

The Effect of Specificity

adapted from: <http://readwritepoem.org/blog/2009/11/25/workshop-redux-specificity/>

Directions: Read both versions of the poem “Pokeberries” by Ruth Stone. The “revised” version has removed all of the specificity of language. After reading through the original version of the poem, go back and highlight all of the specific details which were left out made less specific in the “revised” version.

A “revised” version of
Pokeberries by: Ruth Stone

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.

The original version of
Pokeberries by: Ruth Stone

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.

Questions for discussion:

1. How did you feel when you read the “revised” version of Stone’s piece?
2. What effect did the removal of the specifics have on your ability to place yourself in the poem?