Sleight of ear

The Atlantic's David Barber has a knack for hearing good poetry.

David Barber is bewitched by the sound of the word "abracadabra."

"What does it mean?" he asks. "Is it just mumbo-jumbo? No one knows for sure, but there's some learned conjecture that it originated from a phrase used by medieval Arabic sorcerers: 'I make as I speak.' To make as you speak – isn't that what poets are desperately trying to do? I'm no Houdini, alas, but I sure wouldn't mind a piece of that action."

When it comes to poetics, the award-winning poet and poetry editor at *The Atlantic* has a few tricks up his own sleeve. His first book of poems, *The Spirit Level* (1995), won the Terrence Des Pres Prize for its rhapsodic meditations. Next came *Wonder Cabinet* (2006), an eclectic collection of unsung curiosities and characters including funiculars, field nettles, a Benedictine beekeeper and a Brazilian Bigfoot.

Now he's conjuring up *Secret History*, a new book of poems based on grimoires such as *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* and *Sir David Brewster's Letters on Natural Magic*.

"I mostly just try to lie in wait for them," says Barber, when asked how he finds such delightfully arcane subjects. "I mine quite a few of my poems from my reading, which for better or worse has always been incorrigibly omnivorous. More and more, what I'm prospecting for is language that hits a nerve: a suggestive figure of speech, a freighted phrase, a surprising allusion, a snippet of artful description or narration, a fetching piece of street lingo or scientific lexicon, something I feel enticed to imaginatively animate or inhabit."

One such snippet was this statement by the famous tight-wire walker Karl Wallenda: "Life is on the wire. Everything else is just waiting."

Barber used the line to unravel "Wallenda Sutra," a poem from the "New World Sutra" series in *Wonder Cabinet*. Here's an excerpt.

> Life's on the wire;
> The rest is waiting. I know
> I'm alive when I
>
> Hear no one breathing.
> On the wire I'm living:
> The wire is where
>
> I'm sure where I stand
> In the great chain of being.
> The rest is dead air.

"I was idly toying with syllabic 'haiku' stanzas and seeing if I could cast them into a pithy mode of gnomic, aphoristic verse akin to the devotional sutras in Hindu and Buddhist scripture," says Barber who, while a maestro of received form, says he's increasingly drawn to nonce forms and patterns that acoustically insinuate themselves. "When I discovered that the word 'sutra' in Sanskrit originally meant 'thread' or 'line,' that really got me off and running. The 'New World' part was an effort to pay a little tribute to certain totemic American artists and performers of mine – Buster Keaton, Louis Armstrong, Audubon, Houdini and so on."

As poetry editor at *The Atlantic*, Barber is also an influential figure in the American arts. He's spent the past 20 years – the first 10 alongside legendary poet and editor Peter Davison – sifting through great mounds of poems in search of verses that will shape the sound of American poetry. With the din of more than 15,000 poetry submissions annually clamoring for his ear, what catches his attention?

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"It can be a distinctive tone or sense of inflection," he says. "It can be a certain torque of syntax or a certain crackle in the diction. It can be a seamless quality of formal prosody or a disarming way with colloquial or conversational speech. It can be the polished use of rhetorical and discursive language or the austere absence of rhetorical and discursive language. It can be a turn the poem makes, a shift in register, an inversion of expectation, a move you didn't see coming, a cliché turned on its head, a leap of association. When those things happen, you hear them, because the lines are crafted in such a way [as] to make them palpable and audible."

Take, for example, this excerpt from his poem "Pilgrim's Progress."

> Wing it, mother tongue: the world's
> your whetstone.
> We're wired for sound. We're unfinished business.

Saila Huusko

Let's hear it for the phoenix, all fired up.
Sirens, rock us to sleep with the fishes.

To refine your own aural agility, Barber advises memorizing poetry, reading it aloud and listening to poems read by others.

"You sharpen your ear by listening closely to how lines work, how lines of various lengths and measures organize rhythm and cadence, how they ideally prompt the speaking voice to speed up or slow down or bring out intonations that accentuate feeling and meaning," says Barber, who has taught writing and literature at Middlebury College, Harvard University, MIT and other colleges.

He also recommends speaking out prose – "the much younger sibling of poetry" – particularly speeches such as the Gettysburg Address.

"What you'll be channeling is the sustained flow of rhythmic language and the expressive power of 'memorable speech,' which Auden proposes is what we're really talking about when we're talking about poetry," he says.

As for Barber, you'll find him reading up on stage illusions and "the foxy vernacular of legerdemain." As he begins to write, at some point he'll find "the form or shape or backbone of the poem is revealed by setting the sounds of words into motion." This is when the real magic happens, when, in his words, "I begin to hear what I'm saying and say what I'm hearing." W

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