

Every word is a goblin

It is better to call [writing/poetry] an assembly of living parts moved by a single spirit. The living parts are the words, the images, the rhythms. The spirit is the life which inhabits them when they all work together. It is impossible to say which comes first, parts or spirit. But if any of the parts are dead... if any of the words, or images or rhythms do not jump to life as you read them... then the creature is going to be maimed and the spirit sickly. So, as a poet [/writer] , you have to make sure that all those parts over which you have control, the words and rhythms and images, are alive. That is where the difficulties begin. Yet the rules, to begin with, are very simple. Words that live are those which we hear, like “click” or “chuckle”, or which we see, like “freckled” or “veined”, or which we taste, like “vinegar” or “sugar”, or touch, like “prickle” or “oily”, or smell, like “tar” or “onion”. Words which belong directly to one of the five senses. Or words which act and seem to use their muscles, like “flick” or “balance”.

But immediately things become more difficult. “Click” not only gives you a sound, it gives you the notion of a sharp movement... such as your tongue makes in saying “click”. It also gives you the feel of something light and brittle, like a snapping twig. Heavy things do not click nor do soft bendable ones. In the same way, tar not only smells strongly. It is sticky to touch, with a particular thick and choking stickiness. Also it moves, when it is soft, like a black snake, and has a beautiful black gloss. So it is with most words. They belong to several of the senses at once, as if each one had eyes, ears and tongue, or ears and fingers and a body to move with. It is this little goblin in a word which is its life and its poetry, and it is this goblin which the poet [/writer] has to have under control.

Well, you will say, this is hopeless. How do you control all that. When the words are pouring out how can you be sure that you do not have one of these side meanings of the word “feathers” getting all stuck up with one of the side meanings of the word “treacle”, a few words later. In bad poetry [/writing] this is exactly what happens, the words kill each other. Luckily, you do not have to bother about it so long as you do one thing.

That one thing is, imagine what you are writing about. See it and live it.

Taken from Ted Hughes' *Poetry in the Making*.