

**The Other Poetry Workshop:  
Ivor Murrell, 'How to Age a Rabbit'**

*Original Draft*

He always breathed with a slight whine  
wet lips around a Woodbine  
as he eviscerated game on the table  
as if to distract his nose  
from the glistening raunch of guts  
seeping into spread newspaper -  
at its worst if the stomach burst.

With red clots stuck to his forearm  
he always wanted to talk  
but otherwise had little to say  
unless it was to sell or buy.  
I never saw where the penknife  
cut the fur, he always turned away,  
but the sucking tear, the shining inner skin  
as the pelt peeled off was a moment of magic  
and horror - and he held it.  
Perhaps it was with a hope of hardening  
that he always handed me the slippery paper parcel  
to drop with heavy softness in the bin.

*\* The ears of a young rabbit will tear easily,  
older rabbits are understandably tougher*

*\* Ballymaloe Cookery Course*

The idea of the *Other Poetry* workshop arose from the editors finding poems in the sifting process *too good to reject* and yet *too good to publish* – that is, too good to leave in their current form when it was apparent there was a better poem waiting to emerge from the submitted version. (Series II, No. 27 contains a good example: Jacqueline Saphra's 'Reunion ...'.)

Just such a poem was 'How to Age a Rabbit'. The first stanza caught the eye and ear of the whole editorial team, but there was a sense of just enough loss of control of the line in the second stanza to leave a feeling that it did not complete the work of so strong an opening. Editor Peter Armstrong (PA) and poet Ivor Murrell (IM) agreed to work through drafts of the poem in an electronic 'workshop', and this article charts (in edited form) the unfolding of that process.

**PA:**

I think the strengths of the poem lie in its physicality, where the graphic account of the gutting is captured as much by the word-music as by the words' meanings – for instance the relatively strong alliteration that's not so overt as to intrude (the Ws of line two); "glistening raunch of guts", and the Ss of line 6. The rhythm is well managed here too: broadly a three- or four-beat line with fairly clear sense-units contained within each line.

I think the main issue which suggests the poem isn't finished is that of form – to rhyme or not to rhyme? That and the management of rhythm, which seems more assured in the first verse than in the second.

Regarding rhyme, and management of word-music more generally, I enjoy the understated alliteration and rhyme more than the overt: "whine/Woodbine" chimes so strongly, especially placed in the opening couplet, that it sets up expectations for the reader that aren't what the poem is going on to do. You might take the poem in either direction. There are a number of full and assonantal rhymes already in the text: the closing "hardening/bin", with the previous "skin" and, less prominently "it"; the "say/away" rhyme. You might want to push that semi-formal use of rhyme further, or to curtail it. Similarly the "worst/burst" internal rhyme in line 7 rings more loudly to my ear (and less successfully) than the quieter music of the Ss and Ws of line 1.

One other thought is that you might reconsider your line order in the first quatrain. Since the literal reading of lines 3 and 4 is that it is by the evisceration that he distracts his nose and, if you agree with my qualm about the first full rhyme, retaining the current text but rearranging lines 1-4 as 1,3,2 and 4 might be something to consider.

My initial feeling is that you manage rhythm better in this section than in the second verse, which doesn't quite have the strength of shape of the first. Look how the line lengths in its second half vary, and the lines themselves become less confidently contained. I wonder if it would be worth your while to have a look again at that, with the first verse as your model?

**IM :**

To rhyme or not to rhyme? I thought the use of rhyme in the first stanza would ease the reader into the poem, and then find the subject matter perhaps more brutal than expected. I am pleased you feel the poem's opening is capable of setting up misplaced expectations in the reader's mind, as that was the intention. The whine in the voice was because he was partly talking through his nose, a technique he developed to reduce the sense of smell. I think the cigarette smoke was also to provide masking, but it had to be kept in the lips because of the state of his hands.

Your proposal on line re-ordering in stanza 1 works, and reads well, but doesn't introducing 'eviscerated' in line 2 dilute the reader's misplaced expectations? I always thought 'eviscerated' was too descriptively detached, but could not find a more suitable word. 'Gutted' was a word more suitable for the second stanza.

Regarding "Worst/burst" jarring on your ear, I had a lot of trouble with "worst" and should have dropped it. I wanted the final line to brutally lead into the second stanza. The bursting

stomach and resultant stench from the animal's partially digested meal is central to the horror in the room.

In the second stanza I dropped the need to rhyme to produce (I'd hoped) a concentration on the description of the event taking place, and thought that the disruption of form would help to produce a sense of unease. Reading it again in light of your comments, perhaps there should be no aspect of rhyme in this stanza, but more attention to verbal rhythm?

After the initial discussion, Ivor produced another draft.

*First Rewrite*  
*(Second Draft)*

### **How to Age a Rabbit**

He always breathed with a nasal drone  
wet lips stroking a Woodbine  
as he eviscerated game  
a simple ploy to distract his nose  
from the glistening raunch of guts  
and thick stench if a stomach burst  
to seep into newspaper.

With red clots stuck to his arms  
he always wanted to talk  
but otherwise was silent.  
I never saw where  
the penknife cut the fur,  
he always turned away,  
but the sucking tear,  
the shining inner skin  
as the pelt peeled off  
was immediate horrific magic  
– and he wielded it.

Was it a hope of hardening  
that made him hand me  
the slippery paper parcel  
to drop with heavy softness in the bin?

*\* The ears of a young rabbit will tear easily,  
older rabbits are understandably tougher.*

*\* Ballymaloe Cookery Course*

**PA :**

I'd misunderstood "whine" as referring to him breathing though his mouth around the cigarette, so "nasal drone" avoids that confusion for me (I don't know if other readers would make my mistake). That aside, "drone" tones down the rhyme without losing it altogether, which I think is good. I share some of your concerns in regard to "eviscerated" as being "too descriptively detached", although it could be argued that it's congruent with his efforts to distract himself from the stench; also it might be a shame to lose the half-hidden rhymes of eviscerated, distract and glistening, which also connect with the "sp" of spread/newspaper and the further "st" of stomach. There's also something to be said for the more detached "eviscerated" exacerbating the horror of the rest of the stanza. I agree with your point about "eviscerated" counter-balancing the initial full rhyme of whine/woodbine, although that's less of an issue now you have "drone", and it still functions as an interesting rhythmic variation.

I'm not sure about "a simple ploy" though: this really does strike me as "descriptively detached", commentary on the moment rather than being in it. I can see that it makes strict sense to have changed to this from "as if", because it isn't "as if" – it really is that ploy. My hunch is that it'll be better to cut down to the description alone, although that still leaves you with a problem ordering the sentence as per the previous exchange: if you just drop "a simple ploy", then we're back to seeming to say that the evisceration is the distraction. (If just writing prose, you'd push back "as he eviscerated..." to the end of the sentence, but that would ruin the impact of the visceral stuff to follow.)

One other minor issue: "to" in the last line of the first verse is somewhat suggestive of intention, as if the seeping were the purpose of the bursting. Presumably it's the contents of the stomach rather than the stomach itself that seeps, and I was struck by your reference to the animal's partly digested meal.

I prefer your management of the line in the second draft of the (now) second and third verse. Contra your thoughts about "no aspect of rhyme", you've brought the previously-hidden rhymes of "where", "fur" and "tear" to the fore, while at the same time evening the pace by shortening the lines.

I was struck by a new thought having printed the drafts. Perhaps by happy accident, the second draft spanned two pages, the second page beginning with "I never saw where", which immediately struck me as a smashing opening line to verse two. Of course, you lose something of the individual you describe, but there might be enough of him elsewhere in the poem to accommodate that. If you really need to keep the previous three lines, I like "stuck", which carries over the "st" sound from verse one as well as its physical immediacy.

Only two more quibbles! (Both might refer to your point about descriptive detachment.) "Immediate horrific magic" can, I think, lose "horrific" since we get enough of a sense of horror without the word being used, and "immediate magic" is an interesting phrase as well, don't you think? Almost as if there were a category of magic apart from sympathetic, or black.

Lastly, while both removing the last four lines to a new stanza, and the adjustments to lineation, increase the control of the writing, I'm not sure about the shift to a question which seems to be of a piece with the shift from "held" to "wielded". I can see the sense in a degree

of distancing in the close of the poem – something akin to the concluding, synthesizing final couplet in a sonnet (and there is something conceptually of the sonnet in the poem). Thoughts?

## **IM:**

Sometimes writing with the emotion of memory forces the descriptive to the fore, when emotions are what we are really trying to emphasise. Yet without physical ‘triggers’ the full feelings cannot be shared.

I can dump “a simple ploy”, but it is central to the moment that the eviscerator is trying to do something to distract himself from his own actions, so I have changed it to “a false feint”. A feint is “a mock attack or movement designed to distract an adversary” (Collins), which in his case fails, because the adversary is himself. Thanks for the interest in “the last meal”. I think that makes a good addition to what’s happening in the first stanza, and thinking about it brought another physical trigger, “oozed darkly”, which I thought also sounded well with “newsprint”.

Your very fortunate discovery of a new first line to the second stanza appealed to me straight away. But it meant I lost “With red clots stuck to his arms”, a very key physical trigger, the tattoo marks of evisceration. I looked everywhere to reintroduce them, but it seemed like a bad force fit until I thought about your comments on “wielded” as opposed to the original “held” at the end of stanza two. This poem is all about handling and the horror of the ripped flesh. I needed to go back to “held”, and the red clots could pre-figure that embrace. I was also becoming too self-pitying in the final stanza of re-write one, so I have dropped the question and gone back to the thought of why we couldn’t connect. I liked your idea of ‘immediate magic’ being a particular form of magic, and wondered if I should re-introduce the word “moment” in that line, i.e. “was a moment of immediate magic”. What do you think? I hope you consider the rabbit is ageing well, and I pass you the penknife.

*Second Rewrite*  
*(Third Draft)*

### **How to Age a Rabbit**

He always breathed with a nasal drone  
wet lips stroking a Woodbine  
as he eviscerated game  
a false feint to distract his nose  
from the glistening raunch of guts,  
the thick stench if a stomach burst  
and the half-digested last meal  
oozed darkly onto newsprint.

I never saw where  
the penknife cut the fur,  
he always turned away,  
but the sucking tear,  
the shining inner skin  
as the pelt peeled off  
was immediate magic,  
with red clots stuck to his arms  
he held it.

Perhaps it was a hope of hardening  
that always made him hand me  
the slippery paper parcel  
to drop with heavy softness in the bin.

*\* The ears of a young rabbit will tear easily,  
older rabbits are understandably tougher.*

*\* Ballymaloe Cookery Course*

**PA:**

Would you agree with me that the first stanza is finished? I like "oozed" very much – it captures the thickness of the fluid much better than "seep".

I can see why you want to keep clots/arms and the act of holding: in many respects that reference is the corner-stone of the poem, tying together physical immediacy and emotional implication. To my ear, though, the current phrasing doesn't achieve the rhythmic and tonal authority of the previous lines. I wonder if ten successive monosyllables are too many (although they do serve to make a strong emphasis)?

I wonder, too, if you need "red". I can't imagine a reader not seeing the clots as blood, so I'm not sure the statement of colour is needed. In my mind's eye I see the clots a very dark red, close to black. If brightness of red is what you're showing, then "red" probably needs to stay

in. Whether or not you decide to retain "red", I'm not sure you need "with". In which case, might you re-punctuate as:

but the sucking tear,  
the shining inner skin  
as the pelt peeled off  
were immediate magic:  
red clots stuck to his arms,  
– he held it.

I also wonder about that last line of the verse. I suspect you've written enough drama into the text itself without pointing it up further with the dash and inset. As to the last verse, I think you're right to shift from question to statement, and the "perhaps" does the job of the previous construction in a way that avoids the over-poignant feel of the question. Do you need "always"? You already have it in the opening line, so we read the poem as both specific instance and general account of the experience. I'm also wondering about "paper", since we have "newsprint" at the end of the first stanza; removing it tightens the rhythm, I think, and helps the reader out of the slightly tongue-twisting succession of 'p's in that line. It also leaves an ambiguity: is "parcel" literal, or does it refer to the animal's innards? I like that ambiguity; you might or might not want it, though. The other thing those slight cuts in volume do for my ear is to lessen the degree to which I hear the sentence coming to a close with "parcel". As it stands, I'm listening for a new sentence starting on the last line and though you could do that, I suspect you'd risk going back to the too-weighty tone of the question form.

Remember it's about your own poem, not mine, so don't take any of these reflections as instructions ...

## IM:

I am almost disappointed that this exercise is moving towards its close.

I have changed one word in the first stanza, with "false feint" becoming "failed feint", as the feint was not false, it was done to diminish the smell of evisceration. It failed because breathing heavily through the nose whilst talking was not effective. With that change, I agree that the first stanza is now complete.

Regarding the second stanza, you are absolutely right about the misdirection of the word "red". I used it to emphasise blood, but it was a weak descriptor. As you quite rightly state the congealed blood was dark red to black. I thought about this line and the imagery wanted, and the word tattoo loomed large (which is what the clots suggested up the forearms) so I changed the line as below. I agree that the hyphen on the next line seems a cheap effect, but I wanted to freeze the moment when, almost like using a chest expander, he pulled his arms across his chest as he peeled the skin off, not silently like taking off an overcoat, but with a sucking sound. At that moment the action was almost an embrace, and he relished his hunter skills in a metaphorical embrace; it was more than simply holding the moment, it was 'embracing' in both senses of the word. Hence those two lines now read as below.

On the final stanza: I have dropped “always” before “made him hand me”. I have already used it twice, but cannot easily shed either of the other two. I have also dropped “paper”, and agree the shorter line reads more easily. I also like the ambiguity I have now built on by changing to the past tense in the last line and losing the words “in the bin”. The dropping becomes not only the parcel, but the rejection of the evisceration with an essential manly skill.

*Third Rewrite  
(Fourth Draft)*

### **How to Age a Rabbit**

He always breathed with a nasal drone  
wet lips stroking a Woodbine  
as he eviscerated game  
a failed feint to distract his nose  
from the glistening raunch of guts,  
the thick stench if a stomach burst  
and the half-digested last meal  
oozed darkly onto newsprint.

I never saw where  
the penknife cut the fur,  
he always turned away,  
but the sucking tear,  
the shining inner skin  
as the pelt peeled off  
was immediate magic,  
clots tattooed his arms  
as he embraced it.

Perhaps it was a hope of hardening  
that made him hand me  
the slippery parcel  
that dropped with heavy softness.

*\* The ears of a young rabbit will tear easily,  
older rabbits are understandably tougher*

\* Ballymaloe Cookery Course



**PA:**

"Tattooed" is very good I think. It carries the darkness of the congealed blood and also something of the ritual function of decorating the skin. There's also a congruence between this term and the "hope of hardening", in that both relate to rites of passage. The only question left for me in regard to the first stanza is the punctuation at that point. Are you happy with the comma, or have you thought of punctuating more conventionally – perhaps a full stop or semi-colon after "magic"? It's a question, I think, of how much of a pause you want after the word "magic" – punctuation as musical notation – and there's also the issue of how much attention punctuation can take away from the text if over-used or inconsistent.

As regards the ending, I can see you're aiming at something much more subtle than the earlier drafts – the way the basic physicality of the last two lines contrasts with the more psychologically-speculative previous two (whilst, of course, "slippery parcel", "dropped" and "heavy softness" are shot through with implicit references to the relationship between the protagonists). However, while I don't feel the need for additional content, my ear hears a missing syllable in the final line; do you share that at all? I almost felt an urge to insert an "I" ahead of "dropped", but that would lose the rich ambiguity of the current form.

Two last thoughts: contra my query about looking for extra punctuation in the second stanza, have you thought about leaving out the final full stop? Careful, though – that's something of a regular strategy of my own and no reason to adopt it; on the other hand, it might fit with the tentativeness of the closing sentence, and the speaker's reticence in arriving at conclusions. Lastly, do you need those asterisks in the quote and reference?

**IM:**

Punctuation and performance, a vexed subject! Firstly, I think the comma after "tear" should be dumped in the second stanza: grammatically it's correct, but for performance there should be no pause there.

How long to pause after "magic"? I think a full stop might unlink the tattooing from the pelt peel. A semi-colon would give the required pause but not break the action and would indicate the tattooing is an automatic consequence of the action initiated by "the sucking tear". I think the full stop at the end of the second stanza must remain. It separates the grim physical activity from the more thoughtful intentions in the last stanza. However, why have a final full stop in the final stanza? The dynamism of the mental challenge has never ended.

The last line! I know what you mean about the possibility of a missing syllable, but introducing "I" would be too restricting. I think removing the full stop holds the line open, and perhaps that missing syllable makes you more aware that there is something still unresolved? There is a full stop at the end of the Ballymaloe quote. I have no problem dropping the two asterisks for the final couplet quotation, but perhaps *Ballymaloe Cookery Course* should then be put in brackets? What do you think, Peter? Light the oven?

*Fourth Rewrite*  
*(Final Version)*

**How to Age a Rabbit**

He always breathed with a nasal drone  
wet lips stroking a Woodbine  
as he eviscerated game  
a failed feint to distract his nose  
from the glistening raunch of guts,  
the thick stench if a stomach burst  
and the half-digested last meal  
oozed darkly onto newsprint.

I never saw where  
the penknife cut the fur,  
he always turned away,  
but the sucking tear  
the shining inner skin  
as the pelt peeled off  
was immediate magic;  
clots tattooed his arms  
as he embraced it.

Perhaps it was a hope of hardening  
that made him hand me  
the slippery parcel  
that dropped with heavy softness

*The ears of a young rabbit will tear easily,  
older rabbits are understandably tougher*

(Ballymaloe Cookery Course)

**PA:**

Dear Ivor

I agree – oven ready. I was looking for a while at the closing stanza, wondering why I was experiencing some discomfort, and then realised it should leave the reader that way. The poem rightly resists a too-tidy closure, so that the form fits the psychology of the two protagonists' interaction.

With reference to punctuation, my observation is that the current version is well scored, the reader guided lightly through.

Thanks, Ivor. I've enjoyed the process immensely and think our work on this has turned a good poem into a very good one.

Peter