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“Not At All Resembling a Rant”

What do you do with a language that has the words compost, compute, compote, combust, combine, commune and comport, wandering willy-nilly through sentences all at the same time? And along those same lines, don't get me started with comport, report, purport, transport, import, support, deport and carport. My mom and I spend a lot of time on the telephone checking in on each other to make sure that we're each OK in the time of Covid, and wonder about such things. You see, we lose words, from time to time. She's 93 and comes by it naturally. It doesn't trouble her much; when she's telling me about someone she used to know back in the day, and suddenly she can't remember the name of the town where they met, or what it was that they did for a living. “Well, I guess that's gone,” she says to me, and I tell her not to worry — that I put a pin in it for when she does remember. It happens to everyone.

We keep talking, Mom and I. We muddle through.

“I can't do the newer crossword puzzles,” she reflects, “because they have all of those current pop references. Who is Lil Nas X? What is a twerk? And I can't do the old ones because all the words are slipping away.” They're not really slipping away, I say with a modicum of frustration for the unfinished Sunday puzzle in my lap. It's our language. It's full of vocabulary that is intended to confound even the most erudite of us. Or rather, them.

No, I don't tell my Mom what “twerk” means. I draw the line.

I know what she means. It's a full-time job for some part of our brains to keep all the words in their proper order, filed with the right definitions and usages. Otherwise, we have chaos. And it doesn't help that the pop culture — and by that I mean all of it, from the 24-hour news cycle talking heads to the Instagram meme-creators and propagators — insists on ruining words. Like “fake.” Or “efficacy.” It's not OK to take a good, simple word like fake and use it so often that it is befouled with the constant context of that usage. Fake smells bad now. It was never fresh to begin with, but today it really stinks. I implore you to put it away, in a Ziploc. Find out what the half-life is for such an odor.

We, Mom and I, each sit in front of an old New York Times puzzle, bound in a large print compendium. I bought two copies and sent one to her. We're mutually baffled by the fact that the editor of this volume chose to leave out the titles of the puzzles — an important tool indicating the direction of some of the clues within. So instead of having a

vague idea what “Bronx Five Takes a Little Off the Top,” might possibly mean, it’s just annoying. Of course, clever often manifests as annoying. And Mom has become fractious in her dotage. I think she misses doing the puzzles with my Dad, who cheated when he worked them with her in the quiet time between after-church and dinner, when he hoped that there was a fresh peach or two left on the kitchen counter ripe enough to cut and eat, mix it with some blueberries in the fridge into a bowl with a little sugar sprinkled on them. Just a bit of fruit compote. Pop would read clues to her having already worked them out – just to make it a team effort, to be able to grin and say “exactly!” while writing in the answer with his pen, to have that time together with Mom sharing something. Of course, she would sometimes get up from her chair and take the puzzle away from him and fill in the boxes of clues he didn’t know. He liked the wordplay. Mom, I know now, as her new crossword partner, likes the steadiness of it. Appreciated that there may very well be words that now exist only to be placed into crossword puzzles.

For example, the term “adit.” Which means *a horizontal passage leading into a mine for the purposes of access or drainage.*

I enjoy the games within the puzzles, and often end up with the feeling that our language is just a jumble of syllables that sound similar with no commonality whatsoever but to make the people creating the clues think they’re clever. Nevertheless, I experience unbridled joy by unravelling that Bronx Five is not a cross-town highway or a jazz combo but Joe DiMaggio, and taking a little off the top is not illegally skimming funds but a haircut, and so the answer to the clue is “YANKEECLIPPER.”

Those of us who still like language, the luxuriousness of words with many, many definitions, who love to expand our vocabulary just to do it, so that we might have *pusillanimous* at our fingertips or know what a deadly-venomous *golden lancehead viper* is and where, on an island just off the coast of Brazil, it is the top of the food chain. Well, we are troubled. We’re the grammar police. We’re insufferable, only they don’t use that word, because they don’t know that word.

I recently heard someone use the word abscess in the place of the word obsess. I was going to correct them, or at least ask if they meant something different, but I did not. Correcting someone has gone the way of the dodo, like using the term “going the way of the dodo.” At the time, they were obsessing about the TV show “The Bachelor,” so they may actually have been referring to an abscess, but I’m pretty sure it was just a lingual hiccup. (And I choose to coin that term because I don’t know what it is when someone does this – replaces a word with an

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in the Great State of Georgia!



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CAUTION

whatchoo gonna tell your mama?

“Sputnik and Painless Parker in the Virgin Lands”

by Victor Pogostin

(The Virgin Lands campaign was Nikita Khrushchev's idea to boost the Soviet agriculture. Starting from the late 1950's, early 60's Student Construction Teams were sent to build agricultural structures primarily in Kazakhstan.)

On Fridays, our weekly bath days, we were driven fifty kilometers to a local administrative center Balkashino that had a hot bath-house. It was dark when we were coming back. Unexpectedly our truck began to slowly slide into the roadside ditch. We quickly jumped over the side on to the firm grassy ground. We were stuck in the wilderness of the black steppe with only bleak light coming from the low, scarcely starry sky. Suddenly the sky lit up as if a giant floodlight flashed directly above our heads. A powerful ray of light bit the steppe snatching it from the darkness of the night. Gradually the floodlight moved up and then after another flash dissolved in the sky. Next morning, we heard on the radio that Sputnik “Voshod” was launched on August the 28, 1964.

The village of Doroginka where we were building two rubble sheep-folds was twenty-five hundred kilometers away from Moscow and over a hundred kilometers away from the Kazakh town of Atbasar. The village had four streets. A narrow

rivulet divided it into the Russian, German and Kazakh sections. Some of the local Germans were the descendants of the russified Volga German settlers brought here by Katharine the Great others were children and grandchildren of the technical specialists invited by Stalin in the late 1920s, early 30s to help with the country industrialization and deported to Kazakhstan and Siberia after the outbreak of World War II. Those were the lucky ones. Large numbers of the German community in Russia ended up in labor camps or simply disappeared.

A shabby log building of an old school whose classrooms were converted to bedrooms for our Student Construction Team stood on the outskirts of the village.

On the Kazakh side there were low clay houses with thatched roofs and adjoining mud-brick structures for livestock. Beyond the village stretched out the yellow-greenish steppe intersected by dusty roads.

Victor Moroz, the team's driver woke me up at dawn. It was my and Vlad Kr—ko's turn to go to Krasnaya Polyana sandpit, located twenty kilometers away from our village, next to a quarry.

It rained at night. The roads were muddy and, in order not to bog down in the mud he drove on grass tailgating the leading truck. This was not the first time I have trav-

eled with him, and I remembered how he complained that the brake pads were worn out and he had to slow down gradually switching the gears first to neutral and then gradually to low speeds.

“Vic,” I said. “Why are you dogging him? What if he stops suddenly and you have no brakes?”

“Don't fret.” Vic grinned. “He has no brakes either.”

The sand was wet from rain and heavy to load and it took us an hour to fill up the back of the truck and level the sand so that it would not press on the sides. Vic turned the ignition on, but the engine coughed and stalled.

“What now?” I asked.

“Fucking fuel pump stuck. Too hot...should be OK in half an hour.”

The sun was already baking hot. Not far from the sandpit was a river that looked very inviting, and we walked down the cliff for a dip. The bottom was sandy too, but firm, and the water was clear blue. A pike froze motionless near the shore, but as soon as our shadows fell on the surface of the water, it darted to the side and disappeared.

The quarry was across the river. Convicts from one of the nearby prison camps were brought there to mine the stone. The convicts wore gray caps, gray jackets and moved

leisurely. The bored guards kept an eye on them from a distance sitting by the field kitchen, ready for lunch. Occasionally, we too would come to this quarry to get rubble for our sheepfolds.

Hot days, cold nights, lack of any produce and millet porridge for breakfast, lunch and dinner had taken a toll on many of us. I escaped the cold but had a severe toothache. The nearest clinic that had a dentist was two hundred kilometers away at some no-name railway junction. The driver of a truck sent there to pick up cement for our construction site agreed to give me a lift. For nearly five hours I jolted on bumpy roads in the open truck. It was dark when I came to the clinic. The dentist's office was at the end of a long corridor, separated from the clinic's ambulatory by a plywood partition. It was Saturday and the dentist, a truly russified German, had already had one or two glasses of pure medical spirit. Never mind my aching tooth, he could hardly find my mouth. A sturdy red-haired nurse watched his manipulations with curiosity. Finally, he gave up and asked me to wait in the corridor.

Sitting there I could hear him instructing the nurse how to pull out my tooth. I learned that my head pressed tight to her bosom and her left hand should hold my jaw.

"Then put your right arm in a lever position, grab the tooth and pull and all will be square," he said.

Soon I was called in. The dentist

shook my hand and walked unsteadily out the door.

The redhead cheerfully informed me that I was her first patient, and she would do her best and I wouldn't feel a thing.

"Open your mouth, sweetie," she said and showed me a large plastic syringe bulging with solution. "We use it for large cattle." She chuckled.

Indeed in a few minutes I could neither feel my mouth nor even speak. Inspired by her success the redhead remembered that dentists usually talk to their patients.

"What's your name Blue-eyes?" she asked.

"Viiic," I mumbled.

Pulling no further punches, she, like a true fighter, grabbed my head with her left hand, pulled it close to her huge bosom so that I could hardly breathe. With her right hand she pushed the forceps in my mouth and with a crack produced half of my tooth.

"Well," she said, puzzled. "Guess we'll need a hammer and a chisel to get the other half."

"Thank God not a hammer and sickle," I thought looking at a large poster pinned to the wall featuring a woman-collective farmer happily clutching a sheaf of wheat and a sickle to her chest.

In about an hour the other half of my tooth was pulled out. I still felt nothing, nor did I know what her chisel had done to my gum.

"Drink it when the freezing is off,"

said the redhead and gave me half a bottle of vodka. "You've earned it."

I staggered to an abandoned log-wood house converted to drivers' hostel. My driver was there, tipsy and relaxed. He listened to my story with sympathy, drank my vodka and said: "Listen... you won't sleep anyway. Keep an eye on the truck..."

His loaded with cement truck was parked in the nearby wasteland. The night was cold. A huge red moon hung low over the wasteland. Somewhere in the darkness of the steppe the wolves howled, and I piteously echoed them. ❖

"Love in the Pandemic" a play in one act

by Lee Grossman

Characters:

ISOBEL, an adult

TRIS, an adult

The year is 2020. A curtain divides the stage into two equal halves, left and right. The two halves are furnished apartments. The décor is different between the two sides, but each has a desk centered in its half. ISOBEL sits at the desk stage right, and TRIS sits at the other desk. They face the audience. Each looks at a laptop in front of him/her, but their faces are fully visible. They are talking with each other on Zoom.

ISOBEL: What did you say?

TRIS: I said I love you. I know you've always thought of me more as a brother, but I can't keep it to myself any longer. I've always loved you.

ISOBEL: I didn't get what you said after "All."

TRIS: I didn't say "All," I said... *(TRIS suddenly freezes in mid-word).*

ISOBEL: You just froze. *(pause)* You're still frozen. Can you hear me? I can't hear you if you're talking. *(pause)* Fuck.

TRIS *(unfreezes, speaks over the word "fuck")*: ...touch you. Wait, did you say "fuck"?

ISOBEL: You were frozen. I didn't hear what you said after you said "Alice."

TRIS: I didn't say Alice, I said – I don't know what I said that sounded like "Alice."

(pause. ISOBEL doesn't respond; in fact, she has been frozen for a few moments)

TRIS: Isobel? You still there? You're not moving. *(pause)* Fuck.

ISOBEL *(unfreezes and speaks over the word "fuck")*: ...once in awhile. Wait, did you say "fuck"?

TRIS: You were frozen. Did you hear anything before "fuck"?

ISOBEL: No. Did you hear anything I said?

TRIS: I heard something like “sennawal.”

ISOBEL. God.

TRIS: The only important thing I said was I love you.

ISOBEL: You broke up there. Something about olive view?

TRIS (*yelling angrily, trying to say “I love you”*): I – oo!

ISOBEL: What? (*pause, lips moving*) break up.

TRIS: How can you break up with me? We’ve never even gone out!

ISOBEL: I can’t hear you but I can see you.

TRIS: Why can’t you see me? Was it something I said?

ISOBEL: This is nuts. I’ll email you.

TRIS: Fine. I won’t either.

BOTH freeze in the act of speaking. Tableau. BLACKOUT.

"Like a Pablo Neruda Poem"

by John Tustin

I had finally stopped searching the streets for her
Night after night
In every alley,
Every crevice,
Peeping into windows,
Weeping at the suppositions from what
I gleaned.
I decided to sit at the computer each night and merely
Wonder vaguely about her,
Write about her,
About us.
I was giving her what she purported to want:
I became invisible to her.
She did not see so much as my shadow.

Then
I heard from her.
An apology, sort of.
An apology without much culpability.
"I am sorry things are what they are."
We had died several times in the past
And each time,
Just as I had finally stopped believing
Or stopped hating, obsessing
And settled into the reliable disappointment of my days and nights
Unto death –
There she was again,
Standing in my doorway lit by the lamplight
Like magic,
Her hair just so,
Her eyes so dark
And full of sadness, sympathy
And grace.

She cannot let me go.
She leaves, wringing her hands like a heroine in a Shakespeare play.
I battle her decision, I battle my demons and insecurities.

My quest to reveal her ensues and then dies,
Shot down in flames of confusion.

Clearly
She cannot let me go
Although she wants to.
She loves me but I don't think she really likes me.
I am her reminder that she is a slave
And she serves her masters just enough
To pretend she is free.
To her, I am the fire she cannot extinguish.
The need she cannot kill
Though she tries and tries
To exterminate my very name
From her mind and from her lips.
She hates me as she loves me:
She reads my words aloud with tender whispering lips,
Aghast and alight.
She is their slave but inside, where her true heart resides,
I own her.

Just as she had won
And I was gone,
Here I am again.
The man who is escorted out
But does not leave:
His ghost remains.

I am her conscience, I am her core.
I will always stand upon her doorstep,
Shivering, dripping with rain
But never knocking on her door.
Yet always eventually invited inside.

We, us, the two of us
Like a Pablo Neruda poem
That lives and breathes
In a pulsing beat of rushing wind,
Streaming rain and fibers of existence.
There is The Question
To which we are the answer.

"I knock down the door:
I enter your life:
I come to live in your soul:
you cannot cope with me."
You cannot cope with me,
My angel.
I am here to slay you
With my lust for you;
My fealty and my efficacy.
You. Always and only you.

Other men may enter her kitchen,
Her hallway,
Even share her bed
But only I
Live in her head.
Only I bring tears to her eyes
At the smallest tug
Of a memory.

I look out now and the light streams in
On reality.
I am drunk at 10 AM and I imagine
She is sitting and drinking her coffee,
Looking out of her window
And listening to her music,
Pretending I am there with her.

She is the mermaid calling me to my shipwreck.
She is the maternal eternal lover
Holding me to her breast as my erection
Pokes her splendid and pliantly soft belly.
She is destroying her own cynical narrative
By
Telling me she is missing my kiss
In the middle of this,
A typical anonymous night.
She sends me songs
As the alcohol meets the moonlight
Until I meet the sunlight
And hear the same songs as she before

I sleep.

She,

Always she:

Her hands the arousal of my body,

Her mouth the ensnarement of my ears and mouth,

Her eyes the entrancement of my eyes,

Her very breath the reason why

I suffer another night whispering to myself that

I would give five years of my life

To look at her one more time

As I thread mad fingers through her magnificent black hair

One more time as well.

Just one time.

This lifetime.

Our lifetime

Is in her hands.

Slipping through

Her hands

That bear the mark

Of another

But,

Of course

They really belong to me

Even if I never hold them

Again.

"Rudy Valentino's Mourners"

by John Tustin

Someday young women
Will kiss my dead photograph
The way Valentino was mourned –
Just as ardently and wrongly.

They will read my words and imagine
I would have loved them
Just as I imagine the wanna-be ingénues of 1925
Thought that kissing Rudy
Would have made him a faithful Latin Lover
To their unique beauty and
Personality.

They will read my five poems
That remain after all this
Not caring about what I wrote when I lived
As much as the idea
I meant it when I wrote it.

These lithesome or Rubenesque
Lovelies
While certainly desirable in their way,
I am sure,
Are not her –
Her nose turned down, her lips
Enflamed somehow, her dimples
And her sly smile.
Her hair these black flames
That -combined with eyes
Dark as the mystery of the sea
And the sepia pull of the past
That helped compel the words
With the combination of her heart
And her soul
As I knew it
Or imagined -
Owned me.

Five poems survived.
If I was alive
I would give one more day
With the woman who inspired
The five poems that survived me
Than a lifetime lived
With one of Rudy Valentino's mourners

As she cried thinking about
A man whose smile
Was aimed at a camera
And brightened
By good lighting

Although anyone
Turning out
To celebrate my life after my death
Is welcome
To believe I am worth
A celebration.

Rudy Valentino's mourners
Seem so silly to us now,
Being people not a single person
Will truly mourn
Without ever having met.

I wish I was Rudy Valentino.

The Dream Journal

real dreams, real weird

Please send excerpts from your own dream journals. If nothing else, we'd love to read them. We won't publish your whole name.

Leaning back in my chair, watching Sylvester Stallone climb the side of a cliff, fetching the case of stolen money. At gunpoint. The only way I would do it, too.

But it's so beautiful out here. The regal mountains, the crystal blue sky.

Someone else's idea of heaven. Angels fly. I don't.

Each time the petulant cameraman wanders their lens around, looking up, or down, I feel the back of my chair tipping and the blood rushing to my head and the vertiginous spin and I kick my feet at nothingness. Grab for the arms of the chair, and they're gone. I'm going to fall, and there's nothing I can do.

Gasp! but no one hears me. Where is Stallone? How can he stomach this dizzy height? How can he stand the bitter wind and cold?

But it's not cold. But I'm not falling. It's just an illusion of some sort, something brought on by our (that is, our human) tendency to believe what we see. To convert what we see to reality, and let it play out against our nervous system, our heartbeat, blood pressure and the machinations of our inner ear. (I could be wrong about this last one. I assume our inner ear makes us dizzy. Something about tiny bones and liquid behaving like the bubble in a carpenter's level and so on.)

And I have no credentials to back this up, but I think this is how dreams work. How they become three-dimensional, full-motion events into which we insert ourselves, rather than just made-for-TV movies with bad writing and worse direction. Why we feel everything chaotic and horror-show about a class we were late for forty years ago, or the languorous luxury of a kiss from that boy we haven't thought about since we left our hometown to go to college. He's not there anymore, you can tell me until you're blue in the face. He's as old as you are and you're no spring chicken, whatever the hell that is, and he's gone non-pattern hairless and has number two pencils for legs and suitcases under his eyes too big to get through airport carry-on security. Let it go!

But I can't. The same powerful mechanism that flips me over in my chair because I'm two-thousand feet in the air and falling fast makes that taste on my lips soft and real and memorable.

EB - cyberspace

continued from page 3

almost-homonym. Which isn't a thing.)

Lingual biccup. We all have them. I just discovered, finally, the pronunciation for the word “amalgam,” which I kept trying to shoehorn into my vocabulary as *ab-mul-gabm* instead of the proper *uh-MALL-gum*. Who cares about my mispronunciation? My friend John, who thinks that the English language is declining like the Roman Empire, only *way* faster.

Mom and I (in truth, mostly me, but she enjoys my calls anyhow) talked recently about what the person was thinking who named a particular warship a “frigate.” Certainly this was a coincidence rather than correlation, nor causal to any sinkings. Oh, frig it anyhow. (See, It's funny! Well, in a dad-joke sort of way.)

And it has been brought to my attention that while homonyms are words that are spelled alike and sound alike but mean two different things - rose the flower and rose up from my seat at the table - Homophones can be spelled alike, too, but don't have to be – rain, rein and reign. My answer to that? Kill me with noxious gas or a chunk of coal.

You know, either ether or ore.

Garry - chief@blotterrag.com

Contributors

Victor Pogostin was born in Moscow. He graduated from The School of Translators of the Moscow State Institute for Foreign Languages, worked as translator for the Soviet Trade Mission in India, taught Russian Language and Culture course at the Aligarh Muslim University, served in the Long Range Naval Reconnaissance Aviation of the Northern Fleet. After his return from military service defended his PhD dissertation on Ernest Hemingway's Nonfiction. For many years he worked in the Institute of Sociology of the Academy of Sciences, while working as a freelance author/translator for national newspapers and literary magazines throughout the former Soviet Union. In addition to translating fiction and nonfiction into Russian, he has compiled, edited, and written introductions and commentaries for over a dozen books by North American authors, including the works of Ernest Hemingway and John Steinbeck. In 1993 he relocated to Canada with his wife and son.

Lee Grossman's plays, short stories, essays and photographs have appeared in *Evening Street Review*, *moonShine review* and several other venues since he retired from being a psychoanalyst last year. He and his wife live in Oakland, California, where they are owned by a self-satisfied English bulldog named Frank.

John Tustin's poetry has appeared in many disparate literary journals since 2009, including previously in *The Blotter Magazine*. fritzware.com/johntustinpoetry contains links to his published poetry online.

THE LEGEND OF WIPE-ONCE WALLY

AND HIS 13 RULES FOR HOW TO SURVIVE A GLOBAL PANDEMIC
IN A NATION THAT'S GONE COMPLETELY BATSHIT CRAZY



Joe Buonfiglio

Does living through
a global pandemic seem
WEIRD?

Well, hold on.
Things are about to get a lot
WEIRDER!

The Legend of
WIPE-ONCE WALLY

And His 13 Rules for How to Survive a Global
Pandemic in a Nation That's Gone Completely
Batshit Crazy

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