The Use of Metaphor

Jessica Greenbaum

Last night's rain plastered twigs and acorns, Jackson Pollock-style, around the porch table in such balance that the gray lumber became a canvas I was loathe to revise. We can talk like this all day: how frogs jump on rusty bed springs at six a.m. and birdsong lowers like a chandelier. Bandit clouds blindfold the sun, and in their getaway, coins spill on the lake and glint, then smoke lifts off the water—it was the kerchief they spilled from. Distraction loves magic, but a glance at the woods shows just the woods, because it will be as Neruda explains: and the blood of children ran through the streets without fuss, like children’s blood.

The woods are just the woods. Leaves sway in unison, like boats riding a swell. Then one, seemingly in its own current, flaps like an auto track flagman ending the race. In what terms shall I speak about the daughter who is leaving, or the one pitted against thoughts that would destroy her own true nature, stripping it of leaves, birdsong, and leaving her only a bed of rock, unforgiving below a surrendering leaf?

The Big Cat

Mitchell Wilson

“Call.”
“Call,” the other one says.
“Shut up!” says Jones.
“Shut up!” repeats one of the birds.
The birds will not shut up. “I can't think,” someone mutters, sotto voce. There are giggles. Smith, the old man in the Angels cap, tells the girl taking drink orders that for all concerned, the birds would be better off dead, or at least taken downstairs.
Peters fans his cards. Unperturbed by the birds, he fingers the crown of his king, eyes his two jacks, his three and seven cards, takes a small sip of whiskey, and casts his eyes vacantly forward. He is ahead so far, after a few hands, and he senses clearly enough that the group amongst which he is playing is of mediocre caliber. Though Jones, second to his right, concerns him. The sunglasses, for one thing. The bald head, the stubble, and the toothpick hanging from the side of his mouth, for another. It’s hard to see as it is, Peters thinks. The windowless, wood-paneled room is smoke filled and poorly lit. The buzz of traffic can be heard below, outside.

Besides Jones, the cast of characters seems slack. Lazy maybe, or uninvolved, or too easily bothered by the birds. Apparent laziness is something Peters has learned not to be lulled by. It’s a studied kind of inattention. His mother said she didn’t believe in laziness, that the word “lazy” means very little. Just like the words “bored” and “ready.” They are covers for other things—weakness of will, hostility, guilt. “There’s no such thing as ‘being ready,’” his mother would say, mounting her high horse. “You either do the blasted thing or you don’t. ‘Being ready’ is really ‘having been ready’. It’s something you can assert only after-the-fact.” Laziness means nothing, since all the best players look like they’re taking it slow. Peters reminds himself not to pass judgment hastily.

It isn’t his usual game. He’d walked into the Shamrock on a lark. After a few drinks, some guy at the bar started talking poker. There’s a game, he said, upstairs. When Peters first sat down and looked around
the table, the only person he recognized was the young lady—thin, short black hair, sexy, with large brown eyes and heavy black makeup, in a pink T-shirt. He'd seen her in the Village every once in a while. She hung around the 76 Station near the post office on Weyburn. The dealer called her Honey. The other players he'd never seen.

The stakes are appreciable: dollar, three dollar, five dollar. Three raises per deal. The pots grow to thirty dollars or so, and the evening's money can reach several hundred—a half a week's wages. Not bad, if you are on your game. It shouldn't be too tough, he thinks. These people are hackers.

Jacks or better—progressive betting. Five-card draw. Dealer's call. Everyone antes in, but you need two jacks or better in the first hand to make a bet. If no one can, the hand is folded and the pot remains. The next game you need queens or better to open. And so it goes, with each successive hand, the pot growing larger and larger. Peters is not particularly fond of the game, because most of the time players have to fold early. The pot grows, but from Peters’ point of view true poker is not played.

The two parakeets are quiet for now. Small yellow things with garish purple plumes in a cage off to one side. Surrounded by shoddy wood paneling, their cage sitting on Dodger-blue shag carpet last vacuumed who knows when, they have a surprisingly large vocabulary. “Call,” “Oh, no,” “Shut up,” “I fold,” “Pot's right,” and “Fuck you,” have been heard in this early part of the evening. They seem to be just getting started. What they say, of course, depends on what they hear, and what they hear is, admittedly, of less than impressive rhetorical quality.

Peters registers this irony, but says nothing of it. To say anything might alter the pace of the game, a pace that has suited him up to this point. More importantly, he doesn't want to reveal that he has a grasp of irony to begin with. This would be a kind of tell, what he thinks of as a “large tell.” A kind of overarching revelation about a person. Something that then allows you to infer more specific, limited tells.

Peters often thought that good-but-not-great players sense large tells but don't conceptualize them, don't have a theory about them, and so don't utilize their knowledge to the fullest extent possible. The limited tell is simply if and how a player tips the quality of his hand unwittingly to another, more discerning, player. An eye twitch, a gaze shift (hence Jones's shades), a sigh, an extra sip of something as the player considers his next bet.

The large tell comes through in general conversation, and anything might reveal it. The Hall-of-Fame large tell for Peters was the time a rival player was talking off-handedly about his teenage daughter. Relating a story others around the table couldn’t believe (loaded on Quaaludes and cheap vodka, she’d passed out and nearly was raped, only to be saved by a friend slightly less out-of-it than she), he was too casual in tone, and from this Peters suspected he would be willing to bet more recklessly than usual that night. Peters profited from it.

The pot is sizeable by this time. Twenty-one dollars all told. The dealer says to the overweight, middle-aged black gentleman to his left, “Your bet, Not The.”

Bindle, a round man given to wheezy exhalations, asks, “Not The what?”

At the same time Peters says politely to the black gentleman on the dealer’s left, “I thought your name was Williams.”

“Cleveland Williams Not The Cleveland Williams,” he replies. “Oh. The fighter?” Peters asks.

“What kind of crazy name is that?” Honey blurts out, interrupting her swig of tequila and lime. “That's my fuckin’ name,” Not The says directly. “Sorry. Jeez…”

Seeming to forget he has a bet to make, Not The Cleveland Williams goes on volubly, “I was a fighter myself, man. My papa taught me to fight and entered me in Golden Gloves and AAU bouts back in Philly. By the time I was twenty I was fighting the undercard. Heavyweight. Won every one of them. Got a local name for myself. Had a manager and made a little bit of money.”

Not The sighs, and quickly resumes. “I was ranked at one point, not nationally, but region-wise. It got so every time I introduced myself people would ask if I was the Cleveland Williams. I got sick of answering the fuckin’ question, if you’ll excuse my French. Part of it was that I wished I was the Cleveland Williams, right? I was good. He was great. Know what I mean? After a while I just started introducing myself as Cleveland Williams Not The Cleveland Williams. Solved a whole bunch of problems all at the same time.”

The group nods in sympathy, as if all feel in common for Not The. “Then my friends just went with the ‘Not The’. Or ‘NT’ for short.” “That italics seems a bit rough to remember, always I mean,” offers Jones with a smirk.
“Huh?”
“Especially if you have to underline the T,” says Smith, getting on board.
“Oh yeah,” Not The agrees, falling in the line of the conversation but still confused as to its object.
“The The. Having to get the The right, you know?” Peters clarifies.
“That’s what Jones is saying.”
“The correct emphasis,” the dealer adds.
“Yeah.”
“Who the hell is Cleveland Williams?” gasps Bindle, hitherto silent and switching topics, overcoming his corpulence with great effort.
“All he’s saying is that he’s not the great heavyweight Cleveland Williams,” Peters explains, his voice swelling with newly announced authority. “The Big Cat. The guy Clay pummeled in ’66...though he was half his former self by that time.” Peters says this last as a wistful afterthought. He continues, “He’d been shot back in ’65 by a cop after a traffic stop.”
“A racist cop,” Not The declares.
“Likely true,” agrees Peters. “He lost some of his gut in surgery, one of his legs atrophied, and he tried to come back by fighting Clay. He was beaten badly in three rounds. But the guy could hit. Very strong puncher. Tremendous left hook. He battled Sonny Liston. Twice. But that was half a decade earlier.”
Jones sits up a little straighter as Peters speaks.
“The dude’s got it right,” Not The Cleveland Williams says, impressed.
“1959 and 1960,” Peters says, drawing to a close. “Liston said Cleveland ‘Big Cat’ Williams was the best pure puncher he’d ever faced. Made Clay look like a kitten.”
Jones nods. The others follow suit.
“Isn’t it Ali?” someone asks.
Peters says this last with such finality that most at the table turn with Pavlovian precision toward the birds, as though expecting to hear: “A bum.” “A bum.” But the parakeets stare back impassively, silently.
“It’s your bet,” the dealer tells Williams.
“Three dollars,” Not The says affirmatively.

“Call,” says the young lady, with a hint of reluctance.
“Call,” a bird squeaks.
“I’m out,” Bindle says. He flattens his cards onto the table and then starts tapping his fingers on his belly, b-b-b-lump, b-b-b-lump, b-b-b-lump.
Smith folds too, wordlessly.
Jones sees the bet, and raises another three dollars.

Peters sips his whiskey and is otherwise motionless. During this round of betting, he finds himself off to the side of the game, distracted, having been agitated by the sound of his own voice, what he has said moments before about Clay. Peters lives a bachelor’s life and has bachelor’s habits, one of which is placing heavy mental bets on certain opinions and points of view, beliefs, what is true and not true, what matters and what doesn’t, assertions-of-fact about the world—in this case the sporting world and the great athletes that populate it.

It is a little over-ripe, this kind of precious pondering and opining. But it is also how Peters makes his way around. “It’s a man’s world,” his mother used to tell him. And the map of this world, the map in his head, is well marked. All the signs seem to point in the same direction, except when they don’t. His facts are often right, and he knows a lot of stuff. He is willing to go toe-to-toe with anyone who crosses him. Since nothing really matters, he often tells himself, anything can if I make it so.

And yet this time he senses he has crossed some kind of weird yet familiar line of inappropriateness, a line that has more to do with tone of voice than anything else. This crossing feels to him like his cross to bear, but one that falls heavily upon him in an instant. Boom. Suddenly, he can’t help himself. Feeling wells up in voluminous waves that have to go somewhere, that have to have an effect somehow. He’s compelled to speak, and speak with force.

Jacks are not going to do much for me here, he thinks, bringing himself around. I should fold. He feels the king holds promise, even though he knows that the king means nothing, really, and if he takes two he suggests he already has three of a kind in his pocket. Mostly, Peters feels some affinity for Not The Williams, a vague fidelity based on their boxing connection. He wants to stay in the hand to see how Not The plays the hand if he does.

Peters had fought himself. He spent many summer nights at Cas’s gym in Chicago, off of Western Avenue, learning the ropes. As a kid, twelve, thirteen, fourteen, he was stocky, tough and rugged, and walked...
with a shoulder-leading gait that implied purpose and direction. Though he showed promise in the ring because he had power and strength, he tended toward the rigid, thinking he knew when he didn’t know, or believing in his strategy of attack without regard for the unfolding reality of his opponent’s actual gifts and liabilities. A canny fighter could get inside the strategy, inside his elbows and hands, and inside his head. He keeps all of this tightly wrapped, and says nothing. But he can sense common cause here, between those who have been in the ring, risked their dignity and engaged their courage to fight…and those who have no idea what that whole life is like. Peters had seen Cleveland “Big Cat” Williams box back in Cincinnati. He was tall, rangy, muscular, but oddly hesitant. He held his right hand close to his face open-fisted, palm forward and tending toward the vertical—a halting gesture, protective, signaling he was not ready to use it to box. As if he was going to scratch, rather than punch, his opponent. He had to be in perfect position—feet in motion but alert to plant at a moment’s need, left foot braced as he stepped forward with his right, his left hand rounding into a vicious hook, a sweeping shot to his opponent’s head. A haymaker often enough, but a cruel blow when it landed.

When Peters was a young boy, his mother once told him that whenever he was confused or forlorn he should look for the most perfect white rose he could find, take it to the ocean, and while facing the water, talk to it. Tell it all his secrets and worries. When he was finished, he was to toss the rose into the sea, and over time it would carry his message out into the world. It was a West African ritual, she said. She had learned about it when she was a young woman on a trip to Brazil. One time she took his sister and him to the beach in Santa Monica, white rose in hand. He was sixteen. News of his father’s death had reached them. He had died in an Army hospital in Phoenix of complications from alcoholism. His parents had divorced years before, when Peters was three. He only remembered seeing his father once in his life, when he suddenly showed up in Chicago where they were living at the time. His father stared at his sister and him from a distance while they played with other children in a vacant lot. He didn’t know it was his father, just some strange man in a long black coat looking at them. His mother told them later that night, after he had already gone. She said many things to the rose that day at the beach, but all he remembers is her saying how “good-looking” his father had been, “handsome as a king.” And something else. It disturbed him at the time, and even now when he thinks about it: “I loved you and it didn’t matter how you acted. Not a whit. My feelings for you had nothing to do with that.” She let Peters throw the rose into the Pacific. He has never come to do the ritual himself.

“Six dollars,” says Peters flatly.

The dealer folds his cards and looks Not The Williams’ way.

“Call.”

“As will I,” says the girl.

“Pot’s right.”

Jones seems softened by the timid betting. He wants another raise or two, sensing victory.

Williams asks for two cards. Honey takes one. Jones, the same.
Peters asks for two. Each shuffles his cards privately, as if the shuffle will magically create the winning hand, the true poker hand. Williams places his shuffled cards face down and reveals their contents to himself one by one, raising an eyebrow as he looks. The young lady opens hers promptly, and then shifts them into more appropriate categories. Jones, eyes hidden, is calm and quiet, chewing on his toothpick.
Peters informally shuffles his five cards and fans them: he has drawn an ace and a five. A pair of jacks is not going to win this hand. He hasn’t drawn dead exactly, but he feels as if he has. Bindle and Smith stay at the table to watch.

Not The Cleveland Williams opens the betting with three dollars. Peters believes Not The has three of a kind or better. Honey sees Not The’s bet. Jones sees and raises three dollars more. Pulled in a full house? Don’t think so.
Peters feels Jones behind those dark shades tending to him like a jealous husband—all focused on his every movement. Fuck him. The waitress appears suddenly from downstairs for drink orders and is told to sit tight. Jones is convinced Peters will only bet strong if he has a strong hand to bet. This guy is not a bluffer…Jones has put it all together: a somber player who suddenly explodes in an outrageous claim about Muhammad Ali doesn’t mess around in a serious poker game. Bindle burps abruptly, while the dealer, impatient, shifts in his chair and coughs. Peters has revealed something important about himself in that brief outburst and he knows it. Working quickly now, Peters has to decide whether to meet the six dollars added to the pot, and in a way that insights rarely come to him—as if he’s been leaning on a gate that suddenly gives way and
he falls into the dreamt-of domain—he knows that if he sees the bet and raises he can give Not The Cleveland Williams a chance to win the hand. The whole thing for Peters has become a battle for prestige and alliance. Williams has become his cause. A siren can be heard outside on the street below. For a series of small reasons built up slowly like drips of wet sand, Peters does not like Jones. One of the birds beats its wings, violently. The authority Peters has earned with his boxing expertise is not what he is banking on. If I bet strong, he concludes, Jones will buy it and eventually fold. Peters gets the same thing about himself that Jones gets: that he is too intense a character, with hints of the fanatical about his beliefs, to fool around with bluffing and manipulation. This Ali thing was a Hall-of-Fame tell.

The waitress stands off to the side of the table and stares at Peters. Honey sips her tequila calmly, takes a drag on her cigarette, and observes. “Six and another five,” Peters says without feeling. Not The Cleveland Williams leans back in his chair and sighs. “You must have drawn good,” says Smith. It’s eight dollars to Williams. The pot has grown to fifty-nine dollars. Williams must have thought he had a respectable hand, maybe a great hand. After all, he’d opened this round of betting with three dollars. But the way the betting has unfolded appears to have unsettled him, leaving him reluctant. After a few moments of quiet, with everyone waiting, Not The Cleveland Williams folds his five cards and with both hands places them gently on the table, face down, next to his chips. He shakes his head earnestly and says, “I’m out. You people are too rich for me.”

Peters’ right hand clenches into a fist. Goddamn! His head seems to collapse and everything contracts all at once. With no internal room to maneuver, he finds it impossible to gather his fluttering thoughts. They scatter frantically in that very small space. Dammit!

He could throw the table over, cards and chips flying everywhere, and walk out. He’s done it before. Instead, Peters leans slowly back in his chair and sips his drink, as if, sitting atop the catbird seat, he has everything in the bag.

So here he is: caught in this overly-bought hand, now in it for a concept, an idea, a theory, and more than that, a history, a lived experience that has nothing to do with the current situation, nothing to do with the hard facts of playing cards, the basic reality of the five cards he holds in his hands. Williams has folded.

The young woman seems in control, and eyes Peters persuasively. “Eight and five,” she says. Jones, sated by the betting by this time, eyes lingering over the pot, simply calls the bet.

Peters must decide whether to throw good money after bad, or in this case, bad money after bad. He flips his cards into the muck and doesn’t say a word.

“Let’s see ‘em,” the dealer says to Honey and Jones. They show their cards. The young lady’s two-pair—queens and sevens—beats Jones’s jacks and nines. She gathers up her chips lustily.

With his fleshy right hand Not The picks up his cards and gestures towards the dealer. But in mid-motion he hesitates, and looks quizzically at Peters.

Peters flinches instinctively. Why is he fuckin’ looking at me? Then his eyes latch onto that big paw with the cards halted in mid-air and his heart begins to race. As if in slow motion, Williams casually flips the cards over as he tosses them at the dealer, muttering something about “winnin’ with three kings.”

The glaring flash of the kings sitting on the table pierces Peters’ eyes, like the bright sheen of the sun off the late-afternoon surf. Is that asshole taunting me? Fury swells in Peters’s throat. But the dealer quietly gathers up the cards and shuffles for the next game.

Jones removes his sunglasses and cleans them with a handkerchief. He looks up, and trains his naked blue eyes on Williams. “So, Mr. Williams. What ever did happen to that promising boxing career of yours?”

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