

BASMATI RICE

An Essay about Words

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MY STUDY IS ON THE SECOND FLOOR of our house and faces East. I like that and I get up early to write, perhaps not simply because I enjoy the sunrise (especially in winter, when all has been so black, and then gradually light, like hope, returns) but out of some atavistic hope that my thoughts, too, will rise with the sun and illumine the blank pages in front of me.

We live in a corner house and my study is right above a busy street. People whom I cannot see often pass beneath my window and throw up snatches of conversation before moving out of earshot. And I hear footsteps, light, heavy, singly or in groups, and the sound of buggy wheels or grocery carts. Now, I can see the sidewalk on the other side of the street, see people hurrying along or dawdling, the young woman from the St. James Daycare a block away, out for a walk with her little charges who all seem to march (or skip or run) to a different drummer, a father with his baby tucked inside his ski jacket, a blind man, a woman with her arms full of grocery bags. I cannot hear their footsteps nor anything they might be saying and sometimes a wonderful thing happens where someone will pass beneath my window, and say something while someone is walking by on the other side of the street, and so I get the wonderful absurdity of seeing the old lady in the red coat who lives at the Senior Citizen Lodge at 16th and Macdonald (I know because she asked me to take her picture, waving her hand-made Union Jack, the day the Queen came down 16th Avenue) going by on one side and hearing a gruff teenage male voice saying, “so I said to him nobody talks like that to me and. . .” The movie I watch has the wrong soundtrack!

I am interested in such absurdities, in the word *absurd* itself, from the Latin for inharmonious, foolish. L. *ab*, from, *surdus*, deaf, inaudible, harsh (used metaphorically here, deaf to reason, hence irrational). I am interested in the fact that I spend a lot of my days at a desk, or table, and that the desk or table needs always to face a window. This is not just so I will have something to look at when “illumination” comes slowly (or not at all) but because, in what is essentially an inside occupation (and a very lonely one at that, I can’t even stand to have a radio on when I’m working) I am able to feel even a little bit connected with the out-

side. I often see myself like a diver in one of those old-fashioned diving bells, both in and apart from everything in the universe around me. There is a little piece of brown paper taped to the window frame. I got it from a bread wrapper several years ago when I was spending a winter in Montreal. It says

PAIN
FRAIS DU JOUR

in blue letters and underneath

BREAD
BAKED FRESH DAILY

Some days, if I'm wrestling with a piece or a passage that seems especially difficult I fold the paper so that it reads:

PAIN
BAKED FRESH DAILY

and for some perverse reason that cheers me up. That the French word for bread and the English word for misery of one kind or another *look* alike is another of those absurdities that interest me. There is no real connection, as there is, say, with the English *blessed* and the French *blessé*, to wound — it's just chance. But my mind, when in a certain state of heightened awareness (which I might point out, can just as easily be brought on by laughter as by tears), makes that kind of connection easily.

Here's another. It was early November when I began thinking about this essay, and the tree outside my window was almost bare of leaves. The weather was turning cold and a cold rain was falling. "Autumn leaves" I wrote on my pad, "autumn leaves." Over and over. And then suddenly "WINTER enters." Again, no real linguistic connection, but writing the phrase over and over gave me a new way of looking at the leaves.

I love words. I love the way they suddenly surprise you; I love the way *everyone*, high or low, uses them to paint pictures — that is to say metaphorically. In the past week a phrase, not new, but surely not much in vogue of recent years, has been said in my hearing, or I've read it in the paper, no less than five times: so and so is "between a rock and a hard place." Once in a line-up at the main post office downtown, once spoken by a friend, and in three different newspaper articles. Where does this phrase come from? I can't find it in Bartlett's, at least not under "rock," or "place," or "hard." Why is it suddenly being said? It is certainly a most poetic (and uncomfortable) image. I wouldn't want to be there, nor would you. Somebody says, of somebody else, "I've got him eating out of my hand," probably unaware of the root of the word "manipulate." When I was a child I heard constant warnings about kids who were "too big for their britches"

or “too big for their boots” and we were all, without exception, potential big-eared little pitchers. And yet it seemed to me that all the adults I knew — parents, relatives, teachers, corrected me if I played around with words myself — or with grammar or sentence structure. It was as though all the metaphorical language in the world had already been invented and I wasn’t there on the day that it happened. Once I started reading poetry I realized that poets seemed to have a certain freedom that ordinary, hard-working decent folks didn’t (or didn’t allow themselves) to have. They invented and re-invented language all the time. (Prose that got too metaphorical was considered suspect unless it were in the Sunday Sermon or spoken by Roosevelt or Churchill.) That was when I decided I would become a poet, and probably why. My poems were terrible — a lot of them were very “Christian” in a romantic way, full of Crusaders, lepers, infidels, and angels — and some of them, I regret to say, won prizes. But I do remember the day we were asked to write limericks (Grade 4? Grade 5?) and I came up with this in about five minutes:

There was once a fellow named Farrell
 Whose life was in terrible peril
 He fell in with some rogues
 Who stole all but his brogues
 And had to slink home in a barrel.

(I don’t know where I got “brogues” from or how I knew what it meant; it certainly wasn’t a word used in our family.)

I wrote dozens of limericks after that first one. I knew it wasn’t Real Poetry but I also suspected the other stuff, the stuff my teachers and my mother and various judges liked wasn’t Real Poetry either. Nevertheless, for all my desire to write poetry, what I was always better at was prose. Who knows why one writer works better in one genre than another? What I’d really like to be is “ambidextrous,” like Michael Ondaatje or Margaret Atwood, but I’m not. It’s always prose for me. (Why do most of us see poetry as “higher”? Because it seems more of a distillate of the creative unconscious than prose? Perfume as opposed to cologne? I once had a poet in a graduate prose class in Montreal. He needed one more course to get his degree and had chosen mine. We were all working on stories and one night he said to me, in much despair, “I’ve never written ‘he said’ and ‘she said’ before.” Of course he wasn’t a *narrative* poet: not for him *Beowulf* or *The Idylls of the King*, or, closer to home, *The Titanic*, or *Brébeuf and his Brethren*.) I still sometimes have the awful feeling that I failed because I failed to write poetry, even while I know that prose can be just as exciting or dense, “packed,” innovative as any poem. It probably has something to do with the fact that we write our notes, our memos, our letters, in prose, we speak in prose to one another, even

when we speak metaphorically: "Lay off me, will you?", "I'm really blue today," "What's for dinner, honey?", "You're driving me up the wall."

Sometimes a sentence or a phrase gives me the idea for an entire story (once, even, for the very last line of a novel I didn't write for another three years, when I overheard a man in a pay phone say to whomever was on the other end: "Get rid of it." That's all I heard him say and then he hung up). This summer my daughter and I were in Greece. We witnessed a very bizarre incident involving a young English boy, an octopus, and a man in a panama hat. I knew that that in itself could provide the central image for a new story but then, a few days later, I heard a French woman on another beach say "La méduse; il faut prener garde," and suddenly, because of this incident with the octopus, I saw not the jelly fish to which she had been referring but the great snaky tentacles of an octopus and *then* I saw that what I really wanted to write about was all that sexuality that was there on the beach, in that heat, under the intense blue sky: the bare-breasted European woman, the young Greek men showing off to their girlfriends and whoever else would watch. All the bodies. The story is seen through the eyes of a 12-year-old English boy, very properly brought up, for whom the octopus becomes the symbol of everything most feared and most desired, "the nightmare spread out upon the rock." Later on, on quite a different island, a Greek man said two things that have become incorporated into the octopus story. He said, when we were listening to some very sad Greek music, "There are no happy men in Greece, only happy childrens." He also asked, "you like this ice-land" and since the temperature was over 80° we stared at him. He meant "island" but it took us a while to figure that out. Now, in my story, the young boy hears words and phrases he doesn't completely understand ("la méduse; il faut prener garde" "you like this ice-land?") and this just adds to his general sense of unease.

Another recent story was inspired by a newspaper clipping about a man who had been charged with common assault for massaging the feet of strange women. I began to do some foot research and discovered something I must have learned in my university zoology course, that the number of bones in the human foot is the same as the number of letters in the alphabet. And so the story begins: "There are twenty-six bones in the foot; that is the alphabet of the foot" and goes on to tell a story which is a complete fabrication except for the fact that both men (the "real" man and the man in my story) get arrested, charged and fined.

Another story, which is the title story of the collection I'm presently working on, came as a message written on a mirror in the George Dawson Inn in Dawson Creek. The message was not intended for me but showed up on the mirror in the bathroom after my daughter had taken a very hot shower. It said, "Good-bye Harold, Good Luck" and whoever had written it must have counted on the fact

that Harold would take a shower. (And the maid had obviously not gone over the mirror with *Windex*.) We had a lot of fun trying to figure out who Harold was and whether the message was written in anger or love. In the story, “they” (a mother who is contemplating a divorce and her child) do meet up with Harold, but of course he doesn’t know that they have seen the message (and they’re not absolutely sure he has).

I cut things out of newspapers, often really horrible things and I’m never sure why.

MURDERER SET WIFE ADRIFT ON RAFT

TIGER BITES TRAINER TO DEATH
(Horrified Wife Looks On)

DOLPHINS NUDGE BOYS BODY TO SHORE

That last one really haunts me, not just the image, but that word “nudge.” The dolphins with their blunt “noses,” gently nudging the dead boy towards the shore. That one will probably end up in a story.

PLAN YOUR PLOT

(this one was in the gardening column of the *Province*) and one from the *Vancouver Courier* recently prompted a note to a friend.

POUND WARNS PETS

I cut it out, and wrote underneath, “You’re an old bitch gone in the teeth.”

And so it goes. And so it goes. And so it goes on and on. I read Rev. Skeat, I read Bartlett’s, I read Fowler’s *Modern English Usage*, given to me by an ex-boyfriend who wrote, as a greeting, the definition of *oxymoron*, which just about summed up our relationship! I have the *Shorter Oxford Dictionary* but long to have the real one, all those volumes as full of goodies as good Christmas puddings. I have the Bible, the Book of Common Prayer, Shakespeare and *Partridge’s Origins*. I have Collins’ phrase books in several languages (“that man is following me everywhere”). I have maps and rocks and shells and bits of coral from various places to which I have travelled. I scan the personal columns, the names of the ships in port. And I have my eyes and ears.

I am a dilettante (related to the Italian for “delight”). I never learn any language properly but love to dabble in them. I have studied, at one time or another, Latin, Anglo-Saxon, Middle English, Old Norse, French, Italian and, most recently Greek. I spent a winter in Athens a few years ago and saw, every day, little green vans scurrying around the city with ΜΕΤΑΦΟΡΗ posted on a card in the front windshield. “Metaphors.” When I enquired I discovered that these vans are for hire and they *transfer* goods from one section of the city to another. Now I long to write an essay called “A Metaphor is not a Truck.”

Last year I took two terms of sign language at night school. I was amused by the fact that in ASL (American Sign Language) the sign for “woman” has to do with the tying of bonnet strings and the sign for man with the tipping of a hat. These are charming archaisms, like “horsepower” in English. (I am also interested in mirrors, mirror images, going into and through mirrors, so signing, which one does to someone facing you, is fascinating — and very difficult. I often came home with an aching hand.) I would like to take more sign language; I would like to become, as an African man once said to me, about English, “absolutely fluid in that language.”

Words words words. Sometimes it all gets on top of me and I feel like the monster made out of words in *The Fairie Queene*. I can’t leave them alone; I am obsessed. I move through the city watching for signs with letters missing (“Beef live with onions” advertises a cheap café near Granville and Broadway, “ELF SERVE” says a gas station out on Hastings) and I am always on the lookout for messages within words: can you see the harm in pharmacy, the dent in accident, the over in lover? In short, I play.

There is a phenomenon, most commonly observed in photography but also talked about by people who make stained glass. It is called “halation” and it refers to the spreading of light beyond its proper boundary. (With stained glass it happens when two colours are next to one another.) I think words can do that too, or perhaps I should say that I would like to think that there is no “proper boundary” for words. Let them spill over from one language to another, let them leap out at us like kittens at play. “Wit,” said Mark Van Doren, “is the only wall between us and the dark.” If a writer, if an artist of *any* sort, stops approaching his materials with wit, with laughter, then he is lost. The other day I was making a curry and listening to some old Beatles’ songs on the radio. John or Paul was yelling, “Can’t Buy Me Love” and I was thinking about Basmati rice. Suddenly I realized “Basmati rice” had the same number of syllables as “Can’t Buy Me Love,” so every time John or Paul or whoever got to the chorus I yelled out “Basmati Rice!” and did a little soft shoe shuffle while I stirred the curry sauce. (Everybody had a good time.)

