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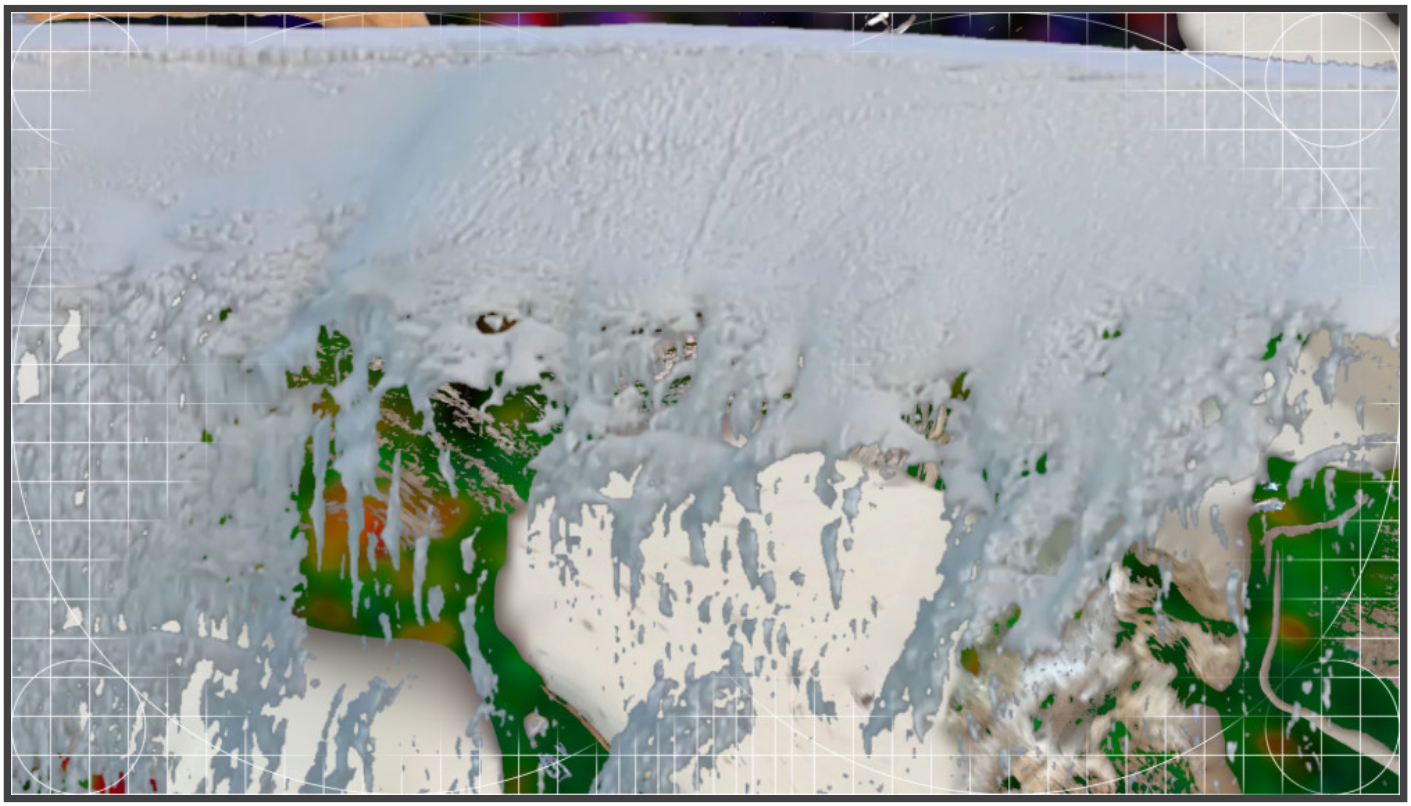
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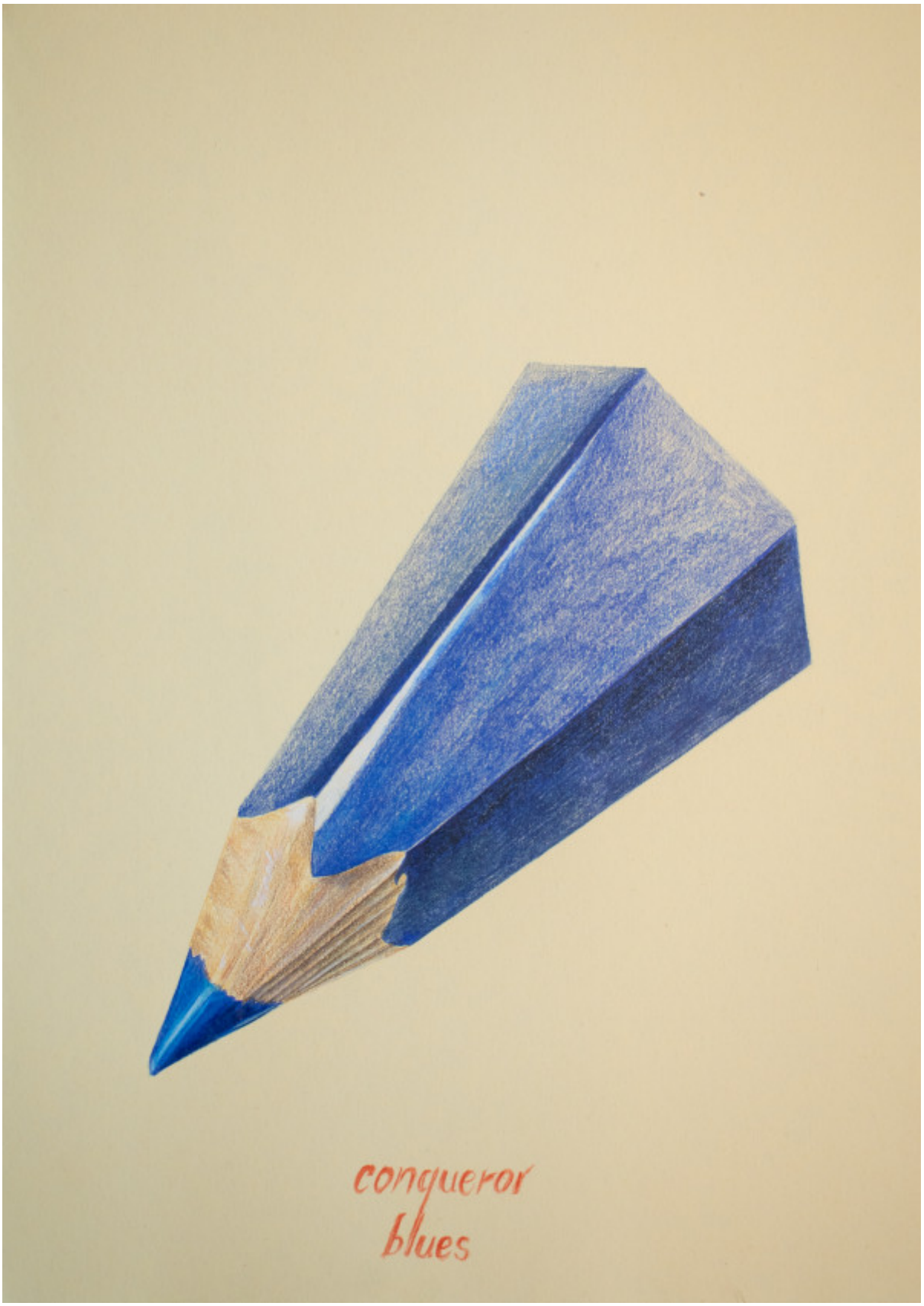
Against Metaphor

Silhouettes of speech

Mariana Tilly

Figures of speech are a tongue's gift to the excessive. Some languages rely on this gift enough to turn its usage into an addiction, speakers into addicts, and poetic metaphors into national history. Consider this: is it possible to argue against metaphors—or some other linguistic devices like analogies or similes—without resorting to the thing itself, in some shape? If we can't stop shaping (and *figurating*) or stage-designing with words, there can be no incorrect way to formulate such figurations. This is an appeal to use it all gloriously wrong.





Mariana Tilly, *Conqueror Blues*, 2024

I have taken issue with metaphor.

I acknowledge the reasons for my unwillingness to excuse the metaphor—it starts with my mother tongue and the intricacies of idiomatic expression amidst which I was raised. It is hard to characterize the Portuguese language's usage as something other than a fluency in

exaggeration, irony and impatience in equal measures; this is already a clue to its reliance in figurative speech, as I cannot describe it without resorting to the very thing I propose to be at odds with. Mix this with a penchant for swearing, subversive intentions and a heritage of recent dictatorial censorship, and what one gets is an ideal scenario for the proliferation of the metaphor's most evident issue, which is its unparalleled misuse.

It is no wonder that language this dependent on special effects has found its healthiest expression in poetry—poetry has been the coded medium of communication through which Portuguese democracy was concocted and demanded, its nuanced ways becoming a subterfuge for the necessary practice of complaint and revolt required to plan the military coups that end dictatorships, as it happened in April of 1974. It must have been a tough task to be a censor (in the censorship line of duty) during those four decades of fascist ruling, to go through every line of printed text and make assertions on whether words were deployed with hidden intentions. All those poetic ambiguities and layered meanings could have caused outbreaks of censor's paranoia, leading their blue pencils to overly scratch out any trace of proverbs or figures of speech as an effective method against anti-fascist incitement. Fortunately, this was rarely the case and poetic action provided a healthy field of undetected communication against the regime. *Portugal country of poets*, we say. However, I have been stuck in struggles with other figures of speech before and for this I blame poetry.

The *Lusíadas* are considered the most important literary work in the Portuguese language: an epic written by Luiz de Camões in the sixteenth century, in poetic rhyme, championing the Portuguese people as its collective hero in a mythical fable around navigator Vasco da Gama's discovery of a maritime route to India, elevating the glories of Portuguese identity as God-like through a dramatic retelling of the Discoveries period.

The Discoveries are praised as the «resurrection» of Europe after the fourteenth century. A series of attempts were made, by the Portuguese crown and navigators, to go down the Western coast of Africa; each time the boat expeditions reached a cape, they wondered if it was the southernmost tip of Africa and often recoiled from the unknown. After 1434, the Discoveries became the country's central effort. Portuguese navigators reached the Canary Islands, Madeira, the Azores and the Cape Verde Islands and settled on several coastal towns—sending the first documented African slave ship to Europe in the process—but the coast just kept going after each cape, and when navigator Bartolomeu Dias finally crossed the southern tip of Africa this was immortalized as Portuguese ingenuity defeating Adamastor, the storm monster seeking to destroy the Discoveries glory. When published, the epic was dedicated to the young king of the time who Camões, the poet, praised as a divinity.

The *Lusíadas* are a metaphorical mega-complex, a monumental construction of a nationalistic mythology in the casts of Virgil, forcing the «Lusitanian people» into the heroic shape required by all epics and having the Gods fight over the desired glory or predestined downfall of the expeditions (for what is an epic without myth, and what is myth without metaphor?).

The metaphor's issues reside precisely in the particularity of its meanings, and the open-endedness of its interpretations. The metaphor's core rationale is the possibility of a shared understanding, an attempt at the simplification of difficult concepts by resorting to familiar terms. But the metaphor fails, again and again, at its purpose (its mission becoming an unruly amalgamation of confusion and misunderstanding).

The more the metaphors, the riper the misunderstanding fruit.

Metaphors are to be taken figuratively, not literally. But if 500 years go by, and language evolves, its metaphors will be open to misinterpretation and originate a sort of narrative of the

absurd, a linear layout of the metaphor's alleged promises—doing a disservice to stories and memories. Fernando Pessoa, notorious Portuguese poet, had 47 heteronyms throughout his life. 47 voices, 47 styles, 47 insides. But it was as his own self that he wrote *Mensagem*, a book comprising 44 poems in intertextuality with Camões's *Lusíadas*, in which Pessoa praises the nation's heroic past and seeks to understand what caused its supposed moral and spiritual decay in the twentieth century. In continuation of Camões' intentions, Pessoa further fabricates the Discoveries mythology and replenishes it with more symbols and figures. *Mensagem* was first published in 1934 to critical indifference, apart from one award by the Propaganda Secretariat of what was the newly installed Estado Novo regime, which would be the dictatorship ruling the country for the following 40 years.

In those 40 years, both the *Lusíadas*' and *Mensagem*'s metaphors were taken literally and appropriated to instill a national identity and pride as part of a long and exhaustive operation of fascist propaganda. The Discoveries frenzy as celebrated in poetry by Camões and Pessoa was remixed and thoroughly indoctrinated, gluing itself into every aspect of culture. The Estado Novo rightfully assumed that if everybody felt the Discoveries had been their own, that glories past could be present and that conquest was a holy duty, people would not go against this oppressive ruling class and count their own sacrifices and miserable conditions as worthy (or even as a certainty) of future glories — as well as justify the regime's colonial projects overseas as a national birthright and the «re-construction» of the Portuguese Empire. The Discoveries as heroically extolled by Camões and Pessoa are, today, a deeply rooted foundation of the country's culture.

The strangest token of the fundamental misunderstanding of the *Lusíadas* has been the literal assumption of Pessoa's prophetic addition to Camões', as *Mensagem* picks up where Camões left off in 1572 and promises that Camões's beloved king (the one who died in an idiotic fight of his own design) will return in a foggy morning to save Portugal from its slow death. This speculative future is known as the Fifth Empire, and through each crisis it is rehashed, brought back from the depths and articulated into nationalistic rhetoric—as are the Discoveries.

The Discoveries were, first, a poorly employed metaphor; later they became a dead metaphor—a figure that lost the original imagery of its meaning due to a semantic shift, caused by repetition and popular usage or because its comprehension depends upon an obsolete custom or technology. They have been reworked in such a way that their literal heritage is indissociable from the regime's imperialism, from which a direct consequence is emphatic strong denial and resistance in acknowledging the role of Portuguese navigations both in the transatlantic slave trade and in the spoils of its colonial project in Africa (which lasted until 1974).

The original persistent use of metaphors and analogies in the Lusíadas has made it impossible for us to grasp the embodied thought, the literal symbolic meaning of any piece of the story as anything other than an enormous feat of fabulation and artistry; and the death of the Discoveries epic as a metaphor has served the purpose to clean the conscience of the Portuguese people and hold on to its new meaning as an imperialist fabrication of the dear past.

If we are still permeable to 500-year-old dead metaphors, and exist in their remixed heritage, it is only natural that metaphors are now unavoidable even if we bear witness to their incessant failure, even as poetry.

Alas I am addicted to metaphors and analogies and other seductive figurations, even as I take issue with them—but because nobody can live a life of such self-control as to ban them from

speech, we must turn to the last resort which is to employ them poorly ourselves in good conscience, and practice good bad usage with determination and the certainty that, as long as they retain some sort of transmittable meaning, it is a job well done and far more effective than a misused metaphor or a dead metaphor or a humiliating analogy, which ends up playing against itself. For we understand nothing of it except its death and the condition of having its meaning reinvented each time.

Alternatively, find comfort with its far more generous cousin, the malaphor—or even better, with malapropisms, the sweetest coincidence of closely sounding words within idioms frequently attributed, in fiction writing, to the mistakes of fools. But to express through malapropism is a privilege! Not a fault. We ought to not be embarrassed of malaphor usage and feed it lovingly instead; combine two things, three things; lose track of the initial idea; be free to rhyme and pantomime. Its meaning is not under the writer's control, there is no universal meaning, it will be lost anyway. Make do with the mischievousness of words.

I leave some malaphors and poor metaphors:

— They ached to be drowning in glory.
— You hit the nail right between the eyes.
— Ocean growling with love.
— Rays from that strong twilight that are like mother's kisses.
— We'll burn that bridge when we get to it.
— Giving new worlds to the world.
— It takes a village to raise an idiot.
— A watched pot is still right twice a day; however, a wrong clock never boils.
— Fool me once, shame on me. Teach a man how to fool me and I'll be fooled for the rest of my life.

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