



SOME THOUGHTS ON WRITING A GOOD POEM

by Deborah Moffatt

To write a good poem, you need, first of all - and this is probably obvious -- to have an idea, something you really want to write about. It doesn't have to be the most original idea, or an idea that seems "appropriate" for a poem, but it should be something that matters to you.

Then you need to build a poem around that idea. For me, the second important thing is to find another idea. I usually find that there is something that's been kicking around in my mind for a while, but I haven't found a way to write about it.

This second idea may or may not be directly, or obviously, related to the first idea, but something tells you that the two will go together. You can then use one idea to enhance the other, or you can create an argument, a bit of tension, between the two ideas. That would be similar to creating a plot for a short story, or, say, a thesis and anti-thesis.

After that, you will need to discover the language of the poem, the tone, the atmosphere. You need to find a suitable vocabulary, and a suitable form; I usually create a form as I go along, especially when I'm working in Gaelic, where the rhythm of the words is quite different from the English. The length of the lines you choose is important, as is the length of the stanzas, if you're using them.

It's a really good idea to experiment with all of that for a bit, to try and find what works best for this particular poem. Once you've got that settled, the rest can be quite simple...although usually it isn't! You have to go at a poem like a dog with a bone, chew it over and over, maybe bury it a few times. Someone once told me to never throw away anything I've written. Even if you don't keep the actual paper work, you can always go back to an idea with some fresh thoughts some other time.

Another possibility is that, in spite of what you had planned to write, you find yourself going off on a tangent. That can be a terrible mistake, and if you don't realise that you're going wrong you'll just make a huge mess of your poem.

On the other hand, it might be much better than what you had originally planned. So I say, go with the flow, if it seems to be working. But keep your original thoughts and scribbles to hand, just in case you need to start over again.

The final hurdle is ending the poem. I often realise (or a good editor tells me) that I've come to the end sooner than I thought. The last stanza, or the last line, can be redundant, or a bit trite, if you're trying too hard to make a point or to be clever.

Then the really hard part is knowing when to stop tinkering. You still have a chance to spoil a good poem! But if you have doubts about anything in the poem, don't dismiss them. Your instinct is probably right.