ON THE HОРNS OF A CLEFT STICK
More Motley Mixed Metaphors

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Even if you lack vocal abilities, you can probably sing or hum “There’s No Business Like Show Business,” words and music by Irving Berlin, the great American composer. The second verse contains this lyric: “Even with a turkey that you know will fold. . . .”

But wait: Can a turkey fold? It’s a mixed metaphor. Or maybe not. After all, both turkey, meaning a bad show, and the verb fold, to close prematurely, have become such common expressions that they’re almost literal. Linguists call these dead metaphors. Still, the line conjures an amusing picture.

It’s time once again for a roundup of mixed metaphors in the media. Why now? Because I’m inundated by a mountain of them! I spot these boners constantly in print newspapers and magazines, encounter them online, and hear them on radio and TV.

In contrast to my past Word Ways compilations, I’m not including mashed metaphors (as I call them), a species characterized merely by clumsy metaphor juxtapositions. The following specimens are “pure” mixed metaphors, where the image created is incongruous or absurd or impossible. They are all genuine and personally attested. But be warned: I won’t attempt to sugarcoat these lead balloons!

- “The strength of our country is the fabric of our melting pot.”
- “Right now he’s going to have such a black cloud on his head that it’s going to haunt him for the rest of his days.”
- “Instead of feeding at this trough like an alcoholic with an open tab at a bar. . . .”
- “The real problem is that this is going to dredge up a never-ending political and economic saga.”
- “[Donald Trump] is staying in for the long haul on his own dime.”
- “It’s possible that enough of a frenzy will be whipped up that people could hunker down.”
- “There is a zero-sum game here that leads us down a slippery slope to where there would be no freedom left.”
- “If anyone was on the fence, this could be a tipping point.”
• “America has been erased like a blackboard, only to be rebuilt and then erased again.”

• “DARPA has thrown another wrench into the mix.”

• “Brooklyn does seem just about as boiled-down as a French beret on a beatnik poet about right now.”

• “Every [film] production is built on the backbone of the pipeline.”

• “They will stay the course now that they are on the upswing. . . .”

• “We don’t want to throw fuel on the fire. We want to wait until the waters calm down.”

• “The national audience for [the] themes, returned to obsessively and buttressed by a seamless web of references, is now larger than ever. . . .”

• “This is going to be a once-anywhere, immersive attraction that takes it truly over the top.”

• “But then, the whole show is like that: Every number pays off on the button.”

Multiple mixed metaphors can be even more jarring or ludicrous. Examples:

• “Losing a bombshell to a competitor stings at the very core.”

• “This is one of those rare instances where a boilerplate [contractual language] can be inflammatory. It makes for some interesting speculation but in all probability it’s a tempest in a teapot.”

• “It almost feels like they provide a cover for the real nitty-gritty. I think on a certain level the powers that be are aware of playing that card.”

Coincidentally, the following two sentences appeared in the news on the same day: “It’s a recipe for gridlock if a Senate minority controls which bills can be taken up.” “There’s not a whiff of the epic gridlock of last night.”

Alas, I’m not immune to the affliction. On one occasion, when I recommended the insertion of a caveat into a document, I noted a possible unanticipated benefit with these words: “The frosting on the cake is that it would be forbidden fruit.”

To put the foregoing into perspective, let’s quote an online commenter on the slate of presidential candidates: “Now we see the whole menagerie is one big Potemkin village.”