

Excerpt from The Risk of Language

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Bless the woman, man, & child who

honor Earth by opening shine.

Yusef Komunyakaa

The light over the lip of red rock was starburst. A moment when the sun becomes fracture not whole. I stood in the cooling shade of an ochre wall in Zimbabwe, staring at a rock painting. The elephant was a deep blue, a startle of flight in deep red, as modern as if it had been painted only a few years before instead of 5,000 years prior. A weighty blue emblem: animal as water, as sky, as bridge. There were no fences around the monument, no fences between me and this gift from an unknown ancestor. I leaned in. It was delicate. A thing fragile from time yet tensile with hope and something more. This sign, pointing and pointer, becomes both that which is there and that which cannot and never could, an impossibility and yet present nonetheless. I put out my hand and the shadow of my palm darkened the blue. Beside the blue elephant was a handprint splayed in white chalk. I hovered for a second longer over the elephant and with a determined shove, put my hand against the handprint. I kept it there, perfect fit that it was, felt the cooling red rock underneath, felt the grit of its texture, noted the ant crawling over my small finger. Without knowing fully why, I burst into tears.

In his beautiful poem “The Forgotten Dialect of the Heart,” Jack Gilbert writes: “How astonishing it is that language can almost mean, / and frightening that it does not / quite. *Love*, we say, / *God*, we say, *Rome* and *Michiko*, we write / and the words / get it wrong.” Language, a matrix of code and symbol, an ever-evolving process, is at once expressive, expressing, transacting, and communicating, and yet it only manages, even at its best moments, to approximate meaning, to approach something deeper that yearns through us but cannot quite take full flight. A blue elephant on a red rock.

I have always wondered about the origin of language, about that moment when that first person realized their own outstretched palm was distinct from the star it was reaching for. There are many theories about this, about the origin of language. I myself lean into a combination of ritual and love.

Ritual is a language; this much has been agreed upon by scholars in the arena. A symbolic approximation of hope, desire, joy, and outcome. A way of reaching into the ineffable, the unspoken, in an attempt to retrieve something all potential and render it real. In this way, symbol and ritual become the gestural journey, a structure itself not unlike language, that over time becomes speech and gesture, and then language. It seems that language in this scenario evolves not as a way to communicate with others but rather as a way to catalog, classify, and assign value to the self. A way to make meaning of our evolving individuation and our relationship to what is not us. Perhaps the factor of I is always a factor of the other, a field of entanglement. This involves a communication that weaves symbolism and action into oneness. Art is the space between.

The other approach, that of love, is about the rumor that language evolves as mothers try to come up with a system to communicate with their children. A way to keep them safe. This, it was then argued, was copied by other adults and spread. This may be how the term mother tongue was born. Of course, I’m a writer so you can’t believe me.

Cultures who don’t tell stories die out; they go extinct. It has been argued by evolutionary psychologists that the one defining thing that is responsible

for the survival of our species of humanoids is story. That singular act, to narrativize the world, is what allows what is inchoate to inhabit matter, to become a reality. Everything is story and story is everything; nothing exists outside of it because what cannot be told cannot be shared and so has a very singular and thus limited use.

Stories allow us to curate the world—knowledge, wisdom, medicine, science, religion, all of it exists because narrative defeats the erosion of time, and it is this unbroken ancestral lineage of story that is the real human achievement. This is why writers are such an urgent need in every culture—we are the curators of our shared humanity.

So, what does this all mean? It means we work in a field of uncertainty. It means that our struggles—to make money at this, to convince the ones we love that this is a worthwhile expense and exercise, that this is a vocation as deep and costly as that of any holy calling, that this is a taking of orders that we must fall before, humbled and small—are something we must do. That the fears of publication, of not being famous, of not making work, pale before a deeper risk. We insist on words because they are a materiality that can save and has saved lives. Textuality has a permanence to it; the world we live in is built of words, and power is the interrelationality of body to word to new body to word to body, symbol and fact.

So, the risk of language for a writer is that words will fail us, that we will never be able to say anything worthwhile, anything that can be an intervention in the world, that we won't be able to make an offering, that can call the light down, that can turn the tide.

The core of the struggle is that we live in a consistent and organic evolution of joy and pain and awe and sorrow and that language often fails human experience, but this is all we have, and we must find the courage to step off into the abyss and trust that it will catch us. That it will hold up our experience. We must accept that its very failure is the risk we must take. The beauty is that it has never let us down; language will carry us forward in an unbroken lineage of light.

Imagine four friends sitting outside a dorm on an Oregon campus speaking into taboo about the profound deaths in our lives. How we came to that moment that can unstitch you, render you mute so that the grief in you becomes a ferocious beast devouring all that is good in you. How to navigate, with this flimsy craft of words, beautifully and painfully, the death of the ones we love. This is the present and compelling power of language employed both in the moment and upon reflection. In both its inadequacy and adequacy, in the hands of a writer, the words of a dying brother can become a vehicle for ritual, a source of healing, not just for the writer, but through the vehicle of the art launched into the world, for countless others. How death and resurrection occur simultaneously and how forever a dying brother will always be dying and making a space in the heart of others, for a death they cannot articulate. This is the vocation we are in; this is both the blessing and the curse. I return again to four friends speaking grief, reflection, laughter, willfully breaking the taboo of silence, because to speak to loss in all its sides is to break taboo. How this simple human moment becomes a healing circle, a palpable heart that will beat forever in time, and will find its way into words and poems and song.

I come from a small town in the southeastern part of Nigeria called Afikpo. In 1960 in that town, which was mostly Christian, as is most of the south of Nigeria, a group of Muslim clerics arrived. And in that town at the end of a dusty road that falls away into a river, they set up a small colony of Muslims, an Islamic school, an Islamic clinic, and they left it open to everyone to join or not join. There was no rancor for six years; there was no hate. And then the Civil War happened in 1966, and mostly Muslim soldiers from the Republic of Nigeria invaded this small town, which was a stronghold of the rebel Biafran forces, and attempted to slaughter everyone. One Muslim cleric, whose name is lost to me and perhaps to most people, opened the gates of that Muslim compound, and invited everybody in. They gathered around the small mosque that faced Mecca. It was so small, it could hold only forty people at a time. But this Muslim cleric asked people to form concentric circles around the mosque,

spreading out as far as necessary. It is said that there were over 2,000 people bowed in prayer: Muslims, Christians, and traditionalists, holding on to the only hope—that they would not be mistaken for rebels. They faced east, they faced Mecca, all these people prone in multicolored clothes around the small mosque, spreading like a mandala in the sand.

And this small imam, five-foot-three, stood at the gate of the enclave and rebuffed the advancing soldiers of his own religion, saying it was an abomination to Islam to spill the blood of anyone in the mosque. Try to imagine this scene, try to imagine the fear, the trembling, try to imagine what could have happened, try to imagine what it must've taken the five-foot-three Muslim cleric whose name is lost to me and to most people to just stand there and protect with his life people he did not know, whose religion he did not know, protect them because that is what humans do. A man whose name is lost to all of us made a body of light out of the words that shape the call of his religion, made a gesture that will wave through time, risked it all in a language that failed him but saved an entire community.

As we move into an uncertain world, even when we are losing people, faith, hope, we must make a story, a talisman against loss, a power in words, and speak it right. We must make a redemption of this enterprise. Even as I write these words, on the side of an ochre rock, a blue elephant older than any memory we can shape, flames up in blue and holds back the erasure of an entire people.

