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Weaving Voices: Writing as a Working-Class Daughter, Professor, and Poet

Imagined air unweaves
our losses and dissolves
ourselves into ourselves,
scatters us into leaves,
and you and I become
whatever words we may
have come so far to say.

—Henry Taylor, "Learning the Language"

My grandmother Rosa was the first woman I ever heard speak with two tongues. Every few years she brought her French-speaking sisters from New York and Connecticut to visit. In our house, this meant eating banana bread and looking at photographs of relatives we'd never met. Although my sisters and I were curious about our distant cousins' new station wagons and their children's crooked teeth and cowlicks, we were more interested in the triangles of lace our great aunts wore pinned to their hair. We were amazed to be related to anyone foreign.

During their visits, the great aunts elicited a voice in our grandmother we never otherwise heard. Barely five feet tall, Rosa always sat on the edge of her chair, one leg wrapped around the other, a single pointed toe resting on the floor for balance. She and her three or four or five sisters, depending on how many came at once, would perch like tropical birds on a half moon of kitchen chairs. They were made up "real French," the phrase my mother used to describe their raspberry lips and cheeks powdered like biscuits. When they talked, the speed of their words almost propelled them into flight. "*Non non non non non, n'est-ce pas?*"—No, no, no, is that right?—they would cry out softly as they caught up on each other's lives. Then, if one of us asked my grandmother a question, she would pivot on her toe, swing her knees from her French circle, and answer in English. She was grandmother and wife again, her spirit surging and draining as she turned to and from her sisters.

My sisters and I envied the *r*'s gargling in our great aunts' slender throats, the way plosives barely touched their lips. We longed for a language beyond English. At Saint Monica School we sat in orderly rows between LaPerles and LeClairs whose families still spoke French at home. While I waited for sixth-grade French class to transform my dull tongue, classmates answered their parents with the musical elisions I coveted. Apart from counting to one hundred and learning how to order mineral water, I passed through sixth, seventh, and eighth grades with little linguistic metamorphosis. Looking back, I understand that our teacher faced two distinct camps: students who didn't speak French and those whose fluent French was flecked with traces of Old French, native Canadian languages, and English. As an educational compromise, we produced spiral-bound cookbooks of our mothers' neatly translated recipes. When translation failed, we were left with *le meatloaf de ma mère*, hardly the language of imagination.

Meanwhile, I had Sister Jerome to thank for my first published poem. Of its four lines, I remember only the first two: “I have a bunny. / He likes honey.” Sister Jerome had copied my poem in black marker onto a gold-bordered place mat and tacked it to our second-grade bulletin board. Every day I looked at my poem as some extraordinary feat of language. If I couldn’t have French, at least I could have poetry.

Other ancestors
might have been mine, after all,
then from some other nest
I would have flown,
from some other stump
I would have crawled in my shell.

—Wislawa Szymborska, “In Abundance”

In Barre, Vermont, home to the largest granite quarrying industry in the world, the class system remains as solid as stone. When I was a child, the lowest laborers rode in quarry buckets, drilling holes into granite walls and inserting explosives to blast loose the stone. Not far from the quarries, monument designers sat at drafting tables, their tools slim and clean in contrast to the drillers’ greasy equipment. Even today, while these two kinds of workers might speak at the company picnic, they live in different neighborhoods, their children go to different schools, and most likely their grandparents spoke different languages.

My grandmother once confided in me the exact moment my father chose between tongues. He was six years old. Like many children of French-Canadian immigrants in Vermont during the 1930s, he spoke French at home and English at school. One spring afternoon, he burst through the front door of their house on Pleasant Street and said in adamant English, “I want my bike!” The force of his words stunned his mother. She wheeled his red bike from the storage room and watched him ride off with neighborhood friends. She never heard him speak French again.

A stone building sits alone on Beckly Hill in Barre’s north end. Most recently a Carmelite monastery, it was originally a tuberculosis sanatorium. Now it’s a reminder of granite workers who cut stone without masks and safety glasses in poorly ventilated sheds. When my father talked about its history, I always asked, “Who died there?” Reciting the roll call of French names, he hung on to the final *o* of *Rouleau* and *Badeau*, an almost mournful trace of his first tongue. His own father was a stone polisher who spoke of *the shed* the way my father spoke of *the shop*, the way I’ve spoken of *the office*.

My father was a diesel mechanic for thirty-two years. Work took him all over New England in his blue uniform and yellow-and-black company truck. Men at job sites knew him, but more importantly he knew himself and his purpose when he was fixing machinery. To show us his work, he shot 8mm film of heavy equipment digging a hospital foundation or breaking rock for a highway. As we watched the machines rumble in silence across the white projection screen, my father narrated slowly as a dozer. “Now...that DC6...the idler was shot. I called down to Hartford for the part.” His motive to share his work wasn’t ego. In doing a job that needed to

be done, regardless of where it fell in the hierarchy of labor, my father maintained a creative connection to a changing world.

I left Barre to attend a liberal arts college where the majority of my peers matriculated from upper-middle class boarding schools in Massachusetts and Connecticut. Because my grandfather and father had not attended this or any college, I was in a country where I had no history. I observed my favorite professor admiring a senior student for her fluent criticism of the Reagan administration. During my first semester I watched this classmate for cues how to dress and to speak. She had mastered the drama of appearing thoughtfully troubled during class discussion. After someone offered a comment, she might uncross her legs, adjusting her pale linen skirt over her knees as she turned to face the one who had spoken, and ask, "Is there textual evidence to support your assumption?" Her challenge was as cool as a lozenge. Disagreement didn't warrant shouting or silence, as it had at home. With phrases borrowed from professors and textbooks, we debated. This new tongue felt awkward but exciting.

My father had always acknowledged obvious passages into adulthood with playful banter. When I announced at a family barbecue that I had become a vegetarian, he offered to throw my corn on the grill beside his hot dogs. One weekend, however, when I was watching the news with my father, I suggested that government assistance wasn't enabling laziness as he so often claimed. "We focus too much on victims of a larger problem," I said. "We have to look at the system that creates the problem." Something about the way I spoke caused him to say nothing. I will never forget how he just shook his head in a new kind of quiet.

Years later I would read Vivian Gornick's memoir *Fierce Attachments* with relief to find an experience very much like my own, if more extreme. Gornick's relationship with her mother strains when Gornick goes to college and begins to speak like an outsider:

> My sentences got longer within a month of those first classes. Longer, more complicated, formed by words whose meaning she did not always know.... It made her crazy. Her face began to take on a look of animal cunning when I started a sentence that could not possibly be concluded before three clauses hit the air. Cunning sparked anger, anger flamed into rage. "What are you talking about?" she would shout at me. "What are you talking about? Speak English, please! We all understand English in this house. Speak it!"

For Gornick's mother, a Russian immigrant, speaking English is a positive sign of cultural assimilation. But, because she didn't know what to expect from higher education, she is unprepared for her daughter's fluency in such an estranging English. She recognizes, nevertheless, that it signals upward mobility and predicts Vivian's inevitable break from her working class past.

Mimicry is a natural impulse. We all learn to speak and to write through imitation. But why, when my parents fully supported my education, did the shift from imitating family to mimicking language patterns of another group feel like a betrayal?

There are country alphabets and town alphabets

Tell me what words you use I'll tell you the number of your cattle.

—Vénus Khoury-Ghata, "Words"

The prize trophy at the Buckhorn Bar in Laramie, Wyoming, is a miniature two-headed calf mounted between a dusty moose and the fourteen-point buck whose eyes follow you like those in certain portraits of Jesus. The first time I went to graduate school, in the mid-1980s, I spent several nights a week in the company of those smoky trophies, surrounding myself with people who were willing to talk about anything but literary theory.

One night I got deep into conversation with a botanist from Virginia. He liked poems that told good stories, and we proceeded to wrack our brains for one we knew in common. "What about the chainsaw accident?" he asked. I recognized the plot. "Frost!" It took us a good half-hour to piece together "Out, Out—." We practically shouted out details as if we had witnessed the incident ourselves. It was suppertime! The saw kicked back! The boy held his severed hand! "It sounds like poetry but real at the same time…," the botanist said. A beer or so later, we were still trying to reconstruct the final lines of Frost's poem: "No more to build on there. And they, since they / Were not the one dead, turned to their affairs."

The next morning I found a copy of Henry Taylor's *The Flying Change* in my campus mailbox. "Thought you'd enjoy this," the botanist wrote. The poems had all the qualities we had discussed: stories told in everyday language and syntax, yet with movement so measured I barely wanted to breathe for fear of missing a hawk's scream or a horse's twitch.

Before I went to graduate school, the only people I knew with higher degrees were my college professors. Among them were eccentric intellectuals who wore blue clogs, strummed autoharps in American Poetry classes, and recited long passages of Rape of the Lock from memory. I assumed if I went to graduate school, I would develop as a poet and professor into some strain of their general breed. But I naively enrolled in a program that privileged critical theory over creative work. By the time I discovered Adrienne Rich, Nancy K. Miller, and Michael Bérubé, writers who dare to say "I" and to reveal personal lives, my writing had become an exercise in academic voice and personal silence.

Bell hooks captures the paralyzing impact of class struggle on her attempt to assimilate as a student and teaching assistant at Stanford University: "Slowly I began to understand fully that there was no place in academe for folks from working-class backgrounds who did not wish to leave the past behind." For a few years after graduate school, I tried to belong marginally to both worlds. I convinced myself that I could embrace transience as I moved physically and linguistically from one to the other. But, when code switching failed, I felt like a strange animal belonging nowhere.

My father was particular about language. My siblings and I were never allowed to say *ain't* or *I seen*, localisms he took to be signs of poor education. He was devoted to "It Pays to Enrich Your Word Power," the multiple-choice vocabulary quiz in *Reader's Digest*. As soon as he finished, he studied the key and corrected his responses. He never erased his errors. He marked large *x*'s through them, as a teacher might, and circled the right answers. Anyone reading

the magazine after him could see his better-than-average score, though we never heard him use words like *juristic* and *perquisite*.

My father's insistence on correct speech drew attention to his frequent use of one particular incorrect construction. When he was ready to go somewhere and we weren't at the door, he would call out, "Was you comin'?" By this, he meant, "Hurry up." During my teens, when I spent most evenings in my bedroom writing sulky poetry, he would lean through the doorway and say, "Your mother and I are going to get a sundae. Was you comin'?" Even as the years softened his subtext from "hurry up" to "we're leaving now, if you want to come," his lapse into the vernacular always gave him a kind of gritty power. Long after his death, my sisters and I have continued to mock the phrase as a sort of "homage to Dad." But we never quite capture the working-class hierarchy his usage evoked—how, with that one phrase, he seemed to conjure a world in which children did not question authority, in which they did as they were told.

> *Everything we write*
> *will be used against us*
> *or against those we love.*
> *These are the terms,*
> *take them or leave them.*
> *Poetry never stood a chance*
> *of standing outside history.*
>
> —Adrienne Rich, "North American Time"

I am waltzing with a black sow. Because she is my height, we dance joyfully, without concern for other differences. Then she begins to choke, and I am paralyzed. I watch her gasp. Eventually I shout for help. Saving her seems beyond my ability. Then, as if we are in a play, my mother enters calmly from stage left. She wraps her arms around the sow's belly and squeezes. A pink tongue flies loose. We are all relieved, but I am horrified at my helplessness. My mother disappears without a word. The sow is walking toward me, upright, as when we dance. Her eyes tell me she wants to dance. Her mouth bleeds where her tongue used to be.

This dream occurred while I was writing my thesis for an M.F.A. in creative writing, an apprenticeship I pursued after almost twenty years of teaching writing. An amateur Jungian read my dream as a muting, even a mutilation, of my shadow self, the dancing free spirit I'd been silencing. Given the image of two selves dancing, one with a tongue and one suddenly without, I understood I was dreaming about voice competing with silence.

The author Sarah Messer describes how she developed a rapport with Stan, a postal worker, while mailing revisions of her memoir *Red House* to her editor. He would ask how the book was coming along. She shared with him good news, disappointments, and frustrations. Messer, who is primarily a poet, admits that her nonfiction often privileges imagery over narrative. Her editor encouraged clarity for general readers. As she revised, Messer began to picture Stan as her reader. She realized, in fact, she wanted him to be able to read her memoir.

Like Messer, I began trying to write for general readers, alternating between poems that integrated common elements of home, such as baked beans, swilled milk, and kitchen haircuts, and those that initiated dialogue with Nazim Hikmet, John Cage, and Vénus Khoury-Ghata, writers whose work inspired me. While working on poems like "Bird House," I imagined my mother making a glass of iced tea and sitting on her porch swing to read my book. At the same time, I intuitively integrated perspective and language patterns I'd gained from my academic life.

Bird House

She tells them no more gifts.

They insist there must be something,
a bulb to force or bury.
But even that requires
water, darkness, decisions.

What she really wants is for them
to take the pillowcases when they go.

She wants to die with empty closets.

They come while she's at Mass
and hang a bird house made of bird seed
outside her kitchen window.

From where she sits eating
buttered toast on a paper plate,
it seems perfect, the birds' greed,

the way the house will just disappear.

If language is to embody the scope of our realities and values, Gloria Anzaldúa concludes in *Borderlands: La Frontera*, it must represent all of the tongues with which we speak.

I remember my father's struggle to speak after a stroke left him aphasic. Whole phrases came out nonsense, although he knew exactly what he wanted to say. Learning to communicate at the most basic linguistic level redefined our relationship. For at least three years, before he died, I almost knew him. And I discovered I hadn't completely lost my first tongue. I may in fact have three tongues weaving a braid to produce the voice I desire: working-class English, academic English, and the language of poetry struggling for its place.

Notes

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