

Writing a Poem

I am not a photographer, but every now and then, among the thousands of images I snap on my smart phone, an honest-to-god good picture appears. Similarly, I am not a poet, but, on rare occasions when I try to write a lyric, I actually succeed in creating something that might be called a poem.

One of my most recent forays into poetry-land began when I was brushing my teeth and noticed a small white blob go swishing down the drain. When I realized that this blob was a small fragment of the shrimp I had eaten that night, I began to speculate about the interconnectedness of the world, with a piece of shrimp that probably came from Thailand now making its way down to the Connecticut River and thence into the Atlantic Ocean.

So here is my first attempt to translate that thought into a poetic form:

Staring down into the sink
While brushing my teeth
I see a little white flake
Go down the drain
On its way to the Atlantic
When I recognize that morsel
As a bit of shrimp I ate
Last night in my stir-fry
—A shrimp from faraway Asia.

After scribbling the above, I added an afterthought:

I try not to think
Of the food it was fed,
Ground-up fish harvested by slaves.

I looked over the words on the page, made a few small changes, and then put my notebook away, recognizing that what I had written was piss-poor.

A few days later, the lilting iambs of the first part of the addendum popped back into my head:

x / x x / x x / x x /
“I try not to think of the food it was fed,”

(Okay, I know that this tetrameter line is really composed of one iamb followed by three anapests, but you get my drift.)

And, just as that lilting phrase came to mind, I realized that the real point I was trying to make was my connection to the slaves who worked on the Thai fishing boats, and that the shrimp was only the intermediary. About a minute after that thought sunk in, the poem leapt into my mind and down onto the page:

“Brushing My Teeth”

I try not to think of the slaves on the ships
Who caught the fish ground up to feed
The Asian shrimp I ate in my stir-fry,
A flake of which goes down the drain
As I brush my teeth in northern New England.

While this little ditty may not be the most profound comment on the human condition ever made, I was inordinately proud of it. At least it would be useful when I tried to teach metrical structures, alliteration, assonance, and consonance. So, as a non-photographer, I will keep snapping pictures, and, as a non-poet, I will keep on scribbling. Eventually, something decent may pop into focus.