

IN THIS TIME OF PARCHED THINGS: A TRANSLATION OF GRIEF - *a microreview*

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“In This Time of Parched Things”: A Translation of Grief

Marsha de la O, a poet from California, explores the relationship between an individual’s lived experiences with that of various animals in her poetry. She often connects these lives to illustrate how a person reacts to events in their life. Her poem, “In This Time of Parched Things,” from her book of poems *Creature*, utilizes transfiguration to translate her grief from her father’s death.

Translation, at times, manifests the most accurate expression of a person’s lived experience. Multilingual individuals would understand how saying something in one language does not have the same effect as the translation in another. After working for more than twenty-five years as a bilingual teacher, de la O would know the difference between the Spanish phrase “me arde” and the English translation “it irks me.” “Me arde” translates literally to “it burns me,” but the literal and connotative translations do not capture the intense total-body revulsion that the phrase describes. Only the Spanish version truly captures this sensation. Essentially, expressing oneself through translation leverages its connotative meaning to better capture the described experience, just as “me arde” captures intense emotion better. In *Creature*, de la O frequently utilizes translation to portray her emotions.

In “In This Time of Parched Things,” de la O uses transfiguration rather than Spanish to leverage translation to illustrate her grief. Transfiguration entails the speaker’s embodiment of a creature, which is a lizard in this poem, to translate their lived experience through the described actions of the creature. This poem observes a lizard existing freely, who is compared with “a miniature wild burro in tall grass” (line 3) and by “extending his neck, a bird dog/ gathering scent” (lines 4-5) in the second stanza through metaphor. No, the lizard does not literally transfigure into a wild burro or a, obviously nonexistent, bird dog just as de la O does not morph into a hawk as described in the poem “*Creature*,” but their experiences resemble these animals. The lizard stands tran-



quilly, resembling a burro, and stretches out his neck like a bird or dog might. So, the transfiguration functions as a means to translate the lizard's actions in context with his life. Subverting the notion that an individual can only be one thing; the lizard is related to a combination animal "bird dog." Without specific words or images that can exist in real life, the lizard's existence is skillfully portrayed through the tone and imagery expressed through these two metaphors (translation via transfigurations). Early in the poem, de la O establishes that transfiguration will serve to translate hardships as the Spanish phrase "me arde" would.

This poem's specific hardship refers to the death of de la O's father, illustrated through the transfiguration as translation. Grief can control a person, insisting that anger and bitterness dominate society's expectation for maintaining propriety. To illustrate her grief induced frustration over her father's death, de la O initially makes herself akin to the lizard, then infers that she becomes the lizard. The speaker, who is assumed to be de la O, says, "it's almost kinship I feel. Have I become his mother?" to introduce the notion of herself metaphorically transfiguring into the lizard (line 8). She initially mistakes herself as relating to a mother's instinct, prompting her to remember her dead son. In the following stanza, she expresses how she "wanted" to name and grow "him" into a mythological creature (line 11). It is grammatically unclear if "him" refers to the lizard or the son, illustrating ambiguity in being. Naming him might refer to how like the boy he "never came back" and could not become mythological as she does throughout *Creature*. The shift to past tense in "wanted" illustrates something that could never occur again, just like making memories with her dead son, her late father. So, through this kinship with the lizard, the specific hardship of her father's unretractable death is revealed as being symbolically connected with the lizard.

This connection segues into de la O's transfiguration to the lizard to express her grief via translation. De la O describes the lizard as "One teaspoon of alligator, a spoonful/ of philosopher, a mouthful of daggers" (lines 15-16). Since the speaker, assumed to be de la O, is the lizard because of transfiguration, this description applies to de la O herself through translation. Consequently, the negativity grief induces could

be de la O's "mouthful of daggers" as she strives for healing through her poetry, the "spoonful/ of philosopher." A line before, the speaker and the lizard exchange knowing glances, essentially understanding one another through commonality in their lived experience, which prompts her transfiguration into him as a craft decision to translate her struggle with grief, instead of words. In this moment, the lizard basks in the sun, symbolizing the optimism that de la O adopts to process her grief. Moreover, the lizard's "armor" scales protect a "private, tender blue" that symbolizes the hardshell optimistic mask she wears to cover her inner struggle (line 17). Since this lizard's described lived experience resonates with her, she claims that "Once, [she] asked for a different body," the lizard's (line 19). "Once" may allude to her poem "Once" that illustrates a moment of happiness. So, she chooses transfiguration to experience the world as the lizard does, feigning optimistic relief from grief in the warm sun. Therefore, her transfiguration into the lizard best expresses her struggle with positivity amid grieving her father because it best translates her conflicting emotions.

Through transfiguration as translation, de la O subverts the usual methods of imagery or characterization through dialogue and action to elicit empathy. Eugenia Leigh's "The First Leaf" illustrates the irrevocable trauma in a father-daughter relationship through reptilian imagery and commentary to prompt empathy towards the speaker, which differs from de la O's usage of transfiguration. Additionally, Terrance Hayes' "Inside me is a black-eyed animal" expresses his struggle against limitations on his freedom through declaring the animalistic chaos inside of him, which resembles de la O's transfiguration while using fragmented dialogue that connects with the traditional mode for depiction. So, innovating with what others experiment with, "In This Time of Parched Things" uniquely uses creatures- the lizard- as a symbol, and a goal, for the speaker through a dynamic identification with it that initiates with vague relatability to metaphoric transfiguration to translate the primary emotion of the poem.

The poem's title indicates a time period in which "Things" are "Parched", yet neither the lizard nor the speaker is depicted as parched. De la O's Creature connects being parched with death as one lies buried in the dry dirt, unable to drink water. Nevertheless, the poem showcases



the speaker observing the lizard, her faint connection to him, and her eventual transfiguration into him to perceive the world through a true, yet out-of-body way. Thus, de la O adopts the benefits of translation for accurate expression of experience with grieving her father's death through her transfiguration to the lizard- who has both tranquility and war in his life.