

The World Comes to Light:

Understanding and Cultivating the Art of Metaphor

Metaphors seem to come out of nowhere. A comparison is made, two things we would never think to associate are beautifully conjoined, and we're overcome by delight. How did the writer think of it? The greater the incongruity, the greater the mystery. No path of logic or skill could have led to such invention.¹ And yet perhaps it something we can explore, even cultivate.

I want you for a moment to lift your hands. I realize this is not a typical request, and you may decide to make only a mental note of it, but if you do take a moment to experience your hands in the air and the presence of your body in space, then let me say this: your body is the source of all your metaphors.

I will go further and ask you to activate your five senses as well as your proprioception, which tells you where each part of your body is located in space. You may also tune in to the sensations within your body, including your emotions, which have a palpable energy or motion even when stilled. This is the whole writer, body, mind and heart. This is the wellspring of metaphor. May this moment stick with you. If you like, before bringing your hands to a keyboard or pad to start a session of writing, hold them in the air, as a reminder to bring your whole self to your work.

Now take a look at your hands. Nothing could be more familiar. They are so often in the

line of sight, doing what we ask of them, and yet we hardly ever see them, much less appreciate them. The poet Tim Seibles, writing an ode to his hands, wonders at this blindness.

Five-legged pocket spiders, knuckled
starfish, grabbers of forks, why
do I forget that you love me:
your willingness to button my shirts,
tie my shoes—even scratch my head!

As we read “knuckled starfish,” we look at our hands through the lens of a different object, and this is the most compelling definition of metaphor I’ve found since it captures the actual *experience* of metaphor—the way we get to see or apprehend one thing in terms of another.ⁱⁱ At first, there’s confusion because the two objects seem disconnected. Then all of a sudden, the two images line up. You look at your hand and catch sight of the strange, wriggling appendages that are your fingers. A vivid picture comes into focus, and it gives you a jolt of pleasure. It’s like getting a joke or solving a riddle. At first, there’s cognitive dissonance; then, you dispel it. The impulse is good for survival and therefore rewarded. Endorphins are actually released.

There’s also a feeling of intimacy and communion, a meeting of minds as poet and reader together take in the new reality. “Look,” says Mary Oliver.

Look, the trees
are turning
their own bodies
into pillars
of lightⁱⁱⁱ

We witness the transformation together, and the transformation takes place even as we read. As we take in the metaphor, the trees come into view. They come to light. This is what happens whenever a poet says one thing is like another. The poet is saying, Look, watch it transform before your eyes. And what happens to us? There's the moment of it coming into view, the excitement of that, the feeling of discovery, of being in touch with life itself.

We ourselves are enlivened. The poet is seeing, we are seeing, and we are reminded that reality always is our seeing of it—what we bring to it. According to the poet Tony Hoagland,

When a beautiful woman wakes up,
she checks to see if her beauty is still there.
When a sick person wakes up,
he checks to see if he continues to be sick.

He takes the first pills in a thirty-pill day,
looks out the window at a sky
where a time-release sun is crawling
through the milky Xray of a cloud.

Metaphors put us touch with reality. This is not some objective reality. Reality is not generic, one size fits all, the beautiful and the sick alike. Our mirrors and windows give on to unique worlds. But do we always recognize this—about reality? Or do we accept the names and labels that turn reality into a cliché? Watching a sun crawl through the milky Xray of a cloud, we are in touch with the reality of a sick man's world and with the truth that every reality is an individual's absolutely unique experience. Reading poetry, we revel in this truth, and we are inspired to become poets with respect to our own lives.

We crave that same intimacy with the world, a personal experience wherever this lands on the spectrum from beautiful to horrific. We want to feel alive, in the world, body and soul, even if it's excruciating. This is why Hoagland goes on to write:

I sing the body like a burnt-out fuse box,
the wires crossed, the panel lit
by red malfunction lights, the pistons firing
out of sequence,
the warning sirens blating in the empty halls,

and the hero is trapped in a traffic jam,
the message doesn't reach its destination,
the angel falls down into the body of a dog
and is speechless,

tearing at itself with fast white teeth;
and the consciousness twists evasively,
like a sheet of paper,
traveled by blue tongues of flame.^{iv}

The poet is compelled to describe what it is to be here, *in* the body, even if the body is burning up. This is the fire we walk into as poets.

The saint, Hoagland goes on to say, may look "steadfastly heavenward,/away from the physical indignity below... exerting that power of denial/the soul is famous for,/that ability to say, None of this is real," but the poet, unlike the saint, describes it all. The consciousness cannot escape the material, no more than a piece of paper can escape the flame that consumes it. Metaphors emerge from this place of embodiment, the fire of a resolve to be here and really see and feel.

What this poem also illustrates is one of the great gifts of metaphor, that it can bring into

our presence not just the material objects of this world, including the most obvious and familiar like our own hands, but that which is invisible—our emotions. So often, they elude us. Moving through the round of our daily activities, we prefer to focus on what is before us and stuff our feelings. Kenyon illustrates this dynamic in her poem “The Socks.”

While you were away
I matched your socks
and rolled them into balls.
Then I filled your drawer with
tight dark fists.^v

Much of the poem describes what is plain to see: the mechanical performance of a manual task. Then in the very last line, that which has been contained in the dark bursts into view—via the metaphor.^{vi} The poet, even as she observes and describes the external world, is aware of the energy traveling through her body, the impulse in her hands to contract into fists.

When we are lodged in the body, ready to travel between the conscious and the unconscious, down paths of memory and emotion even as we’re immersed in an immediate sensory world—the world of laundry and socks—we allow for all kinds of associations. Surprising resemblances emerge, between anger, longing, and frustration on the one hand and balled-up socks on the other. The interconnections are countless. Imagine all the ways of capturing desire, for example, how it moves, where it leads. Tim Seibles finds himself describing

the way a woman’s eyes take over an evening,

how her legs move all the tall ships in my blood—
and this thread pulled taut around my belly,
the fluid spool of her hips finding the book of praise
inside me^{vii}

Imagine also the infinite ways of describing joy, the surge of it. Here is just one, also by Seibles.

Sun climbs over the trees
and light runs towards you,
runs flailing its fast golden legs
like a good dog who's been lost for years^{viii}

Metaphor makes visible, and the emergence takes place before our eyes. First, there's pure energy—the source itself, then light and then running... flailing, then legs, and finally, a full-blown dog bursts into view. This is what happens when the energy is let loose. It bursts into the world of things and takes on physical form. Metaphors emerge when we allow ourselves be taken over by an experience. From within the world of experience, not labels, the mind grabs what it can, searching for resemblances. Veering down trails of association and memory, it takes the reader for a ride while logic and decorum are flung to the wayside.

The truth is, we're always using metaphors. We're always speaking of abstract things in physical terms. We say a person is "warm." Or a friend is acting "distant." Such metaphors are rooted in our infancy, when the difference between being warm or cold, close or distant, hungry or sated was all-important. When I think, "I'm going to put this in my talk," I'm speaking metaphorically because I'm suggesting my talk is some sort of

container into which I can place things. When you explain something, and I say, “I see,” it is the same. So much of what we say, without realizing it, is poetic. Emerson went so far as to say that “poets made all the words.” Of course, most of the metaphors have become dormant. We don’t realize, for example, that “dormant” means *asleep*. Sometimes, they can be awakened; sometimes, they’re dead and past reviving. In any case, when we start to excavate, digging into the etymology of words, we discover that language is, in Emerson’s words, “fossil poetry,” consisting of metaphors the way limestone “consists of infinite masses” of shells.^{ix}

I tell you this to give you a sense of how much we rely on our bodies, our *senses*, to make sense of things, whether material or immaterial. We want to grasp them, smell them, know them by putting them in our mouths. That’s food for thought, we say, because when something feels abstract, we want to turn it into something we can ingest and digest. Let us indulge this impulse as poets and realize its power and potential.

Sometimes it’s the simplest of physical actions that resonate most powerfully. Just think for a moment of a door closing. Imagine it shutting in front of you and feel the visceral impact. Notice the impact in this poem by Laure-Anne Bosselaar called “Stillbirth.”

On a platform, I heard someone call out your name:
No, Laetitia, no.
It wasn’t my train—the doors were closing,
but I rushed in, searching for your face.

But no Laetitia. No.
No one in that car could have been you,
but I rushed in, searching for your face:

no longer an infant. A woman now, blond, thirty-two.

No one in that car could have been you.
Laetitia-Marie was the name I had chosen.
No longer an infant. A woman now, blond, thirty-two:
I sometimes go months without remembering you.

Laetitia-Marie was the name I had chosen:
I was told not to look. Not to get attached—
I sometimes go months without remembering you.
Some griefs bless us that way, not asking much space.

I was told not to look. Not to get attached.
It wasn't my train—the doors were closing.
Some griefs bless us that way, not asking much space.
On a platform, I heard someone calling your name.^x

Again and again, we experience the doors closing, the rush to make it through, the repeated failure. Look how the poet trusts this simple action to resonate metaphorically till her whole poem echoes with loss. The truth is we can't read something without imagining it, and we can't imagine it without to some extent performing it. The muscle neurons are literally triggered. This is the power of finding a specific, sensuous image for what is abstract or general or elusive. There's instant physical identification, and the reader brings to bear her whole self and her entire history. As writers, let us notice metaphoric resonance when it occurs and give it space.

Consider the following poem, "Seemed Pleased" by Malena Mörling, and the deceptive simplicity of its story.

Just after the plane lifted
off the ground with all of its
weight, a small hand its nails with
partially chipped off red nail

polish, worked itself back
from in between the seats in
front of me and sort of waved.
The next I saw of the person

with the hand was a blue eye
peering back at me and then
the girl stood up on her seat
and smiled. She had brown, just

above the shoulder length hair
and bangs and she wore a blue
and white striped sundress. A
red rose of the same material

as the dress was attached to
the middle of the upper
lining which was also red.
“My mother is dead,” she told

me suddenly. “She is already gone—
She is in heaven.” The girl seemed
pleased, almost proud at that
moment, to be able to inform

me of this, perhaps as a
handy way of meeting. “This
is my dad,” she said, and pointed
to the back of his head of

blond thinning rather unruly
cap of hair. “My dad.” She
exclaimed again and again
and hugged his face with all

of her might until she knocked
his glasses off and they ended
up in the aisle. Then she introduced
her brother, engrossed in a book:

“This is Marcus, he is eight.
I am four and a half.” And then
she proceeded to demonstrate
the workings of a doodle pad.

On the cover of it was a clown
riding in an airplane waving
his hands in the clouds. And that's
when the trays of food arrived and the girl

whose name I never learned was told
by her father to turn around
and sit down and eat what was
being unwrapped for her on her tray.

The poem—a series of surprises both delightful and poignant—ends when the food arrives. The event is hardly momentous. Mörling's description is bland and matter-of-fact; nothing could be more banal than a tray of airplane food wrapped in plastic. But this is where Mörling abruptly leaves us, and in the silent space that follows, the metaphor starts to resonate. The delirious freedom of a clown who can stick his hands out of a plane and into the clouds is replaced by the stricture of narrow seats crowded in tight rows. The girl must sit down, face forward, and eat what is put in front of her, what life has dished out. The metaphor catches us by surprise in a way that is heart-wrenching. The winding conversation with its innocence and freedom has been cut short, and there's only the singular direction of the plane, the blankness of what lies ahead. The girl faces into a future that will be fundamentally different from what she has known.

This is the kind of metaphor that might catch the poet herself by surprise, and noticing it, she could decide to end the poem there, adjusting the wording to heighten the resonance.

She might decide to adjust the opening, too, in order to further accentuate the effect.

Notice how the feeling of stricture—which resonates for anyone who has been crammed into a plane, train, car—is established at the very outset when we see the hand working its way between the seats, the single eye peering through a crack. Alternatively, the poet felt

the resonance of the metaphor before she started the poem, the father's command and the injunction to face forward resonating on an emotional and physical level with what the girl must submit to in general. And it was noticing this resonance that caused her to write the poem in the first place.

However the specific metaphor emerged, it owes its meaning to the more general image of life as a journey, a cultural concept that pervades our language, thought and behavior. Bosselaar's poem derives much of its power and poignancy from this same metaphor, for when the lifelong connection between a mother and child is pictured as a journey, then the image of a woman rushing to get onboard, only to find herself alone, captures in a single, heartbreaking moment all that has been lost.

This is the final gift of metaphor that I'd like to explore—how it can capture a situation as a whole, a totality which would otherwise remain invisible to us in its complexity and disparateness. We've already seen how metaphors can bring into view objects which have become overly familiar as well as our invisible emotions. Life as a whole can also elude us. Much of the time, we bumble along without any overall view. That is why we turn to art—to take stock, to get at the truth of what we're doing in general. Perhaps we visualize ourselves traveling a linear path towards a distant destination. Perhaps there are forks along the way as in Frost's famous poem, but that is just one metaphor among many.

Shakespeare offers us a radically different image:

All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances;

And one man in his time plays many parts.^{xi}

We get a visceral experience of life's brevity as well as its relative insignificance—nothing but a few hours of heightened drama on a narrow stage. There is no destination on a distant horizon. Macbeth's vision heightens the absurdity:

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.^{xii}

In a modern rendition, by Tim Seibles, all the world's a Saturday morning cartoon, we ourselves scrawls of technicolor crayon. It's a tale told by Loony Tunes, replete with bombs and sizzling fuses. Wile E. Coyote can't stop chasing after the Road Runner. It doesn't matter that his scheme backfires every time and he himself goes up in smoke. He's instantly reconstituted for the next episode. Until, that is, there's a pause in the action. For just a minute, Coyote sees "the whole show."

I've been after the road-runner
for so long—I can't tell
if it's hunger, love, or
just plain stupidity.
Maybe that's what's so
goddamn funny: my life
whittled down to a riot
of wild pursuits...

Honestly, if you can just
stand still for a minute you

start to see the whole
show. I mean—it's all

perspective; if you can

step out of the action

long enough to catch
your breath you

become your own
audience. And, of course,

there you are, a scrawny animal
starving in the middle

of a desert,
squeezing your knife
and fork.^{xiii}

It doesn't matter if you're the pursuer or the pursued. We hear similar thoughts from the Road Runner in a poem entitled "Commercial Break: Road-Runner, Uneasy."

If I didn't know better I'd say
the sun never moved ever,

that somebody just pasted it there
and said the hell with it...

You've got to wonder, at least a little,
if this could be a set-up:

with all the running I do—
the desert, the canyons, the hillsides, the desert—

all this open road has got to
lead somewhere else. I mean,

that's what freedom's all about, right?^{xiv}

The metaphors we use to make sense of our lives govern our behavior, often without our knowing it. Imagining a straight path towards a clear destination, we race through our days. Seibles playfully revises our picture till it is nothing more than a picture, a profound image of delusion.

We're given yet another view of the whole in Tony Hoagland's description of nine-year-old Lucinda and her trip to the Galleria Shopping Mall.

Today is the day she embarks upon her journey,
swinging a credit card like a scythe
through the meadows of golden merchandise.

All the world's a mall and all the people merely shoppers, wandering in a haze of goods, oblivious to the figure of death hovering over them with his scythe. Other poems by Hoagland give us a surreal vision of a country shrouded in darkness. His metaphoric landscapes suggest that if there once was a journey with meaning or purpose, it has since turned into a nightmare.

Out on route 28, the lights blaze all night
on a billboard of a beautiful girl
covered with melted cheese—

see how she beckons to the river of latenight cars;
see how the tipsy drivers swerve, under the breathalyzer moon

We're in the wilderness now,
Confused by the signs,
With a shortness of breath,
and that postmodern feeling of falling behind.^{xv}

This wilderness scene—of a commerce-clogged highway with travelers drunk and getting nowhere—transforms our vision of reality in order to put us in touch with a reality that we might otherwise have trouble recognizing—the trajectory of our culture as a whole. It can be hard to see when the darkness in it is plastered over with billboards and the lights

kept blazing.^{xvi}

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., himself intent on “the arc of the moral universe” and passionate in his desire to see it bend towards justice, spoke almost entirely in metaphors:

Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice. Now is the time to lift our nation from the quicksands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood.^{xvii}

The dark valley and the sunlit path, the quicksand and the solid rock beneath our feet—these are things that resonate physically. If we can imagine ourselves moving from one to the other, if the path feels real, then we are more likely to move forward, turning dream into reality. On the other hand, without such visions to inspire us, stimulating body and spirit simultaneously, we will stagnate, tranquilized by what Dr. King called the “drug of gradualism.” His metaphors transform our reality, bringing into view not just the horror but also the potential. We behold a world that is constantly unfolding with a boundlessness that we can step into if we choose.

This is perhaps metaphor’s most astonishing consequence—that it can usher us into boundlessness. A breathtaking example is “The Resurrection according to Mary of Magdala” by Mary Cornish. I’d like to close with her poem, also because I’ve distinguished various uses of metaphor and her culminating image illustrates them all, making visible not just the objects of this world, or our emotions, or the complicated, multitudinous whole, but all three at once.

The poem's speaker, describing the Resurrection, says it is not at all what she expected. Anticipating ascent, a departure, she is instead returned to the earth, with an exquisite awareness of being alive.

I had expected ascent: the quality of doves.
But heaven was above me only as a tree's canopy
is above the root, or my head above my throat, singing.^{xviii}

The body has gone and, in its stead, there is the world's sheer presence. She struggles to find words for it and in the end says:

How do I tell the others
that the soul resurrected is only this mapless terrain?
A mouse asleep in the furrow,
twelve winds at the edge of the earth,
and the hills running into the sky.

With this final metaphor, the bounded self dissolves utterly. The single image of the hills running into the sky displays all that a metaphor can do, capturing in one swoop the visible world, the emotion of ecstasy, and life in its infinitude. None of these can be mapped. They can only be experienced again and again.

Tim Seibles looks at his own hands, and it is a revelation. "Why do I forget that you love me," he asks. And yet it is easy to forget. As reality becomes a cliché, we find ourselves disconnected from the uniqueness of each living moment. That is why we keep turning to poetry—to be continually resurrected, to be reminded, to come back to life.

ⁱ The magic of metaphor and its irrationality have often made it an object of fear and

distrust. Over the centuries, it has gone in and out of favor as a literary device. Its detractors, from ancient times through the Middle Ages and into the Enlightenment, have been vehement, condemning metaphors for confounding one object with another and thereby undermining our hold on reality. In more recent times, a growing sense of the subjective nature of experience—starting with the romantics and continuing with the modernists and postmodernists—has altered our understanding of metaphor and elevated its status. Metaphor is no longer seen as a mere literary ornament, either beneficial or deleterious, and in any case dispensable. It is now considered unavoidable, intrinsic to the way we think, speak, and move through the world. Since the 1970s, it has been the object of intensive study across the disciplines, from semantics to philosophy to neuroscience. Two works that are particularly interesting to the creative writer are Geary’s *I is an Other*, and George Lakoff and Mark Turner’s *More Than Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor*.

ⁱⁱ I will not be distinguishing metaphor from simile. Many of us have been taught the following binary: metaphors use the verb *to be* and similes use *like* or *as*. But these are simply two of the myriad vehicles for metaphor. Metaphors emerge via nouns, verbs, adverbs, as well as prepositional phrases. In *A Grammar of Metaphor*, Christine Brooke-Rose provides a thorough anatomy of the various syntactic vehicles. In this essay, I focus on metaphor in general. The varying effects of syntax are nonetheless fascinating, and I touch on them in my endnote to Jane Kenyon’s poem.

ⁱⁱⁱ Mary Oliver, “In Blackwater Woods,” *New and Selected Poems* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1992) 177.

^{iv} Tony Hoagland, “Arrows,” *Donkey Gospel* (Saint Paul, Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 1998).

^v Jane Kenyon, “The Socks,” *Collected Poems* (Saint Paul, Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 2005) 33.

^{vi} Kenyon chooses nouns and adjectives to carry her metaphor, and the shift in syntax is dramatic. The second, third, and fourth lines that precede the metaphor establish a markedly rigid pattern, with a single prominent verb defining each line: *matched*, then *rolled*, then *filled*. The speaker is actively engaged in her task, and a methodical iambic beat moves us forward. Then abruptly, the action stops. The final line contains no verbs, only a noun with its modifier, three short syllables, all accented: *tight dark fists*. So much is packed into these syllables, each clipped sound evoking what is contained, balled up. The relative shortness of the line, along with the sudden absence of a verb, does as much as the line’s content to evoke the energy that is contained.

^{vii} Tim Seibles, “Marrow,” *Hammerlock* (Cleveland, Ohio: Cleveland State University Poetry Center, 1999) 63.

^{viii} Tim Seibles, “No Money Down, Take It Home Today: It’s Yours,” *Hammerlock* (Cleveland, Ohio: Cleveland State University Poetry Center, 1999) 99.

^{ix} Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Poet,” *The Complete Essays and Other Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: Random House, 1950) 329.

^x Laure-Anne Bosselaar, “Stillbirth,” *A New Hunger* (Keene, NY: Ausable Press, 2007) 35.

^{xi} William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, Act II, Scene VII (Jaques to Duke Senior), lines 139-142.

-
- ^{xii} William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Act V, Scene V (Macbeth to his servant Seyton).
- ^{xiii} Tim Seibles, "Midnight: The Coyote, Down in the Mouth," *Hammerlock*, 100-103.
- ^{xiv} Tim Seibles, "Commercial Break: Road-Runner, Uneasy," *Hammerlock*, 19-22.
- ^{xv} Tony Hoagland, "The Big Grab." *Unincorporated Persons in the Late Honda Dynasty* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2010) 5.
- ^{xvi} His poem entitled "America" asks "what kind of nightmare" is it "when each day you watch rivers of bright merchandise run past you/And you are floating in your pleasure boat upon this river/Even while others are drowning underneath you/And you see their faces twisting in the surface of the waters." Tony Hoagland, *What Narcissism Means to Me* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2003) 7.
- ^{xvii} Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., "I Have a Dream," speech delivered on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, Aug.28, 1963.
- ^{xviii} Mary Cornish, "The Resurrection According to Mary of Magdala," 2013, unpublished poem.