



The Truth of Imagination

Metaphor's Universe of Possibilities

BY DAN ALBERGOTTI

"I am certain of nothing but the holiness of the Heart's affections and the truth of Imagination."

—John Keats

I always feel an overwhelming anxiety when I approach the subject of metaphor in the classroom. I believe Aristotle when he says in the *Poetics*: "The greatest thing by far is to be a master of metaphor. It is the one thing that cannot be learnt from others; and it is also a sign of genius, since a good metaphor implies an intuitive perception of the similarity in dissimilars." The mastery of metaphor is the greatest thing *by far*? And yet it is the one thing that *cannot be learnt from others*? So much for my role as

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a teacher! But then again, maybe the role of the teacher is merely to point to raw materials, to inspire an appreciation of metaphor's power, and to encourage the necessary abandonment of conscious control in the search for "similarity in dissimilars." Maybe.

When I work up the courage to tackle the issue with my students, I return again and again to a poem published in *Shenandoah* in 1999: "Water to Sky" by Melanie Carter, a poet originally from Florida who now teaches at the American University in Cairo.

On first reading, the poem might seem rather modest. The speaker notices a persistent bird outside her window and wonders about its meaning. Fourteen lines. Seems over almost as soon as it's begun. Sometimes my students shrug after I read it to them the first time. Maybe one raises an

eyebrow. Then we look a little closer.

Metaphor enters this poem subtly through the verb "trimmed" in line two. The hummingbird—the *common* hummingbird, as the first line insists—shows itself to be extraordinary, capable of treating the insubstantial air as if it were tangible, as if it were fabric. This bird can alter the elements. Or, to read "trim" another way, the bird is not so ordinary as "common" implies, but is rather ornamental, decorating the simple air. In either case, it is more than it appears.

But the third line returns to the modesty of the first, claiming that the hummingbird is "hardly more than a green seed." This accomplishes that most rudimentary goal of metaphor—giving a clear picture. We get a sense of the bird's size, shape, and color in an instant. But the metaphor also has resonance. If the bird is a seed, what could it grow into?

In lines four and five, the hummingbird presents "its fine throat," and the speaker calls that throat "a

Water to Sky

For seven days a common hummingbird has trimmed the air outside my window. Hardly more than a green seed, it glides from pane to pane presenting its fine throat—a fragment so soaked through with red I think it must have swallowed the hook God dangles into this uncertain sea. Is it wrong to say God? Because when this bird moves, its wings pluck the invisible line it is suspended from, and the diphthong note that quivers through the air sounds like a fiddle string gone out of tune with all the distance between here and there. My father must be playing this creature, this stunning bloodstone, caught and reeling.

fragment...soaked through with red." Again the metaphor is subtly delivered. The throat is a "fragment," something broken from the whole; it is at once of the body and outside the body, something to be presented for consideration by itself. And what must

be considered is the soaking red, the saturation of color that is simultaneously the literal shiny plumage and the figurative flowing blood.

Certainly it must be blood, the speaker thinks. This hummingbird “must have swallowed the hook God dangles / into this uncertain sea.” The bird has swallowed a hook. Wait—the bird is a fish? God dangles that hook. Wait—God is a fisherman? The air in which the bird flies, the air we breathe...is *an uncertain sea*? How the hell did we get this deeply into the realm of metaphor in two lines?

So the bird is a fish, but it’s still a bird, and “its wings pluck / the invisible line it is suspended from.” The bird is suspended from a line—yes, the fishing line—but if that line is making a diphthong note *like* a fiddle string, is it not *also* a fiddle string, the bird’s wing a plectrum, the bird/fish now become a musician as well, playing a note for the speaker’s ear even as it displays a vibrant red for her eye?

Consider the poem’s final two lines: “My father must be playing this creature, / this stunning bloodstone, caught and reeling.” Is the bird playing the fiddle string, or is the father “playing” it? Or is the father “playing” the creature (this new general term suggesting its transformed existence as *both* bird and fish), this organism that is also mineral (“stunning bloodstone”), like a puppet? Is he above, manipulating marionette strings, using the bird/fish/stone/puppet to communicate with his daughter from beyond? Is the creature that’s “caught and reeling” a fish that’s been caught and is being reeled *in*, or is it a marionette caught in its strings and dancing (reeling) for the speaker?

Yes, yes, yes, yes. Miraculously, all of it.

By the time my students and I have

finished discussing the poem’s metaphorical possibilities and how many literal impossibilities they overcome, we are *all* “caught and reeling” (stunned, staggering) at the overwhelming display of imagination in this poem where a bird is a fish and a puppet and a stone, where an invisible line is fishing line and fiddle string and marionette wire, where God and/or the speaker’s father is fisherman and musician and puppeteer, where sky is water and water is sky. I have taught them nothing, but we have learned much. Maybe.

As we sit there together in the classroom, still stunned at how the world has been transfigured before our eyes, my students often ask the next logical questions of their teacher: “How did Carter do that in just fourteen lines? How did she create those metaphors?” I have no clear, affirming answer for them. But I do try to impart a lesson.

I tell them that if I can be certain of anything, it’s this: Carter did not consciously seek out these metaphors, nor immediately perceive their intricate connections. No, such metaphorical apprehension only comes—if we’re lucky—through the unconscious mind in the act of composition when we’ve managed to outwit our consciousness with a pure focus on the senses. Metaphor is the truth of imagination, not the truth of intellect. In *Imaginative Writing: The Elements of Craft* (Longman, 2003), Janet Burroway explains that “writing as an art begins when we surrender ourselves to the world of images.” *Surrender* is the key word there. The art begins by merely looking at the stuff of this world, giving up any control we might pretend to have over it—just looking, and then looking closer, and trying to see. Maybe you think that small green bird looks a bit like a seed. Then maybe something grows from that. ∞