

## ABCs

Michael Geisser

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. . . N is for 'nothing'. It's the only word I know that follows 'noteworthy', which was the word I used last time. I'm not sure whether 'nother' is a word so 'nothing' will do just fine. Nothing happened today, as everyday for the past twenty-eight years. Things happened to others and in other places, but to me, here, nothing. I think you have to be a part of something, or else what happens, as far as you are concerned, is nothing. I remember when I was something and things happened to me, but not too clearly now. I've given up hoping for that place again. To be there again, I would have to be involved and that is not possible now. I might qualify as an expert on nothing; I've had so much of it. It's funny, but today I think my right pinky moved, not voluntary, for I have no idea how to wish a movement into my body anymore, or at least I don't think it was voluntary. I don't even now know the feeling, if there is one, of having an active connection between my brain and my muscles.

What would qualify as silence for others is a festival of sound for me; I hear the air scratching against the walls, through the lattice on the headboard, across the floor, around corners and boxes and furniture. I hear insects on their flight paths and touching down, the drone of cars and trucks near and far, the patter of others around me, their breathing and clothes rubbing on their skins, my own assisted breathing. Some sounds I can't identify, even though they return, some regularly, some sporadically, so I give them names like steam train, cowbell, guitar string, fart. I wonder, not really wonder for I believe it won't happen, but I like to dream that I will someday put real names to these sounds, or know them personally, like a person who can investigate such things. While I'm at it, and I've got the time, lots of it, my vision is still good, although I only get to use it at eight in the morning and eight at night. That's when a nurse, it could be any of a number of them, opens my eyes, one at a time, shines a light into them, shock and awe for me, releases them, makes a quick small notation on the chart and leaves. So, my visual experiences are fingers and hands, blinding light, the dirty ceiling with several cobwebs hanging down, and the occasional peripheral data if the nurse moves my head to get a good

handle on my eyelid. I still remember colors, especially deep sky blue, like my eyes, as my favorite; it always drew me to the sky like a magnet. It's amazing how I can talk to myself. It boggles my mind that I don't think instead of talking as if there are two of us.

Since the accident . . . I was twelve years old and almost home when I heard it rattling right behind me, a rattle of great velocity, almost on top of me before I knew what to think. A car of some sort; that much I know. But I never saw or felt it. Well, I felt it for a second, the pain so great I melted into it so I wouldn't be its enemy, part of the pain, not the feeler of the pain, looking out from inside the pain instead of being its victim, like being the gun and not the target. Since then I've wanted to ride my bike again, free, wind-blown, speeding through the air like a rocket. Kids don't get much chance to be free; that was so special.

The first days were almost unbearable. I could hear everything my family and the medical staff said. They wanted me to "hang in there," to "fight, Leonard, fight!" Mostly it was my mom's voice that I heard, close to my ear, too close, too loud. I just wanted it to be over, to get back onto my bike, to eat my dinner in hopes of a good dessert, to have my dad carry me to bed. Well, he didn't really do that anymore then, but he did go with me and talk to me, instead of reading me a story, something that he'd stopped doing when he could no longer get through one without my questions interrupting him continuously. I wanted to scream after the first day, but nothing happened, almost like I was not there, looking out from a small TV camera implanted in my eyes, with me really being in the next room, or next state, or next country. That made it even worse, not being able to scream, trapped so deep that I became terrified of where I was, tied down, naked, buried alive.

After several months, I would have a day once in a while when I wasn't so terrified that I could almost think about what had happened and where I was, and what the future could be, hope perhaps. It was only after about five years that I finally made peace with myself, resigned that I may never get out, never eat a popsicle in the hot sun again, never just walk away from something, never fart and then laugh about it with friends, never . . . That was just the beginning, though, that was just the end of the descent. The real work since then has been to

create a life anew from scratch, to move beyond the wreckage and scars from the terror and despair and build, atom by atom, a new reality, one that I could live within like a “normal” human being, one that had room to move, at least psychologically. I think I’m almost there now, but it’s never really done, is it? It’s simple to get through a day now, in one sense. The secret desire to be like others, like I want to be, breaks above the waves sometimes, but it sinks away again as my thoughts wander to another island.

I’m sure people would be surprised if they knew what a vocabulary I have now. When I entered this monastery, I spoke and understood as a twelve-year-old but listening to the talk around me hour after hour, day after day, month after month, year after year, eon after eon, I’ve learned millions of new words. Maybe not millions, but there are not many that I don’t know when I hear them, and not many that I haven’t incorporated into my speech, well, my speech to myself. I have even given shape and color to things that I’ve never seen, like a computer, that fits well into the conversation, although I’m sure that if I saw one, maybe felt it, smelled it, tasted it, although I don’t think one would taste a computer, it would look different, maybe drastically so, from what I imagined. I could probably write a book about what I imagined and make a fortune by explaining things in such an alternative way that readers would pay money just to go to that world, my world.

I’m still wondering about that pinkie. Was it really a movement that I felt, or was it just a wish, or a dream, or a rogue nerve cell playing tricks on me? There *has* been a new almost tingling throughout my body lately, most likely another cold or another infection from the bedsores, but still . . .

O is for ‘ovoid’. I know it comes after ‘opossum,’ but there must be other words between. Regardless, I don’t know of one right now. What a word, ‘ovoid.’ When would you use such a word? Maybe in poetry. *The ovoid echo of the shipwreck*. I guess poetry is not my bag. What are the parts? Is it o-void or ov-oid? I think its ov-oid, ov-like. What is an ‘ov’? Oval? I’m sure there are persons who think like this all day, every day. How could they ever talk fast or think fast? They would be forever stopping to analyze every syllable, reveling in their complexity instead of

surfing across the sea of language at the speed of wind. I'm shutting down now to the pace of a slug, just wandering about in my head, no plan, no effort, sleep.

Awake again, another day. Sleep, like what I just finished, is often just a nodding to a lower energy level, like when a computer is sleeping, I think. Often, like now, I'm put back into wake mode when the nurse shines that light into my eyes. Now *that's* a wake-up call. Oh, for the days when my Mickey Mouse alarm clock would bray and jingle me awake to slurp mom's fresh-squeezed orange juice, feel the comforting womb of the hot shower, see the sun-painted shapes on the floor across from my window.

My mother is coming. She's still at least five minutes away, but I hear her helloing at the front desk or some checkpoint. Her walk sounds tired, but she's carrying something. Something small, for her step is just a little heavier than her lightest. Her breathing, now presenting, is hollow and raspy like she's eaten fur. I've noticed that the last few visits, old age (She would be what, sixty-eight, sixty-nine, now?) is resident. She's worn out faster since Dad stopped coming. She never mentions him, but I know he's died; her voice has changed to more edgy, more empty.

She's in the room, the sounds are screaming, flashing. And the smells are all reset. No more dusty, chemical institutional wafts; they've all been blown away by her wind, a wind suffused with sweat, not athletic sweat but the sweat of effort to maintain, and woman scents, like lilac, talcum and potpourri, faint today. She must've been up and dressed in these clothes for a while. I wonder what time it is. It's so rare that I hear the time spoken.

"Hello, Leonard. How are you today? I'm sorry I'm late. I had to go over to your aunt Christine's to drive her to the airport. She's going to Wisconsin today to see your cousin, Wesley, and his wife, Caroline's daughter, get married. I remember when Wesley was born; his red hair and puckered mouth made him look like a wrecked fire truck. Gladys says your vital signs are good and you look fine to me, so I guess everything's all right. Today . . . let me just get out of this coat . . . today I'm going to read to you from Bartlett's Familiar Quotations. Your father always

liked, likes, the way the sayings are wrapped up into high thoughts in simple packages. Every once in a while, he would use, uses, one when we are out, and he sounds so smart.”

Who cares about Bartlett’s Familiar Quotations; they’re just thoughts for those who can’t have their own. But Mom loves me, or feels obligated to show she loves me, or some other reason that I can’t or don’t want to fathom. So, overall, it’s good that she comes. If she didn’t come, I wouldn’t have much of any human contact, even one-way contact. The nurses all think I’m already dead, just a heart pumping to keep the flesh from rotting, just another task in their day. Apply ointment where rashes break out, bathe me where grunge builds up, keep my feedbag full, or at least don’t let it empty, change my urine bottle. Check, check, check, he’s done. Ready for another day of existence.

The corroding drone of my mother’s voice is beginning to fade as she tires. I would love to jump up and hug her, tell her to throw the book out the window, have her take me to a bar where we could have champagne and catch up on everything, although I don’t know what champagne tastes like, something to do with grapes, or what it would do to me, how drunk feels. To make her laugh, to feel her face, faces are always so much softer than they look. Let her know that I’ve heard every word she’s spoken to me these last twenty-eight years. That I’ve grown, just inside, but grown nonetheless, that I can think and feel my heart beating, can wish and hope, and have high highs and low lows just like everyone else. But these are just wishes leading to another low low. I wish I could cry.

Just about the time she was finishing the thousandth ‘famous’ quotation from Lord Byron (I would rather hear those of someone more contemporary, but I would rather hear lots of things else when I’m hearing something. I’m not part of the selection committee.) I think my pinkie moved again. Is this something like the phantom limb thing? And it was not just my pinkie. I also felt a stirring in my left leg. Is this good or bad? No way to tell, just wait it out. I’m good at waiting.

After mom left, I returned to my game, thinking about every word I know. Just free association,

not definitions, but the whole world, abbreviated, around the word. I thought this up a while ago to put some order in my life, which had been messy and undisciplined to the point that I was dying inside of boredom and hate. The hate wasn't for what was, but for what isn't. When I was first brought in here after the accident that was my last adventure, when I finally woke up and heard the doctors talking about me, I was sure that I'd soon be on the street again, riding the storm. I wasn't prepared to never speak again, never move again, never see much again, never ride again, never this, never that. The nightmare of not being able to tell the doctors that I could hear them, knew the answers to their questions, had preferences, desires, faded into hate. But that faded too. A sort of Zen peace took over, blunted the fear of dying from some simple error by another, perhaps the nurse's failure to clear the mucous from my throat so I suffocate, even though she checked it off on her list. The lack of control becomes a kind of refuge, a state all its own.

It was then, during my eighty-thousandth reverie on existence that my eye blinked. I'm sure of it. And my pinkie moved again, I could feel the coarse blanket under it for the first time. I always wondered what the bed looks like. Then terror overcame me like a tsunami. What if this hope that was sprouting like a mushroom in the shit of my life was *not* the start of some change toward getting out of here? If I hoped even a little, just a peek, and it's proven false, I'd want to die instead of starting over the process of reconciling myself to this life again. I can't even kill myself, the ultimate freedom.

P is for 'perspective' . . . Huh, did part of my larynx stir as if a voice is being reborn? There are too many things going on. I want this, whatever it is, to happen slower, much slower. I feel torn, like a concentration camp survivor who is seeing food, real food, for the first time in years, knowing that if he takes more than a morsel the shock could kill him. Perspective . . .