

Unaccustomed as I Am

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Language is an abstraction, a menu of things both simple and complex, like a wand configuring the world.

A room buzzing with phatic voices, the sound of the farming middle; class blaring out in the same accent, the low and high harmonics in the nonsensical language of music. In the studio there are portraits on the wall, the men speak on their phones; ordering the world with their big muddy voices, expressing the shape of their ideas, laying out their fields in convergent squares, nodding in agreement writing stuff down, ordering a painting to hang up unheeded on the wall of a farmhouse, painted by one of their wives.

They turn their ruddy eager faces to me, they have a glass of Champagne in their stubby hands: “Do you live in around here, or further south?” I start with what sounds like a stutter, but I am actually sorting misplaced street names, house names, a mislaid pub, a filling station on the unnamed road that runs out of the village, across the bridge, over the river, into the trees. My address is going around and around on a fairground carousel. People are concerned:

“Is everything alright?”

I don't need to tell them I have fallen headlong over the cliff of language, that I have low level hallucinations. Looking over the bedclothes I can't decide whether that's a vase or a lamp? I go to the bathroom, which is full of fresh creams, exfoliations, shower gels. The product names are written in Russian, but a closer inspection of one of the packets says in upside down writing: *moist toilet tissue wipes*.

In the beginning I believed that I could communicate through clichés, but I can't remember the chain of words leading up to: *Unaccustomed as I am to public speaking; or we're not laughing at you, we're laughing with you, or perhaps laughing at you.* Clichés are jammed tight with meaning, which makes them dense and impractical to use; employing them is to latch onto a yarn, wrapped up in a joke of signifiers. So that's the point of this story. I steal things from books; for the sound and rhythm of literary words; the main characters already described, the awkward setting explained:

The editor lit another cigarette. "So, you're in love with words. Is that right Tom?" He expelled plumes of cigarette smoke towards the ceiling. "Words can change the world."

We never knew what propelled him to the Midlands town to edit the weekly Journal; but he was capable of greater things. Perhaps a scandal had driven him out of his London job. Tom sat opposite his desk and caught a glimpse of remnants of those days, the ivory elephant, the gold fountain pen, the tortoise shell cigarette box. He lit another Stuyvesant. "So, why don't you want to change the world?"

"I don't know," replied Tom. But Tom did know... 'In the beginning was the Word...' it came before everything, the capacity to speak, the sky and the oceans. It followed Tom around, opening every door before him showing him the way, it was not some third-rate grammatical banality, devalued time and time again by journalists. The Word conveyed the brilliant magic of the real, jutting out from yesterday's trash, from the arid sticky waste of the brown contract carpet, where thousands of half-truths litter the floor; a circle of uncertainty, a sphere of influence, a global comment, a round condemnation. What does it matter?

The editor didn't like awkward shapes in his journalists, he wanted their body and souls, to bend them and twist them, to teach them to respond like reporters, to give a version of the

world in a language that served everything up as muzak, baffling the public, softening their thick necks.”

This is the kind of detail I want; the paragraph is longer, reeling off the spool, the adjectives queueing in a line; ready to be attached to the narrative, like lines of washing. Sometimes I steal for poetry's sake; I like the sound of certain words; squibs of light in the darkness:

Derek revolves his head this way and that way, and the mercury streetlight turned him an electric blue. He veered around to face Abe, and the back of the coach swung slightly causing Abe to steady himself against the door. Rain started, sharp drops, soaking the windscreen, impinging on rusty nails and pieces of tin, the dross in the soil. After a downpour, an exquisite silence prevails invaded by rippling and babbling in the gullies. Abe remembered running to the kerbside and floating a matchstick in apples of light; the stream undulating its way to the drain before being lost. Rain nominates the gardens, percolating flower beds impregnating them. As the night comes the stars draw focus; oncoming headlights glitter in a new light, the tyres aquaplaning, a distant oceanic sound.

Before long, my wife organised a move to London and set about filling the gaps in my conversation and my memory by inviting guests we didn't know to our house. A bold move, considering the things I couldn't do; I couldn't recite the alphabet, couldn't spell, couldn't read aloud, or remember words, couldn't put a fluent sentence together except: "Good morning, goodnight, thank you very much, and how much is it?" Today, I've got problems with tenses in the subjunctive mood. I am, you are, he is, we are, they are. The guests sat down at the table, the shimmering crystals hanging from chandeliers reflecting on crisp white tables and off-white serving plates. I listen to the tumultuous flow of conversation, going

around and up and down like a waltzer on a fairground reverberating and modulating, a baritone hum of exchanges.

When I was holding court, I could rely on the magic of semantics to run in front of me, I would think up wild beguiling phrases; sarcasm flowed from my lips like a river, the raillery the caustic put-down, the lampoon. That is what is needed at dinner parties; bewitching talk, rascally talk. Now I specialise in horrid silences. When there ought to be laughter I remain silent, one step behind the complex processes of a joke, sullenly following the well-rehearsed tale, the metaphors stretching out and disconnected, and by the time I've tumbled to the punch line, the moment of pleasure is lost, like a diamond falling through the mine.

In search of inspiration and to get away from long winter nights, we seek out Slam Poetry sessions. We descend into the cellars of a public house, the light changes from yellow to atmospheric black. The highlight of the evening was a young performance poet, bright eyed, a missionary for poetry. His head was cropped short, like a tennis ball, the red ears had nowhere to hide so he displayed them at a jaunty angle like aeroplanes coming in to land. He stood up in the quiet darkness head lowered, all the awestruck faces turned upward like dogs on a lead, looking up him. The keyboards struck a dramatic note. (The words of a Slam poetry session never come alone, because the fake tyranny of the voice isn't enough to sustain the appalling lyrics).

*What do they want with me,
those early Snowdrop flowers
seen from a parked car?*

The voice was alarming, the sound one gets when rubbing a wineglass, or listening to the gas fire with its one note overture.

Cold-blooded gatherings

dead white choirs,

tall as suicides.

I waited for a pause in the reading, I stand up, summon up the imperative sentence and I shouted: “*SHITE*, you’re talking shite!” I don’t know where it comes from! Verbal inhibitions went away, no balls of corroded sweat gathering on my brow, cursing comes naturally, it gives the right artistic tone to the declamatory sentence.

There was a tangible silence; the poet looked hurt, a knot of language was forming, a babble, the words whirl around and in and out, like a tress of hair in the wind. We left quickly, my wife apologising, the winter air soothing my clothes. Blame the outburst on my condition; the decoupling of my sense of self; remnants of clarity remain locked in another room; I can look at them, but not express them.

*You were born to work in Autumn,
not in fields of sunlight or
near the lead-blue eruptions of the sea,
but in October in perfect light
with pared pencils, and a brush
smeared with yellow ochre
to catch all the coppers and gold
emblazoned on the morning air.*

Perhaps it could be a good poem, but Aphasia came to rob me, like a sinister conjurer, it turned a right-handed man to a left-handed man. I learned to write again, holding the paper with a sweaty useless right hand without knowing how to spell the words.

When I awoke, I was surprised to see my family gathered around my hospital bed. My younger brother Damien, his wife and all their three badly behaved papery faced children who stood impatiently, waiting to run away.

“What’s happened?” I said to myself. My wife read my face.

“You had a major stroke three days ago”. A stroke? I thought of our tabby cat. I started speaking, and the voice came back weak and disembodied ...

“Studder im.”

“What the bloody hell was that?” I thought angrily. It must be the anaesthetic. I tried again, concentrating on the short words.

“I am studder him.”

“Perhaps we should ask the doctor?” But Damien, had a better idea.

“If he can’t speak, perhaps he could write it down?” Well done Damien. It seems obvious, like passing a tape recorder to a man suffering from senile dementia so that he can record his thoughts.

“Now”, said Damien. “Write it down.” I looked at him learnedly and said:

“SHITE!”

“I’m going to call the doctor,” said Emily.

Like a lumberjack, my wife Emily steps out cautiously on the river; onto to its flume of logs, she parts them easily, posing questions without complexity freeing up the logjam. I can’t handle the abstraction of language in all its entanglements, and therefore I cannot own the world, cannot configure it, utter it, only observe it:

“People politely looked at Holly’s rear as it slid past the tables. She got herself comfortable, slipped into a chair absent-mindedly tucking the creases out of her lap.

‘Aren’t you going to order a drink?’

'What would you like?'

'Vodka and orange. Anyway, what's the matter with you? Who are you looking for?''

Its six a.m. and I am standing on a river bank in the summer sun, drinking coffee. The river is pellucid, warm and narcotic; I can see the shiftless curve on a Coke bottle half buried in the sand. A man is fishing, his Nike trainers leave a chaste footmark in the beige mud, his headphones like a pair of gigantic earmuffs. I watched him cast out, and the mirrorlike surface fractures and heals itself. He puts the rod down, takes his earphones off and walks towards me. He smiles:

“Excuse me. I found this. Is it yours”? He passed a piece of blue plastic to me. It was my bank card. I accepted it, he nodded and padded his trousers, feeling for a pack of cigarettes. He the taps the cigarette against his thumbnail, and then lights it with a waterproof match.

“Are you a Doctor then?”

“Well, not a medical doctor...Anyway, I don't know anything.”

He nodded, as if I explained everything there was to know. He put on his earphones and bent down to load the lure, an artificial tropical fish to attract the pike lazing in slack waters. He raised his right arm up and casts it far out, the clicker sending the line smooth and sure. Then we watched its spinning yellow and green fins turning just under the surface, something exotic in an English river, returning to the bank.