

She had a deep, throaty laugh, like a dog throwing up

James J. Kilpatrick

In his 18th sonnet, Will Shakespeare posed a question for his lady love. He asked: Shall I compare thee to a summer's day? It was a nice thought. Then the bard bogged down. He left his simile unfinished, and more's the pity, for elsewhere he made many splendid comparisons, e.g., the serpent's tooth and the thankless child.

We're talking today about "the good stuff," i.e., about writing beyond the level of Dick and Jane and those insipid Bobbsey twins. More particularly, we're talking about the simile. It's the most familiar of all literary embellishments, in a class with a wedge of lemon or sprig of parsley. It can raise a cupcake to the level of a petit four.

First a definition. The New World dictionary says a simile is a "figure of speech in which one thing is likened to another, dissimilar thing by the use of 'like' or 'as.'" The editors offer as an uninspired example "a heart as big as a whale." Merriam-Webster says a simile is "a figure of speech comparing two unlike things," e.g., cheeks like roses. Shakespeare's similes were better. He saw concealment like a worm in the bud. He heard a lover sighing like a furnace. He could make our particular hairs stand on end "like quills upon the fretful porpentine." (He was an erratic speller.)

How may we fashion similes more like Will's and less like Webster's? It's an art — but it's a learnable art. We learn by good and poor example. Fifteen years ago an industrious logophile, Elyse Sommer, put together an alphabetized collection of 8,000 similes under the title of "... As One Mad With Wine." She arranged her choices under topical headings from "Abandonment" to "Zeal." Thus, if you need a simile for moonlight, you will be led to 64 similes for literary moons, among them moons like chips of ice, moons like ripe plums, and a moon that "hung above the yard like a cheap earring."

Probably half of Sommer's choices are pedestrian nominations, but we can learn by the limp similes as well as by the good ones. Good similes have at least these two qualities in common: They are succinct, and they are fashioned from familiar elements.

How busy was Chaucer's pilgrim? As busy as a bee. How quiet was silence to T.S. Eliot? As quiet as wind in dry grass. What could Tolstoy

say of a woman's bare arms? They felt "cold as marble." How guilty was one of Raymond Chandler's bad guys? He looked "as guilty as if he'd kicked his grandmother." W.S. Gilbert invented a character "as innocent as a new-laid egg."

Again, notice the elements: Good writers deal with ice, plums, earrings, bees, bare arms and new-laid eggs. William Faulkner conceived a face "like a pie out of the oven too soon." Katherine Mansfield gave us a character with a "round red face that shone like freshly washed china." How cold is cold? It can be as cold, said Shakespeare, as "any stone" or "a dead man's nose."

Ten years ago a hilarious list of lousy similes circulated anonymously on the Internet. These gaucheries purported to be from high school essays, and probably they were. Nobody could have made them up:

"She had a deep, throaty, genuine laugh, like the sound a dog makes just before it throws up."

"Her hair glistened in the rain like a nose hair after a sneeze."

"When she spoke, he thought he heard bells, as if she were a garbage truck backing up."

Every reader of this column can think of a better simile — of something fresh, that is, of a simile as fresh as ... as fresh as ... as fresh as ...

James J. Kilpatrick is a syndicated columnist. Readers are invited to send him dated citations of usage in care of this newspaper. His e-mail address is kilpatjj@aol.com.