

## MOVING FROM THE ABSTRACT TO THE CONCRETE

by Neil Rollinson

**...nothing, but in things** - William Carlos Williams.

What are the big subjects that poets address? Love, loss, sadness, etc. These are subjects that move us, that make us feel compelled to write poetry often. But these are also subjects fraught with danger. It's all too easy to be clichéd and sentimental when we write about these subjects, and this in part, is due to the nature of abstract nouns. We really need to avoid them like the plague (talking of clichés!). Now, as I've said, love and loss and loneliness are an important themes, emotive and powerful, we've all experienced this bitterness at some point in our lives, so lets not chuck these things out and say we're not going to engage with them poetically.

As poets we need to know how to make the most of these dangerous themes, and this is where the concrete comes to help us. Just using the word lonely for instance, ie: I was lonely, he felt lonely, really tells us nothing about our subject. This is the nature of abstraction, abstract nouns are slippery, intangible and vague. Loneliness, like love is an abstract noun. Nouns are things, as we know, real things: a hammer, a tree, a motorway flyover, a bowl of potatoes, an axe. So what then is loneliness, or happiness, or fear? Say *bowl of potatoes* and I'm there, i can see, smell, touch, but say *fear* and I'm struggling to focus.

So lets take one of these concrete nouns, and imbue it with loneliness, or fear. Let the concrete noun carry the emotion. Think for instance of William Carlos Williams' famous poem 'The Red Wheelbarrow'

**[www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/15537](http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/15537)**

This is a poem rich in concrete imagery. This is in fact what's known as an Imagist poem, but that's another subject. This poem might in fact, be titled 'Loneliness' or 'Loss' - though of course it already has a perfect title: 'The Red Wheelbarrow'.

What was the poet thinking or feeling when he was looking out of his window into the garden. Something about the wheelbarrow obviously struck him deeply, and in his genius he managed to get the wheelbarrow to carry all the emotional intensity.

Similarly if you can get hold of Billy Collins' poem 'On Turning Ten', there's a wonderful few lines:

and my bicycle never leaned against the garage  
as it does today,  
all the dark blue speed drained out of it.

The poem is a contemplation of aging, of loss of innocence (in the voice of a ten year old) but see how he makes the bicycle carry the burden of his anxiety and emotion.

Abstraction is the poet's enemy, while the concrete is one of the poet's dearest friends.

---

More ideas to inspire your writing at [www.poetryschool.com](http://www.poetryschool.com) – download, online and face-to-face

All material is © The Poetry School and the Author. Please do not reproduce, distribute or transmit this material without permission from The Poetry School.

The Poetry School, 81 Lambeth Walk, London SE11 6DX, UK Tel: +44 (0)207 582 1679

## TEACHING THE ART OF POETRY

---

### Poetry Exercise

Go around the house, and collect ten various and different objects, preferably something belonging to someone else, a relative, partner or flatmate. (The exercise works best if the objects have no emotional context for the poet). Now put them in a box.

Write ten different abstract nouns on pieces of paper, and put them in another box.

Don't be fussy about the objects you pick, a shaving brush or a pipe are just as good as a ring or a rose. In fact rings and roses already have too many poetic contexts, so its probably best to avoid things like that.

Now, first of all, you take an object from the bag and place it on your writing desk, say a shaving brush. Then you take an abstract noun, (don't look), say sadness or lust, and place it beside your object.

Your task is to write a poem about your object, imbuing it with the emotion, and feeling of the abstract, so that we know implicitly, for example, that the poem is about sadness or lust, but without you ever telling us this explicitly.

You are not allowed to use the abstract noun in your poem.

For example, off the top of my head, I might approach my shaving brush like this.

Now that he's gone,  
my fathers shaving brush  
stands on the sink,  
beside the toothpaste tube.  
I hold it briefly,  
run the fine hairs  
across my face ...

The implication is, that the father is gone and his shaving brush is a sad reminder of him. I'd develop this poem to deepen the resonances and the sadness, not by telling the reader that I was sad, but by showing my sadness, ie. my imitating him shaving, running the brush across my face like he must have done many times. I could include a lot of other details that broaden and deepen the emotion, and as long as I keep control of my language, and avoid the abstract, I know it will produce a good poem.

So - you get the idea. Go get your objects, write your nouns and have fun exploring your emotions in a thoughtful and interesting way - and go deep.

---

More ideas to inspire your writing at [www.poetryschool.com](http://www.poetryschool.com) – download, online and face-to-face

All material is © The Poetry School and the Author. Please do not reproduce, distribute or transmit this material without permission from The Poetry School.

The Poetry School, 81 Lambeth Walk, London SE11 6DX, UK Tel: +44 (0)207 582 1679