

# Axis of Poetic Language

## Figurative:

Words used for more than just their dictionary meanings  
in ways that are inventive and surprising  
*figures of speech* include similes, metaphors, personification, etc.

*They were carbonated with joy:* a concept expressed using a metaphor (we can picture carbonation, but the joy part is still abstract.)

*Their laughter burst from them like carbonation escaping a shaken bottle:* uses one concrete thing (carbonated liquid to describe another concrete thing (laughter): also implies an emotional state

## Abstract:

Words that name concepts that only exist only in the mind and can't be perceived with the five senses

## Concrete:

Words that name things or qualities that can be perceived with the five senses

*They felt joy.* Joy is a real emotional state. We can't see joy.

*Their laughter was high pitched and uproarious:* Describes the sound of a specific kind of laughter

## Literal:

Words used for just their dictionary meanings:  
intended to be taken at face value

## Separation

-W. S. Merwin

Your absence has gone through me  
Like thread through a needle.  
Everything I do is stitched with its color.

*A Spiral Notebook*

-Ted Kooser

The bright wire rolls like a porpoise  
in and out of the calm blue sea  
of the cover, or perhaps like a sleeper  
twisting in and out of his dreams,  
for it could hold a record of dreams  
if you wanted to buy it for that  
though it seems to be meant for  
more serious work, with its  
college-ruled lines and its cover  
that states in emphatic white letters,  
5 SUBJECT NOTEBOOK. It seems  
a part of growing old is no longer  
to have five subjects, each  
demanding an equal share of attention,  
set apart by brown cardboard dividers,  
but instead to stand in a drugstore  
and hang on to one subject  
a little too long, like this notebook  
you weigh in your hands, passing  
your fingers over its surfaces  
as if it were some kind of wonder.

*I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,* (340)

-Emily Dickenson

I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,  
And Mourners to and fro  
Kept treading - treading - till it seemed  
That Sense was breaking through -

And when they all were seated,  
A Service, like a Drum -  
Kept beating - beating - till I thought  
My mind was going numb -

And then I heard them lift a Box  
And creak across my Soul  
With those same Boots of Lead, again,  
Then Space - began to toll,

As all the Heavens were a Bell,  
And Being, but an Ear,  
And I, and Silence, some strange Race,  
Wrecked, solitary, here -

And then a Plank in Reason, broke,  
And I dropped down, and down -  
And hit a World, at every plunge,  
And Finished knowing - then -

*Bait Goat*

-Kay Ryan

There is a  
distance where  
magnets pull,  
we feel, having  
held them  
back. Likewise  
there is a  
distance where  
words attract.  
Set one out  
like a bait goat  
and wait and  
seven others  
will approach.  
But watch out:  
roving packs can  
pull your word  
away. You  
find your stake  
yanked and some  
rough bunch  
to thank.

## *Difference*

-Mark Doty

The jellyfish  
float in the bay shallows  
like schools of clouds,

a dozen identical — is it right  
to call them creatures,  
these elaborate sacks

of nothing? All they seem  
is shape, and shifting,  
and though a whole troop

of undulant cousins  
go about their business  
within a single wave's span,

every one does something unlike:  
this one a balloon  
open on both ends

but swollen to its full expanse,  
this one a breathing heart,  
this a pulsing flower.

This one a rolled condom,  
or a plastic purse swallowing itself,  
that one a Tiffany shade,

this a troubled parasol.  
This submarine opera's  
all subterfuge and disguise,

its plot a fabulous tangle  
of hiding and recognition:  
nothing but trope,

nothing but something  
forming itself into figures  
then refiguring,

sheer ectoplasm  
recognizable only as the stuff  
of metaphor. What can words do

but link what we know  
to what we don't,  
and so form a shape?

Which shrinks or swells,  
configures or collapses, blooms  
even as it is described

into some unlikely  
marine chiffon:  
a gown for Isadora?

Nothing but style.  
What binds  
one shape to another

also sets them apart  
— but what's lovelier  
than the shapeshifting

transparence of like and as:  
clear, undulant words?  
We look at alien grace,

unfettered  
by any determined form,  
and we say: balloon, flower,

heart, condom, opera,  
lampshade, parasol, ballet.  
Hear how the mouth,

so full  
of longing for the world,  
changes its shape?

*A Glimpse of the Eternal*

-Ted Kooser

Just now,  
a sparrow lighted  
on a pine bough  
right outside  
my bedroom window  
and a puff  
of yellow pollen  
flew away.

*A Washing of Hands*

-Ted Kooser

She turned on the tap and a silver braid  
unraveled over her fingers.  
She cupped them, weighing that tassel,  
first in one hand and then the other,  
then pinched through the threads  
as if searching for something, perhaps  
an entangled cocklebur of water,  
or the seed of a lake. A time or two  
she took the tassel in both hands,  
squeezed it into a knot, wrung out  
the cold and the light, and then, at the end,  
pulled down hard on it twice,  
as if the water were a rope and she was  
ringing a bell to call me, two bright rings,  
though I was there.

*Sestina in Prose*

-Katharine Coles

It was like climbing a mountain to those of us who'd climbed one. To the others, it was like, I suppose, something else. In other words, we let everybody find her own figure of speech.

Not that it—speech—lay thick on the ground, or mountain; it presented itself one word at a time, far between. A body had to keep an eye out, like for firewood at dusk, or else

miss her chance. Nobody else, let's face it, cared about metaphor, or even simile, the like-it-or-not-ness of the mountain pretty much getting between a body and her musing, in its going. One

step at a time, anyone could lose herself or someone else just staring at her feet. And if a body meet a body is not mere speech but something that could happen, like hopping a bus—though on the mountain

you'll catch no rides, worse luck, the mountain requires to be climbed on foot, one after the other, nothing else will get you up it. There's nothing like such obduracy but in the wild, nobody can tell you otherwise. No simple figure,

this struggle: just a crag, your burden, and your own two feet. Say otherwise, talk through your hat, which I don't care for.

"A metaphor goes out and comes back; it is a fetching motion of the imagination."

"And yet, and yet—when a ship goes to another country and then returns, it always brings some kind of foreign vegetation attached to its hull. Under the waterline, some zebra mussel or termite is hunkered in the dark—and a metaphor, will always return from its journey with something unintended attached." -Tony Hoagland

"A simile is a metaphor that admits it's making a comparison. Similes tend to make you think; metaphors let you feel things directly." -Jane Hirschfield

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