CHEROKEE PAUL MCDONALD

A VIEW FROM THE BRIDGE

Cherokee Paul McDonald (b. 1949) is a fiction writer and journalist. His latest book, *Into the Green* (2001), recounts his months of combat as an Army lieutenant in Vietnam. (One of the themes of the book, says McDonald, “is hate the war, but don’t hate the soldier.”) After Vietnam, McDonald served for ten years on the police force of Fort Lauderdale, Florida, an experience that he draws on in numerous crime novels and that he describes graphically in *Blue Truth* (1991). McDonald is also a fisherman and the father of three children, roles that come together in the following descriptive essay about a boy who helps the author see familiar objects in a new light. The essay was first published in *Sunshine*, a Florida sporting magazine.

I was coming up on the little bridge in the Rio Vista neighborhood of Fort Lauderdale, deepening my stride and my breathing to negotiate the slight incline without altering my pace. And then, as I neared the crest, I saw the kid.

He was a lumpy little guy with baggy shorts, a faded T-shirt and heavy sweat socks falling down over old sneakers.

Partially covering his shaggy blond hair was one of those blue baseball caps with gold braid on the bill and a sailfish patch sewn onto the peak. Covering his eyes and part of his face was a pair of those stupid-looking ’50s-style wrap-around sunglasses.

He was fumbling with a beat-up rod and reel, and he had a little bait bucket by his feet. I puffed on by, glancing down into the empty bucket as I passed.

“Hey, mister! Would you help me, please?”

The shrill voice penetrated my jogger’s concentration, and I was determined to ignore it. But for some reason, I stopped.
With my hands on my hips and the sweat dripping from my nose I asked, “What do you want, kid?”

“Would you please help me find my shrimp? It’s my last one and I’ve been getting bites and I know I can catch a fish if I can just find that shrimp. He jumped outta my hand as I was getting him from the bucket.”

Exasperated, I walked slowly back to the kid, and pointed.

“There’s the damn shrimp by your left foot. You stopped me for that?”

As I said it, the kid reached down and trapped the shrimp.

“Thanks a lot, mister,” he said.

I watched as the kid dropped the baited hook down into the canal.

Then I turned to start back down the bridge.

That’s when the kid let out a “Hey! Hey!” and the prettiest tarpon I’d ever seen came almost six feet out of the water, twisting and turning as he fell through the air.

“I got one!” the kid yelled as the fish hit the water with a loud splash and took off down the canal.

I watched the line being burned off the reel at an alarming rate. The kid’s left hand held the crank while the extended fingers felt for the drag setting.

“No, kid!” I shouted. “Leave the drag alone . . . just keep that damn rod tip up!”

Then I glanced at the reel and saw there were just a few loops of line left on the spool.

“Why don’t you get yourself some decent equipment?” I said, but before the kid could answer I saw the line go slack.

“Ohhh, I lost him,” the kid said. I saw the flash of silver as the fish turned.

“Crank, kid, crank! You didn’t lose him. He’s coming back toward you. Bring in the slack!”

The kid cranked like mad, and a beautiful grin spread across his face.

“He’s heading in for the pilings,” I said. “Keep him out of those pilings!”

The kid played it perfectly. When the fish made its play for the pilings, he kept just enough pressure on to force the fish out. When the water exploded and the silver missile hurled into the air, the kid kept the rod tip up and the line tight.

As the fish came to the surface and began a slow circle in the middle of the canal, I said, “Whooee, is that a nice fish or what?”

The kid didn’t say anything, so I said, “Okay, move to the edge of the bridge and I’ll climb down to the seawall and pull him out.”

When I reached the seawall I pulled in the leader, leaving the fish lying on its side in the water.

“How’s that?” I said.

“Hey, mister, tell me what it looks like.”

“Look down here and check him out,” I said. “He’s beautiful.” But then I looked up into those stupid-looking sunglasses and it hit me. The kid was blind.

“Could you tell me what he looks like, mister?” he said again.

“Well, he’s just under three, uh, he’s about as long as one of your arms,” I said. “I’d guess he goes about 15, 20 pounds. He’s mostly silver, but the silver is somehow made up of all the colors, if you know what I mean.” I stopped. “Do you know what I mean by colors?”

The kid nodded.

“Okay. He has all these big scales, like armor all over his body. They’re silver too, and when he moves they sparkle. He has a strong body and a large powerful tail. He has big round eyes, bigger than a quarter, and a lower jaw that sticks out past the upper one and is very tough. His belly is almost white and his back is a gunmetal gray. When he jumped he came out of the water about six feet, and his scales caught the sun and flashed it all over the place.”

By now the fish had righted itself, and I could see the bright-red gills as the gill plates opened and closed. I explained this to the kid, and then said, more to myself, “He’s a beauty.”

“Can you get him off the hook?” the kid asked. “I don’t want to kill him.”

I watched as the tarpon began to slowly swim away, tired but still alive.

By the time I got back up to the top of the bridge the kid had his line secured and his bait bucket in one hand.
He grinned and said, “Just in time. My mom drops me off here, and she’ll be back to pick me up any minute.”

He used the back of one hand to wipe his nose.

“Thanks for helping me catch that tarpon,” he said, “and for helping me to see it.”

I looked at him, shook my head, and said, “No, my friend, thank you for letting me see that fish.”

I took off, but before I got far the kid yelled again.

“Hey, mister!”

I stopped.

“Someday I’m gonna catch a sailfish and a blue marlin and a giant tuna and all those big sportfish!”

As I looked into those sunglasses I knew he probably would. I wished I could be there when it happened.

For Discussion

1. Which of the five senses does Cherokee Paul McDonald appeal to in his description of the tarpon in paragraph 35? In “A View from the Bridge” as a whole?
2. How much does McDonald’s jogger seem to know about fish and fishing? About boys?
3. What is the attitude of the jogger toward the “kid” before he realizes the boy is blind? As one reader, what is your attitude toward the jogger? Why?
4. How does the jogger feel about the kid when they part? How do you feel about the jogger? What, if anything, changes your view of him?
5. How does meticulously describing a small piece of the world help the grumpy jogger to see the world anew?

Strategies and Structures

1. McDonald serves as eyes for the boy (and us). Which physical details in his description of the scene at the bridge do you find to be visually most effective?
2. McDonald’s description is part of a narrative. At first, the narrator seems irritable and in a hurry. What makes him slow down? How does his behavior change? Why?

3. The narrator does not realize the boy is blind until paragraph 31, but we figure it out much sooner. What descriptive details lead us to realize that the boy is blind?
4. McDonald, of course, knew when he wrote this piece that the boy couldn’t see. Why do you think he wrote this piece as if he didn’t know at first? How does he restrict his point of view in paragraph 6? Elsewhere in the essay?
5. How does the narrator’s physical viewpoint change in paragraph 26? Why does this alter the way he sees the boy?
6. “No, my friend,” says the jogger, “thank you for letting me see that fish.” (43). So who is helping whom to see in this essay? How? Cite examples from the essay.

WORDS AND FIGURES OF SPEECH

1. Metonymy is a figure of speech in which a word or object stands in for another associated with it. How might the blind boy’s cap or sunglasses be seen as examples of metonymy?
2. Point out words and phrases in this essay—for example, “sparkle”—that refer to sights or acts of seeing (35).
3. What possible meanings are suggested by the word “view” in McDonald’s title?
4. Besides its literal meaning, how else might we take the word “bridge” here? Who or what is being “bridged”?

For Writing

1. Suppose you had to describe a flower, bird, snake, butterfly, or other plant or animal to a blind person. In a paragraph, describe the object—its colors, smell, texture, movement, how the light strikes it—in sufficient physical detail so that the person could form an accurate mental picture of what you are describing.
2. Write an extended description of a scene in which you see a familiar object, person, or place in a new light because of someone else who brings a fresh viewpoint to the picture. For example, you might describe the scene at the dinner table when you bring home a new girlfriend or boyfriend. Or you might take a tour of your campus, home town, neighborhood, or workplace with a friend or relative who has never seen it before.