An Idea Caught in the Act, in Bradford Tice's *What the Night Numbered*:

What the heck is poetry? Once, when asked, Robert Frost said that “poetry is the sort of things that poets write.” What did the interviewer think? Probably something along the lines of “thank you very much, Mr. Frost!” or, more likely, “thanks for nothing, A-hole.” Everyone gets tired of the most basic questions about their profession, so I understand Frost's frustration. When Louis Armstrong was asked what jazz was, he answered something like, “man, if you have to ask, you'll never know.” Luckily, Robert Frost threw a bone to another interviewer, stating that “a poem is an idea caught in the act of dawning.” Ah, the poet without irony! What a lovely phrase.

Frost's answer implies that the best writing is not about premeditated ideas. Instead, it implies that the process of writing *suggests* the ideas. I do believe that the best poets don't sit down with an idea of what they want the poem to say. Rather, they discover what the poem wants to say in the act of writing. And how could it be any other way? Of course the writer wants to be surprised in the act of writing. It's the most likely way that the reader will be surprised in the act of reading.

I love the notion of the author figuring out what the poem wants to say, the notion of the poem as “an idea caught in the act of dawning.” And when I get the sense of that in other people's writing, it makes my skin tingle.

So in the poem, “Two Falsehoods,” in Bradford Tice's *What the Night Numbered,* I'm struck by the pun of the words “Liar” and “Lyre.”

The poems begins with a recollection of personal biography:

My grandmother once said, “A story is a lie

with legs,” meaning the good ones

have to strut...”

The grandmother's quote is striking, believable, and memorable. Then the poem turns the words on their heads, the word “liar” morphing into the word “lyre” as Tice goes on to mention the story of how Nero played the fiddle while Rome burned. The poet admits the fiddle wouldn't have been invented for another 1,600 years. No, of course Nero didn't play the fiddle. Maybe he played the lyre. Maybe he didn't even play the lyre. The best stories are part lie, part lyre. The grandmother lies. Some historians bend truths. The reader gets caught up in a cyclical argument among words.

Well, I wasn't there when Tice wrote the poem. But if I had to guess, I'd bet that the sound of the words “liar” and “lyre” took him by surprise while he was in the process of writing. I don't imagine that he sat down with the idea of playing those two words off of each other. And isn't that what we write for? To be surprised by our own language? For me, the most exciting poetry is not preconceived but is discovered in the course of writing. I imagine that the author must have sat back in his chair, stunned by the surprise of his own language. Maybe that's just a lie I tell myself. I only get to respond to the music of this lyre. But I can say this for sure: when I first read the poem, I sat back in my chair, stunned by the surprises that our language offers us, word after unexpected word.