

## Hamstrung on the Trampoline of Language

After fifty years of talking, he's out of juice. Tongue-tied and ill at ease, he trades in nothing to say while ducking the pressure to say it anyway. Crowded rooms are minefields. EXIT signs pulse with the urgency of heart monitors. Since phone calls assault him like orange alerts, he carries no cell. With the requisite travel budget, he'd gladly celebrate birthdays in a foreign city, alone, relishing the pungency of uncomprehended voices. Take away his fear of being eaten and he'd trade lives with a plaice fish, its mute self-possession masking diffidence like a psychic gel-coat. Still, when he greets you from across the street with a shrug that says, "If not for this river of traffic between us . . ." take him at his word. He's a stick-toy Ishmael, odds of rescue nil.

Social phobias may attest to character (defective in this case), childhood trauma (peremptory in anyone's) or the usual gang of existential thugs. What keeps him frog-marching himself along sanity's tightrope is the awareness that he *is*, in fact, damaged goods. Accused of self-absorption at an early age, he can only plead guilty as charged, and like literary idols from Montaigne to Emerson, he considers navel-gazing a respectable practice. Proust retired to his cork-lined room; Stephenson, to a South Seas island. Even they might have stopped short of Jean Paul Sartre, who defined hell as "other people," but here's the X-factor: when they're not writing, intellectuals seem to thrive on company. They live to talk. A fellow traveler with nothing to say, *our* man chokes on dysfluency, his throat a cindered airshaft. For this guy, hell isn't other people; it's conversation. He might take you by the arm if you're intimate and toss a frisbee your way (with enough distance between you to cancel out dialogue) or learn to sit wordlessly in your presence. When tongues cleave to palates, he takes a powder.

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Elaine's father ran the Shell station, more or less. His family lived in the floodplain of the Charles River, their slattern house moated with sandbags. From the bays of his service garage uptown, Earl Polito radiated menace. No hail-fellow-well-met, he; when the station closed, if you were interested in shooting seagulls, you could follow him to the

dump. But Elaine: in homeroom she'd tap you on the shoulder. An early bloomer who projected appeal in a restless, distracted way, she favored an expression adults would recognize as wounded. You recall the way she twisted strands of hair around her finger and jackhammered her knee against the underbelly of the desk. She blushed when teachers reprimanded her but kept on talking out of turn; Elaine couldn't help herself. Once in gym class, Steve Mangini stated conclusively, "Polito's a chucker." Her attentions confused you, but you paid attention. One day she invited you home.

"Why?" (the casa Polito being a place best avoided).

"I don't know. We could fool around together."

"Doing what?"

"We can have donuts. And," she said, "I want to show you something."

"What?"

"Just something. *You* know." Elaine paused for a beat before whispering (whether in fact or just in memory), "We could go to bed if you want."

Your turn to pause.

"Don't you like doing it sometimes?"

"Oh," the first flare of puberty answered, "I suppose *you* do." Let put-downs pass as foreplay.

Elaine gave up, had her seat changed. She put in appearances at Paul's Market to buy her old man's Luckies. Once she was glimpsed in Tommy Rafferty's Camaro, her eyelids painted lapis. Tommy it was that got Elaine in the family way, back when "intercourse" was a rumor and conversation nothing to worry about. Before Elaine drops from sight, though, let's feature her in a dream. There she is, balancing in a leaky skiff, round arms wrapped around her knees. On shore you hold the frayed, severed end of a rope. Good thing you're not aboard.

Muddles repeat themselves. When fellowship collapses, dismissed as a tenuous, unwillable condition, guilt vies with grateful relief. For habitual avoiders, getting to *not* know you is standard practice. Recently, after ten years of occupying the next-door office, a colleague retires. You've greeted him by name unflinchingly, but he only ever replies with a silent, barely perceptible nod — nothing unusual when you think about it. Students you've taught pass by on campus without a glance. In these aversions, you read no insult. The surface of the earth being crowded with animate, vertical

objects nattering on cell phones or moon-walking in bubbles of alien perception, how are we to countenance human beings? We go our ways, dragging tentacles of missed connection.

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The world is peopled with social beings, too, gregarious sorts who welcome the challenge of a charity case. Here we find an undergraduate, aspiring to write literature, who attends readings in the company of his English professor, Dr. Edwards. “Margaret,” as she insists he call her, has others in her coterie, and it’s only out of kindness she nudges him toward the podium one evening where a Famous Poet smiles, soaking up the rapture of his college audience. In one hour’s measure of liquid phrases, the bard pledges 300 youths to live and die for poetry.

Hailing the maestro, Margaret shouts, “This is (himself), one of the students I mentioned. He’s shown me *his* poetry, and I thought you’d like to know what a fine young writer he’s becoming.”

Nothing better, to be sure. Pleased to make your day. Shaking the poet’s large hand, his mute tongue congealing like a beef patty, the student knows what protocol requires: speak to his knowledge of the great man’s oeuvre, extol the muse whose acquaintance they’re supposed to share — whatever. But calculation kills. Our hero dons his Edvard Munch mask instead, yorking in an antechamber of his mind, as the poet’s gaze settles on some promising brighteyes standing by. We leave our tortured undergrad in an echo chamber of witticisms, anecdotes, panegyrics — the utterances that failed him a heartbeat ago. His moment for contact is past.

A history without regrets is a history without language — it’s unrecorded, and this explains the ways utopians fiddle with words. Quaker *thees* and Jacobin *citizens*, Bolshevik *comrades* and lesbian-separatist *womyn* all point to the need for clean breaks. Most language reforms come to nothing, though, and your own zip-mouthed agenda is haunted by the memory of another.

Summer of 1980: at a hill farm in southern Norway, you witness a childrearing experiment worthy of Jean Jacques Rousseau. Staying at Dalandgaard as a worker-*cum*-hanger-on in exchange for meals and a cot beneath the barn eaves, your occupation is pulling weeds in strawberry beds. Also digging

pasture stones and failing, mostly, at herding the milk goats, sheep, a single unruly cow, and tribes of miscegenating fowl. (For the record, Norse cattle say “møø.”) You want to improve your Norwegian, but the farmer of Dalandgaard puts a premium on spoken words. A disgruntled beatnik and fierce autodidact, Sigmund condemns language as a tool of oppression. “We are *colonized* by it,” he says. “It crushes us before we find a voice!” All human evils, he feels, are social constructs rafted on verbal currents from one generation to the next. Thus, conventional speech is *forbudt* in earshot of little Erling. Liv, the boy’s mother, goes along with this policy — she’s a product of experimental schooling herself. That, and the blows which have swollen her jaw like an eggplant. (Sounds of male snarling and female weeping grow familiar at Dalandgaard, perfectly audible in the barn.) When it comes to words, both parents keep shut around their child. Conversation goes underground, like sex after kids.

The regimen is raving mad, but to raise a human being without vocabulary or syntax takes work. Sigmund spends enormous energy producing the utterances he directs at Erling. Listening to his strings of nonsense syllables, a kind of Dadaist croaking, you feel you are hearing “I Am the Walrus” played backwards, or an African click language translated by Maoist re-educators. Whatever it is, it produces results. Going on five years old, Erling speaks not a word. He sobs and murmurs repetitively throughout his waking hours. He rocks himself in a corner of the yard, his back to a wattle fence, when he’s not sprinting from a homicidal turkey rooster; but you never hear him talk, even to himself. Not to worry, Sigmund explains. In marathon bull sessions, he keeps you up at night embroidering theories. An unspoiled child, appareled in celestial light, will have no need of verbal trappings, it seems. Corruption cannot cling to the mute, shielded as they are by their wise and cultivated innocence. “The words of men are breath,” Sigmund quotes, “and breath is but wind.” Whether or not the hay gets made or the strawberries go to market, Dalandgaard will bequeath to humankind a holy fool. “It may be too late for you and me,” Sigmund avers. Still, he takes comfort in shepherding goodness. The project will fail *only if Liv subverts it!* or *society!* intervenes. Success, Sigmund believes, depends on calloused love. Just a push from his father, and little Erling redeems Adam’s fall.

(There might have been a nightingale fluting when you crept from the barn. Channels of rainwater brimmed the ditches, swallowing footsteps the morning of your escape. Thirty years on, you wonder what ditches little Erling may have flopped in. What ceiling tiles has he memorized in his life? You ponder, too, your telling no one about the farm you fled like a fugitive.)

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Despite his sins of omission, he's always been attracted to Buddhists. Specialists in silent sitting are not known to be talkers. In the Zen technique known as *metta*, he reads, practitioners inhale the sorrows of the world and deliberately exhale wellbeing. An in-breath of suffering, an out-breath of kindness, breath after breath, patiently repeated — that's the exercise in a nutshell. It's not alleged to cure unhappiness; *metta* is just a way to acknowledge affliction, to free oneself from denial. Nor does meditation work magic, the teachers say, though it does unencumber. You can't help people unless you can be hurt.

The Arms and Armaments Gallery at New York's Metropolitan Museum: strolling past mounted knights on display, their tons of chain mail, casques, buckled greaves, and cuirasses, he learns that armory declined with the Renaissance. It was finally understood, a pamphlet explains, that the more thoroughly you shielded a knight, the less nimbly he soldiered. (Sigmund of Dalandgaard, a pacifist, armored his kid in silence. Little Erling may have escaped history, but the same can be said of an armadillo. The hermit's life is one you choose. Glimpses of it bring longing for the shoulder-rub of the herd.) On the sidewalks of New York, people merge and mingle.

Still, he remains unconverted. It is the herd he finds — in spades — during the summer of 1986, in Oxford, England, where he's anticipated monkish privacy. The stillness of the city's reading rooms, its cloistered groves and courtyards shadowed by chancel arches, gives way in summer to throngs. Tourists mug for the lens, their arms encircling the Radcliffe's Roman emperors. Busses disgorging Japanese obstruct the Bodleian Library, while Texan high schoolers appropriate street corners, loudly condemning the shopping opportunities. Jostled half to death, locals are conspicuous for

their testiness but deaf to the tact of scholars. *We're* not tourists, he wants to say. *We're* graduate students writing papers for actual dons! But stiff lips lose out to memories of the Blitz, apparently. A sorry pass he comes to one morning while striding through the covered market, one of few sites in Oxford unvisited by foreigners. Elbow-to-elbow with greengrocers and nannies pushing prams, a pair of student mates air opinions about Shakespeare in flat-footed American voices. *Coriolanus*, the play they've been reading, features vicious mob scenes. The uncouthness of crowds is their topic when the first mate turns to the second mate, saying, "*These* are by far the ugliest crowds we've seen! These are vulgarians on a rampage!" A teashop proprietor standing nearby overhears him — she let go a combustive snort before pulling her glass awning and securing the shade behind it. Seconds later, a hand reaches past the blind to secure a primly lettered sign: "Trading has ceased for today." On the trampoline of language, dismounting is the hard part. Better not to climb aboard.

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Years of experience and a sharpened sense of shame urge you to tread water at the social margins, an agoraphobic extra in a farce of miscues. To overflow is not your métier. Like a blistered heel, your dread of filler speech teaches you to step gingerly, and you risk others' poor opinion to avoid it. Yet the habits of solitude may put off reckonings. A recent potluck buffet occasioned this insight for the hundredth time. In spite of wine, mood lighting, and upbeat techno pulsing from the ceiling speakers, the gathering you attended was bleeding its host — or half the host, anyway. The wife of the household basked in a corona of *bonhomie*; it was her husband who looked paralyzed. You knew how hard he was trying, having just repeated with him the same halting imbecilities you have staggered through on other occasions, partners with prosthetic limbs in a three-legged footrace. Good sports, you paraphrased NPR, tutted over the quality of public schooling, bemoaned the cravenness of the publishing industry. When lapses in conversation loomed you spoke at once, overlapping and jockeying for position. Recovery followed as the host deferred, banging his kneecap on the produce drawer while

reaching for another beer. “So,” you offered, “how does Whitney like violin lessons?” You’ll go on like this for years.

In the end, when other excuses pale, you are inclined to blame lockjaw on the vacancy of commercial discourse. Box store greeters conspire with SPAM purveyors — “Here’s the offer you requested!” — to render communication a fatuous, unedifying pastime. Media satellites pixillate the night sky, phone towers stake the horizon, and life on the grid makes solitary confinement imaginable. Speechlessness may be grim to experience, but at least it’s honest. Often laughable, it’s dumb in the literal sense only. None of us articulates the texture of the soul, yet — you feel — the prolix are leaking theirs by dribs and drabs.

Consider recent developments in greeting styles. Hipsters of the 1970s angled their palms around each other’s fists in a revolutionary dope-smoker salute. New Agers might take your hand in both of their own and give it a therapeutic pat. Who can forget Nixon and Brezhnev, entwined in their global strongman smooch? The south Asian palms-together bow is said to be in decline, while today’s youth, whether from reserve or hygienic principle, greet their peers with the lightest touch of the knuckles. It’s a handshake that says, “Here’s not getting acquainted.”

You are still looking for the greeting that asks, “How’re you holding up?” needs no rejoinder, and frees you to go your ways, unarmored if a bit unhinged.