

The DarkPoetry Almanac

November 26, 2009

In this edition: A poem and discussion on imagery, and how to use it to write poems that hit your reader's brain with a thud, without having to actually throw the anthology at them. I'll wrap up with what's happening in the DarkPoetry world, including some good news for hopeful merit poets, and a birthday chuckle.

A Poem

This month's featured poem was written by a favorite poet of mine named Pablo Neruda. Neruda was born in Chile and worked in a number of diplomatic posts, but he is best remembered and most beloved for his image-rich poetry.

Thinking, Tangling Shadows

From the collection: "Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair" 1924

Pablo Neruda (1904-1973)

Thinking, tangling shadows in the deep solitude.

You are far away too, oh farther than anyone.

Thinking, freeing birds, dissolving images,

burying lamps.

Belfry of fogs, how far away, up there!

Stifling laments, milling shadowy hopes,

taciturn miller,

night falls on you face downward, far from the city.

Your presence is foreign, as strange to me as a thing.

I think, I explore great tracts of my life before you.

My life before anyone, my harsh life.

The shout facing the sea, among the rocks,

running free, mad, in the sea-spray.

The sad rage, the shout, the solitude of the sea.

Headlong, violent, stretched towards the sky.

You, woman, what were you there, what ray, what vane

of that immense fan? You were as far as you are now.

Fire in the forest! Burn in blue crosses.

Burn, burn, flame up, sparkle in trees of light.

It collapses, crackling. Fire. Fire.

And my soul dances, seared with curls of fire.

Who calls? What silence peopled with echoes?

Hour of nostalgia, hour of happiness, hour of solitude.

Hour that is mine from among them all!

Megaphone in which the wind passes singing.

Such a passion of weeping tied to my body.

Shaking of all the roots,

attack of all the waves!

My soul wandered, happy, sad, unending.

Thinking, burying lamps in the deep solitude.

Who are you, who are you?

Translated from [Spanish](#) by [W. S. Merwin](#)

Workshop

This month's piece is written by Matt Steven ([DarkPoet](#)) and is about effective use of imagery in poetry:

Since we are such visually-oriented creatures, let's talk about imagery in poetry; or, for the snobs amongst you: "figurative language." Few things add as much emotional power to a poem as effective imagery. I will talk about some of the use of imagery in the preceding poem, and distill these observations into a few high-impact tools that you can easily put to use in your own poetry.

While this poem is not Neruda's best or most popular work, it should serve our humble analysis very well. It was chosen for this publication due to its generally dark nature, and its clever use of metaphor and especially its bizarre simile.

As always, let's start with "the concrete," that magical phrase from which all great poetry springs. Put on your analytical hat, and read the poem again; but this time do it looking for as many tangible and easily related objects that you can find. Shadows, birds, lamps, fogs, the sea, and it goes on. Are you tasting the salty air yet? The first few stanzas build up the environment in which this poem lives by using concrete objects that are easily understood. By the time you get to the action, you know where you are. This is definitely a "storytelling" poem.

After tallying up the concrete, it seems only natural to switch into a conversation about “burying lamps.” Neruda leads with, and closes with this figure: a powerful rhetorical device. So what is it? There's the obvious metaphor: it may mean that someone is trying to cover up a light of some kind. But why a light? It could be something that's visible to everyone, or perhaps it represents knowledge of something, or even the concept of purity or goodness. This is a fun poetic ambiguity because it's really a mystery, and as curious creatures we'd like to solve it. But from a purely toolbox standpoint, it is a metaphor: an implicit (intended, but not specified) comparison with a real thing.

Also remarkable is this odd bit of phrase: “as strange to me as a thing.” This is technically a simile (an explicit comparison to something tangible), but wait, a thing? What a marvelous corruption of a simile this is. Stood on its head, to make the most vague line that would seem humanly possible rather than actually mentally connecting you to an idea. This is one trick that you and I will probably never get away with because it is a complete turning away from the concrete. But it seems to have a purpose here.

The many metaphors and the one simile in this piece say powerful things and create images that you can incorporate into your natural senses. This is one of the most important and easily learned components in the artistry of poetry. Here are some ways to use these tools in your own work:

First off, to be effective, one has to talk about concrete things that the reader will already know very well and be able to assimilate into their own picture of the world of your poem. So you have to know your audience. It's a lot like giving a speech: you may confidently insert some Douglas Adams or Monty Python references into a talk aimed at engineering students, but the same material will likely result in puzzlement

and confusion in the business school. When you don't know who your audience is, make no assumptions! Communicate the world of your poem in the most commonplace language that you can manage. Everybody knows what a lamp is, but not everyone knows why 42 is such a darned [useful](#) number. Unless you have good reasons to do otherwise, try to write something that everybody will understand.

And be careful. Metaphor is a tool that is easily abused. Good metaphors take familiar objects and concepts and apply them appropriately to the scene of the poem. Bad metaphors take ambiguous or arbitrary objects and try to bend them into the poetry. Knowing the difference is important, and a lack of relevance tends to be the common factor in all [poorly chosen metaphors](#). Of course almost all of those bad examples in the former linked text are actually similes but lets not be picky. You know the difference now right? (similes use “like” or “as”)

You also need to know when to stop. Notice how Neruda exercised moderation in his work. Only certain parts of this poem involve metaphor. They're used to add excitement and energy to the poem in crucial spots, and left out of some other areas where the reader can sort of pause and relax a little.

One other tool that you can use sparingly to add meaning is something called [personification](#). This means that you add the characteristics or actions of a living thing to an inanimate object:

It was not Night, for all the bells

Put out their Tongues, for Noon

Emily Dickinson, "It was not Death, for I stood up"

It's a little harder to do a good job of this, and surprisingly easy to make a really stupid personification. This is why good poets revise a lot, and pass the poem around to a few friends before actually sending it off for the world to read.

These tools can take you a long way to adding “visual” elements to your poetic communications. You should be able to spot a metaphor or simile, and decide for yourself whether it's an appropriate one or a completely silly thing. You also know about the power of personification, which when mastered can really thrill your readers, or if you're out to torture your reader, can really make them cringe.

Is this section useful to you? It's a substantial effort to write, so please provide some feedback!

News

November saw the introduction of the new member-driven [contest system](#). Members can set up contests for others to enter, and can win prizes. If you hurry, there are a couple of contests ending very soon that have few entries, and should be easy to win!

Also added was a “stalking chat box” which follows members from page to page within the site. At the conclusion of the preview period in November, this option will be available only to Gold members.

Another new and much requested feature is the member search, where you can try to hunt down those members where you only “sorta” remember their usernames. It works on a chunky basis, so a search for “ark” would match DarkPoet, Fark, and Clark for example. I'll be adding more sophisticated search tools as people ask for them.

Customizing profiles is going well. SilentStalker in particular has been working with me to make the profiles more customizable via the stylesheet, and [his profile](#) is a good example of what you can do with a stylesheet customization. You'll also see a number of other (Full/Gold) profiles around the site with elaborate customizations.

DarkPoetry saw a slight rise in membership in December, but it still stagnates overall in both membership numbers and real income. If you want to help promote DarkPoetry, first promote yourself! Make links from your blog, personal home pages, and profiles on other web sites [to your DarkPoetry profile](#) wherever possible. Click for some example links, or Dpmail SilentStalker, Adaml or Six-Out for help with HTML and making links.

Or do it the easy way. Click the “Share” links to put your poems on Facebook, MySpace and other sites. Dig poems that you like. The more activity we have from sharing good poems with people outside of the DarkPoetry community, the better.

Are you a Facebook (tm) user? Be sure to “Fan” the [DarkPoetry](#) Facebook group and stay up to date on day to day happenings on DarkPoetry.

People and Events

Do you have an event you'd like to share next month? Please [Dpmail](#) with your announcement.

DarkPoetry.com Turns Eleven

On December 8th, 1998, Matt bought the domain “darkpoetry.com” and started work on what we have today. Of course, DarkPoetry had been around for a few years prior to that, but that is when the actual domain came into being and a permanent home was found for the community. Thanks to the Wayback Machine, there are [plenty](#) of [embarrassing snapshots](#) of what DarkPoetry has looked like [over the years](#).

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