



FICTION

Silent Words

ABDULLAH RAYHAN

There was a faint sound of an old dog crying somewhere. It was as if a blind man was trying to play an ancient untuned violin. Its shrieks turned Rubi's blood cold. She almost fell asleep but woke up at the howling sound.

Startling out from slumber she stared at the man lying on the bed, wrapped in white gauze as if he was mummified. He looked like a dead soul in a shroud. Half of his body was covered with a light blanket, and a tube was sticking out of his throat. It was divided into two segments. One was used for feeding, and another for breathing. Other than that, he had wires sticking out from both arms. His whole body was paralysed and his eyes were blindfolded. The only moving part of his body were the fingers of his right hand and his heart that still pumped within his carcass. Through those five fingers he communicated with Rubi, who carried the message to others.

Rubi was a young girl who had learnt to understand the signs formed by the fingers and what letter they represent. The number of tap delivered by a particular finger represented a particular letter. It took her only two days to learn all the signs because the urgency of the war had pushed her, hunger supplying her inspiration. War changed everything like it always did.

Minefield took this man's senses away except for his hunger and the ability to breath and of course the ability to move the fingers of his right hand. He has been like this for three months now. Everyone mistakes him for a corpse because he looks like one. There have been patients like him who came and went away, but he keeps on breathing through the tube. Rubi wonders which one is better, breathing through a tube or not breathing at all.

At first, Rubi cried almost all the time because she didn't know anything about the whereabouts of her family,

where they were, or even if they were alive at all. But now, it did not seem to matter to her anymore. People are always captured by life as it comes. Now she wonders what this man beside her feels or thinks. She wonders if he has anything to say to anyone. Rubi feels a keen curiosity to learn about this man, who he is, what his name is and about his loved ones.

She hopes to know him better for

hear any of it but she sometime feels that he does.

Today the doctor will be a little late. There has been bombing near the hospital a few days ago and now the area has become a terrifying residence for people who are still alive. Most of the doctors and nurses ran away, but some of them have started to return. Rubi and some other nurses remained because they had nowhere to go.

How can anyone live in peace when one is barely breathing. But this is just an assumption, and Rubi isn't certain of anything. Only joy can be shared, not pain; only pleasure can be perceived, not sufferings.

That is when Rubi notices the ring finger of the man moving. She snatches the pen and paper lying on the table beside the bed and keeps on writing letters that form words, which shape sentences that create language and eventually expresses desires. But to Rubi's regret she cannot always comprehend what those are. After all, her education in minimal. She can write the letters, but does not always understand the full

mouth of the tube and push the syringe until all the medicine is passed through the barrel that is now a part of the man. But instead, she cuts the tube with the scissors that lie on a tray on the other side of the bed where medicines are kept. She does it with steady hands.

The body does not move, not even a little. But its essence vaporizes and merges with the breath of all the dead cries of thousand souls. The body opens like Pandora's box to release the struggling, wounded chimera waddling on the boulevard of fabricated hopes to live. It is released from the phantom everyone compelled him to believe to be a reality. Now he is free to accept the

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implication of those letters turning into words.

She stares at the distorted letters of her handwriting, she tries to figure out what they mean. To her, those are just short scratches of pen. She sits silently and gapes at the paper for a long time.

Finally, it is nine o'clock at night. She leaves the pen and paper on the table and goes up to push medicines through the tube into this vessel of life. She takes five tablets, crushes them and adds some liquid to the powder. She takes the liquid paste in a syringe and goes to the white figure of a human body resting on bed. All she has to do is to set the syringe to the

truth, free to live in it.

The doctor comes later that night and sees the man's condition. He searches for Rubi but cannot find her. What the doctor does find is a sheet of paper on the bed side table. On it there is a sentence written in Rubi's distorted hand writing. The doctor reads it over and over with perplexity but the sentence does not change. From the moment it was curved on the paper till then the order of the letters remains the same. "Kill me," it read.

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On Writing in a Second Language

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Writing entices me. But every time I get down to writing something, I feel like a bumbling idiot. Nothing emerges. Ideas evaporate. Thoughts tangle. Language languishes. My frustration mounts. I quaff caffeine. It doesn't improve the quality or quantity of my writing. I'm me, a writing zombie. Sometimes I wonder about the causes of my inability to write fluently and gracefully. The culprits abound. While I discount many of these culprits, never do I stop regretting my decision to write in a second language, English. As an aspiring writer, I am an amalgam of two worlds: Bangla and English, both heterodox and both complex. Whenever I immerse myself in one of these languages, the other always stalks me. My writing emerges from two different worlds. And these two worlds never seem to mesh. I can't abandon Bangla altogether. Neither can I own English the way I'd like to. A writing professional would disregard such an account, because there's such an entity as a native speaker, but there's no such entity as a native writer. Every writer, then, is a second language writer. There's nothing gnawing in writing in a second language.

Why did it gnaw Edward Said, then? Said reached the U.S. in 1951 from Palestine to study at a boarding school in Massachusetts when he was about 15 years old. In the Middle East, he had attended schools run by the British. He claims in his memoir *Out of Place* that he was so deeply immersed in both English and Arabic that he never knew what his first language was. As Said continued to live, study, and work in the U.S., though, his Arabic atrophied. He didn't undertake any serious work in Arabic besides contributing an occasional column to an Egyptian daily, the *Al-Ahram*. He wrote only in English with the elegance of an influential intellectual that he was. Despite that, he claims in his memoir that he almost but never wrote with a native-like fluency in English. In his essay "No Reconciliation Allowed," Said further claims that every sentence that he speaks in English has to echo first in Arabic. Said is not the only scholar whose writing in English seems to come through a process of translation. Eva Hoffman in her memoir *Lost in Translation* claims that she lost her "interior language" at

the age of 13, when her family migrated from Poland to Canada. She felt linguistically dispossessed and speculated that one's inner-most thoughts can't be expressed with a language learned subsequently. The version of me that my writing in English represents is perhaps an artificial one. The more I strive to be natural in English, the more I distance myself from Bangla. I lose something familiar, essential.

That is exactly what Vladimir Nabokov felt when he shifted from Russian to English. He claims in his interview in the "Paris Review" that he lost a "domestic diction" when he started to write in English in 1940. Yet his *Lolita*, some critics arguably claim, is one of the classic novels in the annals of literature written in the English language. Nabokov was a craftsman and a scholar when it comes to literature and literary criticism in the English language; nonetheless, he believed that his English was a "stiffish, artificial thing." Nabokov as a writer was more ironic than humble. He may not have meant what he said. Discounting Nabokov's view, however, warrants some caution. Another sophisticated voice in English literature and criticism, T.S. Eliot, echoes Nabokov's sentiment in his "Paris Review" interview. Eliot wrote some poems in French, but he stopped his poetic ventures in French as an epiphany occurred to him: "there's no such thing as a bilingual poet." Of course, there were—and are—bilingual poets. Does poetry—and writing, in general—emerge from the same stream of consciousness both for a bilingual and a monolingual poet or writer? Because some bilingual writers in the English language (Nabokov, for example) grieve for the loss of a "natural vocabulary" and grapple with the "poverty of syntax" while writing in a second language, a second language writer is perhaps unlike a first language writer. Writing scholars will argue that such a binary opposition between a first and a second language writer misrepresents the process of writing, but some writers continue to reinforce the existential difference between a first and a second language writer.

Jhumpa Lahiri, for example, presents a peculiar case of second language writing. She never had a

second language, per se. She was born in the U.K. in 1968. When she was two years old, her family migrated to the U.S. In her essay "My Two Lives" in *Newsweek* in 2006, she claims that she speaks English without an accent. She won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2000. But by virtue of her birth to Bengali parents from Kolkata, India, Bangla is her home language. In that essay, Lahiri dramatizes the tension of a Bengali speaker writing in English. She seems riven between Bangla and English. While I enjoyed reading that essay, I was tempted to think that she just pussyfooted with words to satisfy her writerly impulse. I found her more maudlin than authentic in that essay. Because of my interest in second



language writing, I was following her career curve with some curiosity. From her essay, "My Life's Sentences" in the *New York Times* in 2012, I discovered her infatuation with Italian. And the consequence was puzzling. Since 2011, she migrated to Rome, Italy, and started to write only in Italian. In her essay, "Teach Yourself Italian," translated from Italian into English in the *New Yorker* in 2015, she blamed the English language for her flight from it. She asserted that she was tired of English, that it was a burdensome aspect of her past that represented a consuming struggle and a continuous sense of failure. Very few second language writers have failed so successfully as Lahiri. For most second language writers, failure and struggle

are no metaphors. These words literally mean what they stand for.

I have had both a personal and an academic investment in English for a prolonged phase of my life. I still can't deal with the wrenching frustration of not knowing the language completely and precisely. I continue to learn it, but I have failed to internalize it. I am perennially perched on the mechanics of the language. The syntax in the English language is tortuous and unyielding; its lexis is layered and abundant; and its punctuations are arbitrary. These quirks of the English language short-circuit the flow of my thinking to limit severely my freedom in expressing and explaining my feelings and experiences in an engaging fashion such as one of my



favorite writers, Oliver Sacks, does. Never am I persuaded to think that Sacks is a gifted writer, for I know for sure that a gifted writer is a myth. Seldom do I doubt, though, that Sacks is a natural writer. I am not. There's nothing natural in becoming a writer in one's second language. It's all habitual. Developing the habit of writing in a second language is consequential because it brings a writer down to a "zero-point" of her existence, when she ends up becoming a "compulsive grammarian." That's what Costica Bradatan claims in his essay, "Born Again in a Second Language" in the *New York Times* in 2013. I won't argue against Bradatan.

Writers like Salman Rushdie, Bharati Mukherjee, and Charles Simic would.

Rushdie claims in *Imaginary Homelands* that if one continues to identify himself with one language or culture, he is the victim of a "ghetto mentality." A writer needs an "internal exile" from what he is fond of and familiar with, even though that leads him to write in a second language. That's a creative goad, not a crippling limitation. Bharati Mukherjee seems immune to the conflict of writing in a second language. She claims in her essay "Imagining Homelands" that she is an integrationist and that being a Bengali writing in English is not conflicting in any way. Charles Simic migrated to the U.S. as a refugee from former Yugoslavia in 1954, when he was 16 years old. He was already deeply conditioned by the Yugoslavian culture and language. He started to explore and absorb the U.S. culture with the zeal of a romantic so as not to pine for his ur-language and culture. For him, migration was akin to a re-birth, as he claims in his essay, "Refugees," "every cliché about getting a second chance and reinventing oneself turned out to be true" for him in the U.S. He has been an accomplished poet in the English language, who won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1990. For all these writers—and many others—language is a flexible option of communication. It's not an indelible genetic imprint.

The status of a second language writer is more psychological than practical. There's a grain of irony in the words of Said, Hoffman, and Lahiri. They all are exemplary writers in English, but they bemoaned—perhaps fetishized—their status of second language writers. Writing perhaps is a translanguing skill and is compounded with factors other than language. Reducing writing to first or second language is akin to reducing a complex intellectual phenomenon to two warring camps. Neither of the camps has converted me. I have opted to write in English because of its redeeming potential to creating and expanding a new world. With Bangla, I don't have to do that. I have long lived in that world, and I am very comfortable there.

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