

***TOOLS OF MY TRADE***

My love for words began with a peculiar journey one late evening when I didn't want to let myself go into the arms of Morpheus. I was five or six years old and reluctant to fall asleep. Perhaps I was afraid that all the things in the room—the picture books piled on the windowsill, my calico dress hanging on the back of a chair, the clock on the wall, even the house itself—would disappear if I took my eyes off them. But nothing escaped. What did happen was my own running away, the here in body and somewhere in mind, an amphibian life between two worlds which would shape and define my life trajectory.

Hugging a pillow and singing a lullaby to myself, I played one word out loud or to myself I could not recall which one, but I do recall the words: apple tree. The moment I said them I realized that there were two apple trees: one in my mind and another one, the real one, outside in the garden. With the same words I could call to mind the image of another apple tree, the crab apple tree, or the Jonathan one and, if I added other words to go along with the initial one, such as “in bloom” or “full of green leaves”, the image in my mind changed as a response to the words I used.

The discovery astonished and fascinated me to the point of forgetting the fear of losing my surroundings while asleep. I did not know at that time that my discovery—the specific detail versus the generic one—was the golden nugget, the “show, don't tell” technique employed by a crafty writer in the act of description. What I knew and embraced then was the unlimited power of words to evoke images and my ability to arrange them in a kaleidoscopic pattern.

Shortly after that realization another event had a snow ball effect on my passion for words. Unsatisfied by the common word “beautiful” when telling my severely visually impaired grandfather about the blossoming plum trees up on the hills of our village, I compared the trees to a group of bathers covered in soap lather, white foam dangling from the armpits of their branches. The words enabled me to bring the beauty of the landscape closer to my grandfather, helping him see what I had seen, offering an image enriched by analogy. Not knowing it, I was stepping up in the world of words to the level of metaphor. “Nature, after all is only one alphabet in the language of poetry,” stated Antonio Machado, the Spanish poet I would read later in my adolescent years. At that

time, I didn't know that I was learning the first letters of a magic alphabet which would be my gift and my curse for years to come.

"Where the words are coming from?" I asked my father. "Who has made them? And how?"

"Let's find out." My father opened an enormous black book bigger than the Bible my grandmother kept on her night table. "This is a dictionary and contains all the words that are there in our language. We can find their meanings, their past, their own personal history, the family they belong to. The word *casa* comes from Latin, which is the mother of five other languages and aunt, to many more. Sometimes words from one language flourish into another. Sometimes they change the sounds, maybe get rid of one syllable, but keep the meaning. Some even die or are not in use anymore, like an outdated tool." He pointed to words originating from the German Language, and chose the word *blitz* as an example of foreign names finding a home in our Romanian language. He turned the pages to the word *yataghan*, a Turkish one which arrived into our language during the Ottoman domination over the Balkans.

My father was not a philologist, but he loved the music of foreign languages, liked to read, and had a deep respect for the written word. From him I learned that words have their own stories, and stories stay in your memory longer than a list of facts. Stories, slices of life in motion and movement, are better choices to be stored in mental archives. All the words were there in his big book with hard covers, onion skin pages and a faint smell of gum Arabic rising from its spine each time we opened it. The dictionary. Sitting crossed legs on the floor rug in my parents' room with the heavy book on my lap I went on my first linguistic expedition uncovering layer after layer of human history hidden at the core of each word. I fell in love with Father's dictionary and I desperately wanted one for myself. My wish came true on my eleventh birthday: I received a smaller version of my father's, one with soft covers and light pages. With the gift came another fear: would I be able to know all the words that were printed there? What if someone would say a word and I would not know its meaning?

I began to carry a dictionary with me everywhere as if it were my passport to a country whose landscape was made of strictly facts and entertaining stories. Over the years I acquired more dictionaries: A French one, a Latin one, Dictionary of Mythological Names, of Synonyms and Antonyms, of Famous Quotations, of Poetic Expressions, of Literary Terminology and even one on trees and shrubs. Growing up I have lost some of them or have used them so much that the dog-eared pages became brittle or disappeared.

I don't remember a time when I didn't have a reference book, ready anytime to search for a new word or a word whose meaning escaped my memory at the first encounter. A dictionary was my safety blanket and my tool of the trade, since, at the age of sixteen, my first poems appeared in a national literary review, marking my birth as a

writer. I held on words, reaching beyond their meanings, choosing shades of connotations, closer synonyms, driven by a burning desire to unfold the truth about the world inside and around me.

Most of the dictionaries came out in hard cover. By definition they were voluminous and heavy. As a university student I ended up carrying extra weight, bulging on my backpack like a hump. Many times I found myself thinking of Abdul Kassam Ismael, the Grand Vizir of Persia, who, in tenth century, travelled everywhere with his whole library: 117.000 volumes loaded on the backs of 400 camels. I felt as if I were one of his camels.

With extra weight on my back I looked like a mountain hiker, an ugly appearance mother and her older sister, a former beauty pageant before the WWII, would not approve of.

“Very unfeminine,” my aunt declared at one of our family gatherings, and every woman relative echoed her with a “not lady-like,” or “not good for your bone structure” or “it’ll damage body posture.” I didn’t care as much for lady-like behaviors as I cared for the health problems I might develop later in life, so I tried to wean myself from my addictive behavior. I made an effort to let go of the habit of rummaging through the book crates at the antiquary shops in the back of my university building.

For a while I unburdened myself and felt free, light, weightless but somehow exposed to the elements as if I were wandering bare foot in the woods. I kept the habit home. Like faithful pets waiting for their owner to come home from work, my dictionaries waited on my desk and I would spend most of my evening hours taking their words to the light of my heart, polishing them into a poem or a short story.

Unexpectedly my life changed with a force of a storm over a mental landscape. In my early thirties I immigrated to United States and I had to learn a new language, and I had to learn it fast. Carrying an English Dictionary in my bag became a vital necessity. I couldn’t let it go: I depended on it. The habit was justified by my non-native speaker status, and by my eagerness to belong to the new place.

Relying heavily on my knowledge of Latin, I labored over every single word I encountered, trying to make it mine, a piece of my everyday survival kit. I listened to people’s talk, learning idioms, understanding meanings. After all, a dictionary is really a record of what people “say.” The term *dictionary* comes from the Latin word *dictio* from *dico* “say” or “speak.” But I didn’t dream to write in a language which was not given to me at birth, I didn’t dare take foreign words to mold them into prose or poetry. They did not belong to me.

“You can write in your own language, find a good translator or, translate your own writing. Many writers did that: Nabokov, Norman Manea,” advised an old Romanian friend, himself a writer in exile.

For a while I lived between two languages, reading my old poems in my mother's tongue but also tasting the new words, listening to their music, trying desperately to tame them, to make them mine. It was painful, always lagging behind, always measured by the scrutinizing eyes of native English speakers.

I thought of translating my old work into English, so I armed myself with plenty of lexicons and Webster dictionaries, with The New Roget's Thesaurus and began my journey into a linguistic Terra Incognita. But my translations were light, see-through, something was lost and I couldn't pinpoint what it was missing. The new version of my poems seemed a pale shadow of the original; it was not the poem itself. I thought of an Irish poet who said that the beauty is in the walking; we are betrayed by our destination. I thought that my only beauty was in the learning itself, for I couldn't see the end of my journey.

I stopped writing poems or short stories. For years. In any language. I just lived with a pain inside me as you would live with a chronic illness, a weird arthritis responding to the changes of my heart. I continued to collect dictionaries, this time of English language.

One day, at *The Strand*, a book store in Manhattan, browsing, touching the back of books lined up on the shelves, my finger stopped on a sort of a dictionary by Wilfred Funk: "*Word Origins and Their Romantic Stories*." I opened it at random and began to read: "Every word was once a poem. Each began as a picture. Our language is made up by terms that were all figures of speech.....To know the past of an individual helps us to understand him better. To know the life history of a word makes its present meaning clearer and more nearly unforgettable...Words truly are little windows through which we can look into the past..." I was reading Funk's words but in my mind I was hearing my father's voice. Again I was nine years old with a dictionary in my hands, Father explaining patiently how the words could become a habit that would be hard to break; first you would want to know the meanings, then their pronunciation, and after that you would worry about their structure, their origins, and personal life.

Had my father known the work of this famous lexicographer? Was Wilfred Funk translated into Romanian? I doubted it. These were just common, universal notions about language. Any language. But Funk's words had a powerful effect on me. It was as if an electric jolt of energy set my whole emotional and intellectual being into motion.

James Joyce once said that the first ten years of life are crucial for a writer. Did the author of *Ulysses* have in mind childhood inquiries, perplexities, fears of not knowing the meaning of a word as part of a writer's make-up? That I do not know. I know that since that day in the bookstore my childhood fears, questions and pure love for words have returned to me. Would I know the meaning of all the English words? Would I be able to invite readers to bask in the light of my images? Old anxieties run deep, like an underground river, only to become an emotional source and writing material.

I began writing. I wrote (and I still do) in a foster language, cautiously testing the words on my tongue, every written line inspected under an invisible magnifying glass, every paragraph weighted on the scale of good grammar and punctuation.

I am still limping in English, but walking nevertheless with dictionaries as my golden crutches. Luckily, now the reference books are easy to travel with, at the reach of your finger on your iPad or other electronic devices.

I thought I was alone in my journey packed with lexicons and Webster's editions until I read an interview with the novelist Carol Shields. She confessed that the best trick she uses to obtain the mental calmness to create, and to get into the flow of writing is to open a dictionary which "puts me in that cool, quiet place of language."

My place of language is not a quiet one, but a busy construction site teeming with words, coming and going, crossing imaginary roads, meeting new terms exchanging stories, calling each other—loudly or in a whisper—singing, playing tricks, commanding, shaping, assembling defining, living on pieces of paper. And I at the other side of the page, holding onto words, not letting them go, for if I do I would lose sight of my own destination.