

AN
ALCHEMY
OF MIND

The Marvel and Mystery of the Brain



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CHAPTER 29

The Color of Saying

Poetry is a dream dreamed in the presence of reason.

—Tomasso Ceva

All language is poetry. Each word is a small story, a thicket of meaning. We ignore the picturesque origins of words when we utter them; conversation would grind to a halt if we visualized crows whenever someone referred to a *flight* of stairs. But words are powerful mental tools. We clarify life's confusing blur with words. We cage flooding emotions with words. We coax elusive memories with words. We educate with words. We don't really know what we think, how we feel, what we want, or even who we are until we struggle "to find the right words." What do those words consist of? Submerged metaphors, images, actions, personalities, jokes. Seeing themselves reflected in one another's eyes, the Romans coined the word *pupil*, which meant "little doll." Orchids take their name from the Greek word for testicle. *Pansy* derives from the French word *pensée*, or "thought," because the flower seemed to have such a pensive face. *Bless* originally meant to redden with blood, as in sacrifice. Hence "God bless you" literally means "God bathe you in blood." The snub of a *cold shoulder* originated in Europe, during the Middle Ages, when people who overstayed their welcome were served cold beef shoulder (rather than hot food); after a few cold meals, guests got the message. We say "windows" because Norsemen kept their doors closed in winter, relying on a ventilation hole (or "eye") in the roof. The wind played through it expressively, and it

became known as *vindr auga*, the "wind's eye," which the English changed to "window."

We inhabit a deeply imagined world that exists alongside the real physical world. Even the crudest utterance, or the simplest, contains the fundamental poetry by which we live. This mind fabric, woven of images and illusions, shields us. In a sense, or rather in all senses, it's a shock absorber. As harsh as life seems to us now, it would feel even worse—hopelessly, irredeemably harsh—if we didn't veil it, order it, relate familiar things, create mental cushions. One of the most surprising facts about human beings is that we seem to require a poetic version of life. It's not just that some of us enjoy reading or writing poetry, or that many people wax poetic in emotional situations, but that all human beings of all ages in all cultures all over the world automatically tell their story in a poetic way, using the elemental poetry concealed in everyday language to solve problems, communicate desires and needs, even talk to themselves.

When people invent new words, they do so poetically—arguments have *spin*, a naive person is *clueless*. In time, people forget the etymology or choose to disregard it. A plumber says he'll use a gasket on a leaky pipe, without knowing that the word comes from *garçonette*, the Old French word for a little girl with her hymen intact. We dine at chic restaurants from porcelain dinner plates, without realizing that when smooth, glistening *porcelain* was invented in France long ago, someone with a sense of humor thought it looked as smooth as the vulva of a pig, which is indeed what *porcelain* means. When we stand by our scruples we don't think of our feet, but the word comes from the Latin *scrupulus*, a tiny stone that was the smallest unit of weight. Thus a scrupulous person is so sensitive he's irritated by the smallest stone in his shoe. For the most part, we are all unwitting poets.

It is just one habit of the brain: finding relations between things, especially between seemingly unrelated things. Seemingly, because all things are related in the web of life on Earth. True, quartz is different from a member of a college swim team, but they share

many features. Not to mention that the word *quartz* began with someone thinking of it as a "siren" (the etymology of *quartz*), an enchantress who lured men with a song of colors, liquid as light, but deadly as rock. If pressed, one could find ways to relate quartz and a member of a college swim team. Perhaps through water—the pool being contained water with a few chemicals tossed in, as is the man for the most part, as is the quartz, through which a fluid (light) still pours. Or the changing face of the man, the changing faces of the quartz. Or that each began as a miniature version of itself, in a dark recess, and grew large. We rarely think of crystals growing, but they do, and they grow in a way we associate with babies growing into lawyers or heliarc welders—otherwise we wouldn't use the term *grow* for both.

Sometimes I think we mainly invent words to help picture ourselves: in metaphorical mirrors. We humans are easy to know, but hard to know well. Because we plant and cultivate, we can imagine a seed planted in the womb and growing, see children as a sort of crop. Because we build machines, it's easy to depict the body as mechanical, or even as a factory. Because we use computers, we envision the brain as "hardwired," our socializing as "networking," our skills as "software."

Despite our best efforts, the closer we look at anything, be it wildflower or fever, the scrappier language becomes. It fails where we need it most, at the outskirts of mind, memory, and emotion. Poets solve this problem by fusion (metaphors), bridging (similes), and other devices. But whole cultures do it, too. "Surfing the Internet," for example. Or computers having "viruses." In time, those words will pass through the lips of countless humans, and evolve into other words just different enough to disguise the original poetry behind them. The art of the brain is to use poetry to navigate the world. We breed symbols, we speak fossil poetry. Even so, how would you describe the sun to a blind man? One wordsmith knew.