



## Workshop Redux: Specificity

Today's column is about how specificity works in a poem and what it can do for the landscape of the piece. We're going to use Ruth Stone's poem "Pokeberries," as an example. But before you take a look at it, we wanted to share our revision of that poem. If you are familiar with the original, our changes will stand out immediately. Give it a read anyway, whether you've read the original or not, and try to focus on how the poem makes you feel and how it resonates with you.

### Pokeberries

I started out in the mountains  
with my grandma's bed  
and my aunt's wine.  
We lived on very little.  
My aunt scrubbed right through the floor.  
My father was a northerner who was creative  
and made some bad decisions.  
He married my mother on the rebound.  
Who would want a girl like that?  
They took a train up farther north  
and someone stole my father's belongings.  
My whole life has been imperfect.  
No man seemed right for me. I was awkward  
until I found where I belonged.  
There is no use asking what it means.  
With my first paycheck I bought my own  
place; I had lamps and a road.  
I'm sticking here like an animal, waiting,  
like one that's been shot. No amount of knowledge  
can get my grandfather out of me;  
or my aunt; or my mother, who didn't just like living.  
She loved it.

Now, keeping the revision in mind, read the original piece:

## Pokeberries

I started out in the Virginia mountains  
with my grandma's pansy bed  
and my Aunt Maud's dandelion wine.  
We lived on greens and back-fat and biscuits.  
My Aunt Maud scrubbed right through the linoleum.  
My daddy was a northerner who played drums  
and chewed tobacco and gambled.  
He married my mama on the rebound.  
Who would want an ignorant hill girl with red hair?  
They took a Pullman up to Indianapolis  
and someone stole my daddy's wallet.  
My whole life has been stained with pokeberries.  
No man seemed right for me. I was awkward  
until I found a good wood-burning stove.  
There is no use asking what it means.  
With my first piece of ready cash I bought my own  
place in Vermont; kerosene lamps, dirt road.  
I'm sticking here like a porcupine up a tree.  
Like the one our neighbor shot. Its bones and skin  
hung there for three years in the orchard.  
No amount of knowledge can shake my grandma out of me;  
or my Aunt Maud; or my mama, who didn't just bite an apple  
with her big white teeth. She split it in two.

It's fairly obvious what we did to the poem, removing as much of the specific language as possible and substituting more general terms. The pokeberries are reduced to berries. The Virginia mountains become a generic mountain range. Aunt Maud becomes any aunt, and even the endearing terms "mama" and "daddy" are changed to the more formal, and less intimate, "mother" and "father."

Where examples were used to show the character of someone in the poem, such as "My daddy was a northerner who played drums / and chewed tobacco and gambled," we substituted in statements about the person instead: "My father was a northerner who was creative / and made some bad decisions." Where the quality of living is shown in the poem's last lines: "or my mama, who didn't just bite an apple / with her big white teeth. She split it in two," we reduced the lines down to the idea behind them: "or my mother, who didn't just like living. / She loved it."

Do all these changes we made to the piece make Stone's poem bad? Not necessarily. We certainly weren't trying to write a stunning revision. In fact, for illustration purposes, we were trying to do just the opposite. (Stone, however, is such a strong writer that the sturdy framework of her poem comes through even with the changes.) But the revision is certainly weaker, by far, than the original. And in this case, the strength—as we've illustrated by showing what happens without it—comes from the specific details and the showing, as opposed to telling, that give this piece such grace and immediacy.

When we see "Virginia mountains" we have a strong sense of place. When we read, "We lived on greens and back-fat and biscuits" we learn so much more than the first thought that might come to mind when writing a draft of a poem, "We lived on very little" or the cliché notion of "just scraping by." Inside Stone's words an entire life

unfolds, complete with all the detail that makes the speaker's life—in that particular region, at that point in history, and in that family—unique.

This poem brings up an many interesting points of discussion about specificity and detail, which is our focus of this installment of “Workshop Redux,” one of which is that some writers will talk about avoiding or at least questioning the use of “extra” language in a poem, and examining the use of every modifier. Is the modifier needed? Does it add to the poem? Is there another word that could serve in the place of a modifier-noun combination?

That is certainly sound advice, but this poem also exemplifies what happens with language, including modifiers, when used with precision and when no substitute will do without compromising the overall world the poem is creating.

How did you feel when you read the revised version of Stone's piece? What effect did the removal of the specifics have on your ability to place yourself in the poem, or did you feel the poem was inhibited by the changes? When you write drafts of new poems, do you find yourself gravitating toward phrases that could be either packed up into cleaner, more streamlined language or, on the other hand, that might be better to unpack into more detailed and specific language?

We would love to hear your responses in the comments or any other thoughts or questions you have about how specifics serve to fuel a poem. So get your comment on!

Also, we have created a new forum thread in each of our critique groups called “Workshop Redux: Specificity.” If you have a piece that you want examined solely for specificity of language, you can add it to the thread for whichever critique group you belong to. This is a great way to get your feet wet with both critiquing and having your work critiqued in a very directed way by looking at just this one aspect of the poems being submitted. We hope members will jump in and start a lively discussion about how details inform your work.

The Workshop 101 Forum is <here>. The Workshop 201 Forum is <here>. And the Workshop 301 Forum is <here>.

(All the rules of the critique groups still apply, so make sure you take a look at those guidelines before sharing or critiquing work. If you don't belong to a critique group, all you need to know is listed in our navigation bar at the top of the page under “Workshops.”) 🌸

Ruth Stone's “Pokeberries,” from *What Love Comes To: New and Selected Poems* (2008), appears courtesy of Copper Canyon Press, <www.coppercanyonpress.org>.