can tell me a magic word?” I asked.

Ninety hands went up.

I called on the girl in pink and white stripes. “Abracadabra.”

“Great answer! What might happen if you say that?”

“A rabbit might come out of a hat,” she said.

Yeah!

Another magic word? “Open Sesame!”

“What might happen if you say it?” I asked.

“A door might open up,” he said.

I was impressed he knew about Ali Baba’s password from *Arabian Nights*. As a kid, I’d thought it was a homophone, “Open Says Me.”

“What’s another magic word?” I asked the kids.

The girl in the back row almost dislocated her arm from her shoulder in an attempt to be called on.

“Yes, you in the green shirt.”

“Please.”

“Great magic word,” I said, surprised that I hadn’t thought of that. As soon as she said it, I remembered plenty of times I had heard as a young girl, “What’s the magic word?” So I asked her, “What might happen if you say please?”

“You get what you ask for,” she said matter-of-factly.

But my favorite magic word came from the boy in blue in the front row.

“Hi,” he said. I was puzzled.

“What happens when you say ‘Hi’?” I asked.

“You make a new friend.”

Presto.

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