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Metaphor as Fuel

By Josh Woods

In days yet to come, Illinois turn away from petroleum and instead fuel our vehicles with metaphors. Refueling stations replace the gas pumps with slips of paper and microphones, and the gas station attendant is replaced by the poet. Do you want to drive from, say, Chicago down to Cairo? Just stop in and give your sedan a full dose of *the sun is the hot mouth of God*, or *feet so pale and delicate they were carved from soap*, either of these probably being enough to get you halfway. A second stop at *neighborhood streetlamps are incubators of discontent and sin*, and you'll find yourself at your destination with miles to spare.

You can try to avoid the lines at the fuel station by pulling off to the side of the road and producing your own metaphors, but as thousands of hapless and stranded motorists have found, with attempts at metaphors such as *the night is the darkness of day* and *the dove flew like an eagle*, it is best to leave metaphoring to the professionals: the poets—those proud industry-workers who are soon so joyfully bound to their success that they quickly unionize, disallowing anyone to create poetry who has not undergone years of training and the appropriate licensing.

But analysis of statewide metaphor distribution and company records reveal that, contrary to predictions of endless diversity, patterns of metaphor emerge. The fuel companies seem to find themselves selling the same small number of metaphor formulas (sometimes called *metaphormulas*) over and over. To avoid fuel wars, accusations of accrued monopolies, trademark violations, and inevitable profit loss, the companies divide rights to the major patterns among themselves. Shell takes *time as a river*. BP takes *female beauty as a flower*. ExxonMobile takes *eyes as stars* and reserves the right to license-out *stars as eyes* at a corporate bidding auction each year. Chevron takes *sleep as death*, and Texaco takes *battle as fire*. The metaphor of *life as dream*, however, becomes too hotly debated for the major companies to come to agreement on by themselves. They all accept an attempt at judicial arbitration, all waiting to see which company's metaphor is deemed weak enough to merit being awarded a second major pattern of metaphor as its domain, but in a shocking public announcement, the arbiter declares that *life as a dream* is not a metaphor and cannot be held subject to fuel company ownership. The arbiter says that life may actually be a dream.

The companies band together and appeal the ruling, and the suit transforms from a fight against each other to a case of the allied fuel companies versus the State. The suit moves its way to the Supreme Court. The companies' argument begins by positing that *life as dream* does, in fact, fuel vehicles and must therefore be a metaphor. As metaphor, therefore, it is clearly subject to ownership. The Supreme Court, however, finds little interest in mechanical matters, so the allied fuel companies change focus to what the judges find most concerning and important: the subject matter of the

metaphor itself. The fuel companies argue that *life as dream* must be a metaphor because life is not actually a dream.

The defense, adhering to the precedent of the original judicial arbitration, holds that life is a dream until it can be demonstrated otherwise.

The affiliated fuel companies show that dreams happen in life, meaning that the two are separate and exclusive, but the defense counters that a dream within a dream is not only possible but firmly established in the philosophical tradition.

There is an attempt in the news media, based on these days of argumentation, to label the proceedings “The Butterfly Trial” in reference to Zhuangzi’s conundrum of whether to interpret his dream of being a butterfly as actually being a dream within a dream of a butterfly dreaming it was a man, but the label doesn’t stick. Butterflies have gone out of fashion, mostly through overuse in metaphor fuel for trucking companies.

The affiliated fuel companies go on to show that life cannot be a dream because it contains sharp and lucid moments of pain, but the defense easily tosses this aside at the mere mention of the type of dream we call nightmare. Then the fuel companies argue that other people share experiences, but the defense easily tosses this aside as well at the mere mention of other people as projections in a dream.

As the affiliated fuel companies watch their case weaken, they make the bold move to veer away from the direct human experience and, instead, posit that life cannot be a dream because objects have permanence. They explain that, separate from the internal workings of the human mind, objects continue to exist. A chair in a room is there when you enter; then you leave the room, lock the door, allow no one else in; when you return, the chair is still there. This, they claim, proves that matter exists, that matter

is not dependent on human consciousness. By extension, human consciousness is not the constructing power of life and, thus, life is real.

The defense counters. They say that the chair cannot be shown to exist without human experience. It can't be shown to exist in the room unless it or its evidence is sensed by a conscious person. They go a step further to say that there is no chair without its color, its texture, its scent, its weight, all of which are human sensations. Therefore, there is no need to believe in a separate substance that is colorless, textureless, weightless—no need to believe in this separate substance we call matter.

The affiliated fuel companies lose their case. And elsewhere, out of fuel, the engine turning and turning to no avail, stranded on the side of the road somewhere outside of Cairo and heading to some as-yet unknown destination, a man whispers into his sedan, "Life is real," and it starts.