

THE WORDS

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Omphaloskepsis

I first meet my wife standing in Poetry. It is a verbday. I am unpublished, and on Saturdays I go to the bookshop on Hunter Street, always to seek out the same spot, imagining my poems held between Blake and Donne. I put my hand in amid the paperbacks, blushing, as if they were a woman's thighs. Then I hear Beatrice, speaking in italics.

Ecmnesia

I don't know how long it has been since the stroke. There is a newspaper on the bed, but I can't read it. I'm not even sure I think in English anymore. The right side of my face and body are paralysed. The nurse sits by my hospital bed, doing a crossword. She is as formal and contained as a sonnet. She changes my pyjamas when I soil them. She shaves me and trims my hair. She sits with me sometimes, for I have no visitors. She has become my bookmark. I know where I am by using her. And at night, she listens to my breathing with awful attention as if I were an enemy soldier lying nearby in the darkness. She believes I will die soon, and perhaps she is right. God must be tired of writing my story, the same lines again and again.

Doggerel

My father is a sullen man. He looks as if he has been angry all his life and wanting to revenge himself for something, perhaps the midwife's slap on his bare arse when he was born. He is a printer, and has taught me how to read backwards, and to recognise any font. He speaks, in my mind, in Times New Roman. He is always annoyed with me, by my constant reading and my nervous habit of filling any silence. He has forbidden me to hum or whistle, so now I mumble poetry I have learned by heart and he

can do nothing because I say it is homework. He is proud only of my neat handwriting.

When I am eleven I compose a burlesque of Mackellar's 'My Country.' My line is identical to the more famous version, 'I love a sunburnt country,' except that I leave off the last syllable. I use my father's keys to his work and print off a hundred copies and pass them around the school.

Abecedarian

I meet with Laura to teach her how to read and write. She is eager to learn. For her, Newcastle is the centre of the world, like Jerusalem in the old maps, and outside there are only strange coastlines and savage peoples. At first she reads aloud slowly and with great caution, as if stretching the words out from a cramp. As she progresses, I like to watch her read everything—instructions for the washing machine, a computer manual, ingredients for toothpaste and for baked beans. After a while, she reads every word with urgency, as if she were being examined in the morning on how to live a life. She is a cleaner, and her young hands are old, and her knees ache with kneeling, like Beatrice's after chapel. With Beatrice I am a verb. I must comfort, love, support. With Laura I am a noun.

Laura lives in an ugly house in Mayfield, and after she recognises all the letters and some words she says she wants to move away, because the walls of the houses swear at her. I give her money to rent a unit near Newcastle beach, and money for new furniture and clothes. I never tell her I am married. I plot our affair carefully. After all, I am a middle-aged man and she is a young woman. I am on guard to avoid clichés. I watch her as she reads the books I give her, rare first editions of poetry. A woman's face in reading has always been more intimate to me even than a woman's face in orgasm. She reads a poem I have written for her. It is printed in the newspaper, and she is excited. That afternoon, I sleep with her for the first time. Her labia remind me of two pages of a book stuck together. I take her between my thumb and forefinger and open her.

Later I see the books I have given her on sale at a secondhand bookshop. I find the diary I gave her on the floor of the bedroom. She has acquired the habit from me of leaving a book open to let it breathe and I read the two pages. She can fit no more than eight of her large words to a day, and half of

these are the names of men. I am rarely mentioned, though she writes her daily life with the fountain pen that I gave her.

Cagamosis

Beatrice reads the letter, delivered this morning.

'This girl claims she was your mistress. That you taught her to read and write.'

'She's lying,' I say.

'Then why does her handwriting look like yours? And how does she know all about you?' She holds open last week's newspaper. 'And I thought this poem was for me. But you wrote it for her, didn't you? Why didn't you just write "bastard" fifty times?'

She rips the paper into small pieces, and throws them at me. Solemn and embarrassed, like a priest scrambling for fallen communion, I kneel to pick them up.

'Look at the T, John! Only you write a T like that.'

Beatrice reads the letter aloud. I can't bear to hear Laura's words in her mouth, and I put my hands over my ears.

'You met her while I was in the hospital? How could you?' Beatrice's anger is mostly consonants. 'But then, I suppose you wouldn't mind if I killed myself, as long as the suicide note was spelled correctly.'

On the shelves behind me are dozens of my notebooks, tens of thousands of words I have collected, and I think there must be some that will keep her here. I begin to quote some of them.

'Don't you dare!' she says.

Jesus Christ watches from the wall. He is a vaguely handsome man, with a thin blonde beard and a fiery heart shining through his robes, sending out pink lines of love in all directions like the shrapnel of a grenade. I despise him.

'Aren't you supposed to forgive me? Isn't that what *he* said? You've had more of his body than I've had of hers,' I say.

Beatrice says nothing. She wraps her rosary beads round her hand like a knuckleduster, and for a moment I believe she is going to strike me. But she walks out of the room, out of the house. It is a verbdy. I watch Beatrice leave me. It is raining outside, which seems to make it all worse, and I think

that even hell would be bearable with a blue sky. She has left Laura's letter. I read it again. It begins in black ink and ends in blue, as if Laura has paused in her anger and mislaid pens. As Beatrice said, the T is exactly like my own. I turn to look at Jesus. Like him, I have been crucified on a capital letter.

Amphigory

The nurse has placed a piece of paper in my lap. I live in the passive now. I do nothing. Everything is done to me. A pen rests in the middle of the paper like a broken compass needle. The nurse takes the pen and places it in my hand. She has me practise writing every day, though now I find writing on paper like writing on skin. I write, '_____/aaaaaall.' This is my last poem. I even have a title for it, 'A Stroke of the Pen.' I laugh, two ha-ha's, as if I were dictating the sounds.

There is something missing from me now. I suppose that if I were a character in a novel I would have only one letter for a name, a D or a K as in Kafka. The nurse takes the pen and paper away. She shows me a picture of an elephant. 'What's this?' she says. 'Car!' I say angrily. I know it is an elephant. Then she has a picture of a flower. 'Trousers,' I say and then I curse—I still know how to curse—and turn away to look out the window. I don't look at any more pictures.

The nurse reads to me from a novel. I shake my head, and with my left hand reach out for one of my blue notebooks by the bed. 'Why do you like me to read these?' she says. 'There's no story. They're just words. I don't even know what half of them mean.' I nod at her. I like her to read each word slowly. Each word makes me remember something.

'Omphaloskepsis,' she says. 'Ecmnesia. Doggerel.'

(end of excerpt)