

From Issue 7: Joseph P. Wechselberger

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))) bUM ^^^ miNg bird !>

-Joseph P. Wechselberger

At first, this poem might look like a simple ASCII representation of a hummingbird, with tail, wings, face, and a beak. As such, this poem would fit with the “micro micro” poems of four words or less that we featured in *whiptail* Issue 5. This type of short, concrete poem has been explored by minimalist poet Aram Saroyan and Marlene Mountain, who referred to them as Unaloud Haiku (homonym intended). Mountain writes “unaloud haiku attempt to blend the verbal and the visual by drawing not only with a typewriter but with a word...Many words have in them an element of themselves.”

But “*hummingbird*” goes beyond the short, concrete poem. The choice of how to represent a hummingbird borrows the meanings of symbols and typography. The poem is as much about punctuation as it is about a bird.

If you have a hummingbird feeder or have, at some moment, gained the attention of a hummingbird, you know that they have their own agenda. As beautiful and magical as they are with their figure-eighting, iridescent wing-swishes and their faster-than-the-eye dive-bombing, hummers can be quite aggressive and opinionated. Let’s take the elements of the poem in turn, as they appear from left to right:

Joseph’s poem begins with a series of parentheses that are facing the wrong way to enclose the bird. We can imagine that the parentheses attempted to capture it, but the hummingbird was too fast! Hummingbirds are decidedly NOT within the confines of your parentheses. They are not at all parenthetical, an afterthought, explanatory or tangential. A hummingbird has the confidence of a main event.

The wings are composed of carets, which are characters used to insert a proofreading note. These birds likewise have no hesitation using their wings to insert themselves anywhere they please.

The capitalized letters UM...N are reminiscent of the Doppler sounds of a hummingbird buzzing by at top speed.

The face is an exclamation point! But, of course, it is! A hummingbird eyes the nectar and whooshes with a forceful, strong intent, embodying the feeling of an exclamation point!

The beak is a greater-than sign. The smallest bird is well represented by a greater-than sign. This poem is about a hummingbird's attitude and lifestyle, not its physical size.

To top it off, the poem is italicized as if the word has blurred as the hummingbird zips by.

As a whole, "*hummingbird*" goes beyond a typical minimalist concrete poem. It juxtaposes the visual shape of a hummingbird with the meaning of the symbols that were used as building blocks to create the structure.

This is a type of punctuation poem, handled differently than most "punctuation haiku" (recently reviewed in *Frogpond* by Randy Brooks) that tend to use the words (rather than the symbol) for, say, the em dash or the question mark within the poem. Here, the punctuation marks are used directly as concrete symbols that expand the meaning of the shape by conjuring the function of these marks within writing. Be sure to slow down to appreciate this work, because if you read this poem as fast as a hummingbird might, you will miss some of its genre-bending beauty.

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Originally published at *whiptail: journal of the single-line poem* on August 1, 2023.