**Poetry from Daily Life: Walking a tightrope with figures of speech**

By David L. Harrison

*Since Poetry from Daily Life began on Nov. 5, it has featured 10 guests and 50 more poets across the United States are standing by. Counting our host newspaper, the Springfield News-Leader, the column is now carried in at least five newspapers in three states. In name it’s my column, but what makes it so successful are all the other voices who come to share their thoughts, experience, and wisdom about poetry. I don’t know anywhere else you can find such a rich mix of voices. ~ David L. Harrison*

**As happy as a clam**

As white as snow. As red as a beet. As quiet as a mouse. These are familiar figures of speech specifically defined as similes. A simile compares two dissimilar things using “like” or “as.” One goal of a simile is to give the reader an image to help describe something. The subject is not just hard — it is as hard as a rock! A close relative of the simile, the metaphor, turns one thing *into* another. She’s the wind beneath my wings. They’re a bunch of squirrels.

But similes and metaphors have another purpose beyond clarifying the subject. They also add an element of surprise. They reward the reader by creating an unexpected mental picture that lasts beyond the reading.

Some similes and metaphors are used so much that they are no longer fresh or interesting. Poets try to avoid such overused expressions in their search for newer ways to express what they want to say.

In a book that Mary Jo Fresch and I wrote for National Council for Teachers of English in 2020 called "Empowering Students’ Knowledge of Vocabulary, Learning How Language Works," we played a game of taking similes to silly extremes to make the point. We took a simple paragraph like this:

"One winter day, I got caught walking in a blizzard. It was cold and the swirling snow made me blind. Walking into the wind was hard. I thought I’d never get home."

By adding preposterous similes, we turned the paragraph into this:

"One winter day, I got caught walking in a blizzard. It was as cold as a six-pack of frozen mackerel after two years in the freezer and the swirling snow was as white as four-ply toilet paper made from aspen trees. All that snow made me as blind as a rhinoceros horn covered with a sack of bad potatoes. Walking into the wind was as hard as prying out a concrete filling with a toothpick. I thought I’d never get home."

Writing bad similes (and metaphors) can be fun and it also helps remind us that these comparisons can be quite good when we tone them down a bit and use them where they can add interest and understanding to our poem. Here’s an example:

**Muttering**

Dwarfed by geese

like Matchbox cars in a parking lot,

they mutter under their breath,

maneuver their kids in and out of traffic.

Sometimes you hear them at night,

carrying on boisterously,

like they stayed too long at a party,

and now and then there’s a wild reception

when cousins fly in for a reunion,

But mostly, more than they quack,

ducks putter around the lake, muttering.

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