FADED DINOSAURS AND CLOSED PUPPIES
More Mixed and Mashed Metaphors

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David Carr, the prominent journalist who died earlier this year, wrote in one of his final columns: “Contrast that with Verizon, whose effort to dip a toe into publishing turned out to be all thumbs.”

Mixed metaphors are usually errors. In this case, however, Carr used the device intentionally for effect.

In a just-published book, my friend John Clifton emphasized that his choice of words was premeditated: “To wildly mix a metaphor, the shotgun approach is simply not putting all your eggs in one basket.”

And I’ve deployed the device humorously in e-mail correspondence: “He’s on the lowest rung of the food chain.” “They’ve all gone to that great newspaper graveyard in the sky.” I’ve also puckishly penned “double-barreled punch,” “three rounds to the finish line,” “forging a new income stream,” and confessed to being “in the dark with both hands tied behind my eyes.”

Alas, this phenomenon is more commonly unintentional. In previous Word Ways articles, I’ve distinguished between classic mixed metaphors, which are characterized by incongruous or impossible or ludicrous images, and what I dubbed mashed metaphors, which are awkward juxtapositions, often strings of clichés.

First, a few examples of the classic form that I’ve encountered recently in routine reading:

- “Inevitably, other theater-district dinosaurs have been fading away.”
- “This dark current took a toll.”
- “She was a volcano of ferocity on a pillar of vulnerability.”
- “But based on the information we have so far, it isn’t clear that it was a slam dunk to put the pieces of the puzzle together.”
- “Let’s not screw around eating our own.”
• “The discovery of the folio in St.-Omer provides a bit more ballast, he said, if hardly a smoking gun.”

• “But it is really Shailene Woodley as Hazel who melts your heart with a dazzlingly fresh breath of air.”

• “We are closing this puppy up by noon today.”

Here are specimens of mashed metaphors:

• “I saw the writing on the wall and realized I needed to get on board.”

• “Now it’s a situation where the emperor has no clothes, and everybody is scratching their heads.”

• “For years we’ve been saying the chickens will come home to roost. Eventually someone has to pay the piper.”

• “Don’t come to us with hat in hand until you have your act together.”

• “She was trying to put the toothpaste back in the tube, spinning her wheels in the second term trying to undo the disasters of the first.”

• “It’s something that could be done that would send a very clear signal of taking the gloves off and not just dancing around it.”

• “We’ve been pretty squeaky clean, knock on wood.”

• “It wasn’t like we were the only guys at the table. We were late to the party, so we moved fast.”

• “For women, at times, it’s ‘Carry your own water,’ but this is a business [in which] you can learn a lot from people who have been around the block.”

• “The dire predictions did not pan out. The world dodged a big bullet, at no small cost.”

• “It’s a game-changer. Groundbreaking, if not exactly mind-blowing.”

So there’s the whole ball of wax in a nutshell. Are you new to the subject of mixed and mashed metaphors? If so, the above sampling could be just the ticket to whet your appetite!