

Elaine Christensen

A Suitcase Packed With Everyday Things

Goethe said, “I no sooner have an idea, than it turns into an image.” Frost took it one step further: “There are many other things I have found myself saying about poetry—but the chiefest of these is that it is metaphor, saying one thing and meaning another, saying one thing in terms of another.” While experienced poets carry out these transformation automatically, from idea into image or metaphor, beginning poets may need a little practice. Write a poem in the style of the one that follows:

Joy is a suitcase
packed with everyday things:
no beaded gowns, no hats
no umbrella
just pajamas, a toothbrush, sneakers.
If it rains
stand there
soak up every drop
like applause.

from *I Have Learned 5 Things* by Elaine Christensen

First make a list of abstractions like the following:

Aging:
Shock:
Hope:
Sadness:

Second, make a list of everyday actions you have observed, such as the following:

A caged bird knocking seeds all over the carpet
Standing under a huge shade tree
Wipers moving back and forth across a window
The mail sitting in a metal box at the curb
A woman shaking out a rug

Third, link the abstraction to the image, sometimes the more arbitrarily the better. Sometimes with a little tweaking you may end up with a short poem complete in itself or maybe you have the opening stanza of a longer poem. The possibilities are almost endless:

Hope is a woman shaking out a rug . . .
Aging is a caged bird knocking seeds all over the carpet . . .
Sadness is like wipers moving back and forth across a window . . .

Poets use ordinary everyday language as their medium, no paint, no piano, no full orchestra, no dance; just words to make something extraordinary. In a sense every poem you write is a trip into the unknown. Think about what you would pack in your suitcase. Where can you go, how long can you keep going? The best part is not knowing where you will end up!