

THE THING ABOUT WORDS

By Michael Ventura

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Left the Chevy in the hands of strangers – mechanics whom I didn't know – and was feeling none too good about that on the cab ride to my apartment. Hadn't lived in Lubbock long. Asked the cabbie: "What's cab-driving like in this town? I ask because my father was a cabdriver."

This man was hulking, middle-aged, with a buzz haircut and very white skin that reddened easily at any emotion. Turns out he had lots of emotions, barely in check.

"Cabbin' 'ere's nothin' much. Used'ta be, I's a trucker. Cain't do that no more, no more."

He spoke with an unusual, purposeful fierceness. As I was deciding to explore his mind no further, he asked: "Wut's it yew do fer work, feller?"

"I'm a writer."

"Yew wraht [write]!" He fairly shouted it.

"Yeah."

"How?" The question mark should be an exclamation point. He spoke in exclamation points. "How d'yew wraht?! I need t'know. How yew start in to it, wut yew do fust [first], 'n' wut next?!"

I record his accent because his speech was integral to the man, for he spoke from his very soul.

Before I could reply, he explained – with urgency, with conviction, and loudly -- what he wanted to write and why. Said he "druv [drove] rigs a'fore Vision." One day he'd called home from Oklahoma and learned "Mother died, sudden, 'n' none knew why. I got raht [right] down on my knees raht there in th' parkin' lot an' had Vision. I had Vision."

He said "vision" with a capital "V."

He saw three trees in Eden: "the Tree of Life and Death, the Tree of Good and Evil -- and the Incest Tree!" Every last one of us is descended from the Incest Tree and that's why – but I can't reproduce the involved thesis in his unique lingo or how he employed common words that had, for him, uncommon meanings. The gist was: We are the suffering children of incest and the "a'Mighty" feeds on our suffering for [capital-H] "His force o'life."

"How'd yew wraht that, if yew was me?!"

He asked as though it were a matter of life and death, while I'm thinking: "This poor maddened man knows my address."

It might surprise you how many have asked me the equivalent of "How'd yew wraht that?" – though not with this cabbie's alarming intensity. I've been asked by a savvy-eyed postal worker, a mechanic with neck tattoos, a dry cleaner's attendant, and a biker -- and that's just in Lubbock, where the exchange usually begins with: "What do you... do?" Like that, with a slight pause before "do." I tell them, and they tell me there's stuff they want to write and how might they go about that?

It's a question I respect. Everybody has a story, and some want very much to write them, and a few actually might. I tell each what I told the cabbie:

“Don’t worry about the writing part – grammar and punctuation and all that. Concentrate on what you want to say and write it just the way you’d say it to a friend. Not a stranger whom you’re trying to impress, but a friend whom you like and trust. You can say anything to that kind of friend. Start the same way you’d start when talking to this friend. Don’t think about writing the whole damned book, ‘cause that’ll scare you half to death, the way it does me, even after all these years. Think about what you’re gonna write that night. Tell yourself you’ll write one page a day, or a night, or whenever it is you write. Sometimes you’ll write more, sometimes less, but go for that one page. Do that four or five nights a week until you’ve told this friend all you want to tell. In a year you’ll have about 300 pages. That’s a manuscript. Then find somebody who’ll read it and can help you with it. None of it is easy. But that much is doable -- if you really want to. You’ll find after about a week or two that you’ve got to really, really want to.”

The people who ask this question don’t care about literature or stylistic prose. They care about whatever it is that made them ask the question.

They ask seriously and deserve to be taken seriously, eye to eye, one quietly desperate soul to another, since that’s all we are underneath: desperate souls on uncertain roads. The thing about words is: They’re the commonest things around; everybody uses and misuses them; you say and hear and see them everywhere, even in your sleep. If you’re fortunate enough to set up shop as a writer and get away with it, your success rests upon the very commonality of your medium. Even if you chant like Walt Whitman or rhyme like Edna St. Vincent Millay or speak the plainsong of William Carlos Williams, even if your sentences are as elegant as James Baldwin’s or as baroque as Murray Kempton’s or as direct as Flannery O’Connor’s – whatever your style and whatever your level, you work with the commonest things imaginable, things that are the property of all: words. Any power you may impart to words is rooted in how words are the property of all. They wouldn’t be useful if that was not true.

To use words in such a way that others read and hear and even repeat your words – that is to participate in humanity at its commonest, and therefore most necessary, level. It is a humble function in the highest sense and cannot help but humble a writer who knows the stakes. Many want to speak but can’t; the writer who can stands on their shoulders. Whatever dignity this craft possesses rests on the pent-up word-longing of those who want to have their say but are stuck in circumstances in which a person can barely stutter.

And there’s this: You never know when you’re facing one whose words somehow have broken through – even if only to himself, herself, or a few.

The other night at the market on 50th and Indiana in Lubbock, Jazmin and I stepped up to the cash register with our purchases, and I saw, with some embarrassment, that we’d cut off this smiling guy leaning on the counter. I figured him for a manual laborer, Hispanic, just come from a hard day’s job. I apologized for cutting in and said: “You didn’t look like you were in line.”

“That’s OK,” said he. “I’m jus’ bein’ a mannequin. How y’all doin’?”

Dirty t-shirt, grizzled face, wide smile, missing teeth, and something about him – something confident and knowing.

I said we were doing fine and asked how was he doing and he said he was doing fine. He asked what we were going to do this evening.

“Work,” said I. “I work nights.”

“What at?”

"I'm a writer."

He lit up. "What?!"

"A writer," said I.

"I write," said he. He didn't say "I want to" or "I try to." He said: "I write. I started with poems. Then sonnets. Now I write proses."

That's how he put it: "proses."

"Me, too, mostly," said I. "What do you write about?"

"Life. What happens on the street. Life and death. You?"

"I'm kind of a roving newspaperman."

"That's good!"

"Yeah," I smiled. "It is good."

He smiled. Actually, he'd been smiling all along. We looked hard and kindly into each other's eyes. To indicate mutual respect we nodded a guy-nod -- that nod guys our age learned from John Wayne.

Here I am writing about him, and he probably went home to write about me, employing many the same mundane, worn words, common to us both and common to all.

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