

LEAPING  
FROM THE  
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*A Poet's Journey of Faith*

JEANNE MURRAY WALKER

SLANT  
BOOKS

LEAPING FROM THE BURNING TRAIN  
A Poet's Journey of Faith

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For Helen Siml deVette



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# Prologue

THIS IS A BOOK ABOUT a girl who left home without quite meaning to. It began willy-nilly one night while I was sitting in bed in Lincoln, Nebraska, writing out algebra equations and listening to a DJ on the radio. I was sixteen. Until then I lived in the chrysalis spun by my parents and their close friends. Weekdays I attended a Christian school started by my father. And then there was church. Every time the janitor turned on the lights, we were there: Sunday School, church, prayer meetings, young peoples' meetings, vacation Bible school, mother-daughter banquets, midnight vigils, revivals, car washes. I eschewed makeup, fell in love with the approved boys, handed out tracts in the neighborhood, and spouted my parents' invective against Adlai Stevenson.

That fateful night, listening to "The Purple People Eater," an improbable thought pierced and held me. *Suppose none of this is true?* I had the sense, suddenly, that I was glancing out between stones in the walls of a fortress. It wasn't just that I saw the vast meadow outside or that the meadow looked tantalizingly fresh and green and worth exploring. I saw for the first time that I was living inside a fortress.

Most Sundays of my life I had listened with my family to the evangelist Billy Graham argue on his radio show, *The Hour of Decision*, that the destiny of my eternal soul would depend upon the choice I made about whether to accept Jesus as my savior. It never occurred to me to question that. When I saw this way of thinking about the world was not the only reasonable alternative, I understood that, indeed, I had a choice to make. I had never before comprehended that

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a single decision could change everything—the people I befriended, the way I dressed, what I ate, who I married. Nor did I understand that the notion of choice involved far more than whether a person ought to steal candy on a Tuesday afternoon from the corner store. I had to choose whether to stay in the fortress or to leave.

About three years later, I left.

This book tells the story of that leaving and the particular path that led me out of the fortress: the language of poetry. It is also, as I discovered in writing it, a book about returning home—or, to put it a different way, about the journey I had to travel in order to preserve the heart of the faith we all clung to so fiercely in my childhood.

It is a story fraught with grief and confusion and astonishment. I went to college and graduate school, where I felt painfully out of place (though I found, to my surprise, that my knowledge of the King James Bible made me more comfortable with sixteenth-century texts than most other students). I encountered writers whose voices felt so familiar I might have heard them before I was born. Eventually, I started writing myself. People who read my books began writing to me. And I began to work in the theater, a pleasure long forbidden by fundamentalism. This book reveals the joy and desperation I felt with each step away from my snug fundamentalist home.

At the same time, I hope this book also reveals the love and respect I feel for “my people.” We called our parents’ friends *Aunt* and *Uncle*. We knew that if you got a bad diagnosis in the morning, by evening the phone chain would spread the word and your phone would start to ring. You could feel people all over your city thinking of you. When my father died, my people brought hams and scalloped potatoes and Jell-O. The women loved to cook, and we ate together at the drop of a hat. People visited us when we were sick. They stayed till the doctor got there and held our hands and prayed for healing. Even the poorest of us donated to those who lost their jobs. If we cast our bread upon the waters, we believed, it would return to us. We shared a comforting, coded dialect, and the grown-ups were dependable as granite.

## Prologue

Many of the core fundamentalist beliefs are still what I affirm. T.S. Eliot's lines from *Four Quartets* have been quoted so often they've become something of a cliché but I can truly say that in writing this book the end of my "exploring" has been to arrive where I started "and know the place for the first time."

Historians and theologians have produced brilliant studies of the American Protestant fundamentalism within which I was raised. Rather than attempt a summary of that tradition's origins and tenets, I will stick with what I know and what I can render: the stories and memories of my childhood and the community that nurtured me.

What I will note here is that over the decades I became increasingly aware—with a shock of recognition—that certain strains of American Protestantism bore similarities to other fundamentalist movements around the world, including ultra-orthodox Judaism, portions of the Islamic tradition, and the rise of highly politicized secular ideologies. The dark side of fundamentalism—and of the literalism that is required to sustain it—can be seen everywhere these days, and not just in religious circles.

Which is why I hope my story can be seen as more than one person's idiosyncratic narrative. The particulars of this narrative are mine, but many other people have faced similar choices, considered the same quandaries, wavered, stumbled, struggled, and finally made a decision. It is the narrative of an individual torn between birthright fundamentalism and a more capacious world, someone who, through sustained attention to the imaginative language of metaphor and symbol, allusion and ambiguity, came to inhabit a wider and more vibrant sense of the world—and of God as its creator and redeemer.



# 1

## Leaping from the Burning Train

A FRIEND OF MINE HAS a burn scar, like a violet, asymmetrical puddle on the left side of her face. When we were in college, she bought a cheap seat on a train that took two days to snake across Europe from Paris to Hungary. Awaking from a snooze in the late afternoon, in the haze of dusk, she thought she saw red flames. The passengers around her were reading, playing cards, sleeping, talking lazily.

She had a little discussion with herself. Because really, what do you do? Clear your throat and make an announcement? Discuss the likelihood of its being fire with the gentleman sitting next to you? Yank the emergency cord? And what if you're wrong? Usually when you think you've seen a fire, you haven't. It's the sun setting like a smear in the window several seats ahead of you.

As she was thinking about this, she smelled smoke. Feeling a wall of heat move up the aisle, she yelled, "Stop the train!" And then someone else called out, in what she remembers as German. There was a pandemonium of voices in different languages. People lunged toward the front of the car. A stocky man and woman stopped and began arguing in the aisle, pushing and shoving one another, screaming words she didn't understand. Behind them everyone jammed the passage, thrusting, heaving, desperate to get to the doors, unable to move forward. Panic-stricken, the clot of people who couldn't move

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pushed someone down. Several people fell. My friend couldn't see what happened to them.

She wrenched herself up and wedged herself into the stream of people in the aisle. A woman, whose big straw hat tilted at a bizarrely jaunty angle, stabbed her with a red umbrella. Eventually, she reached the door. The train was rocking crazily, the fields were racing by, green and blurry. People behind her shouted and pressed against her. In the car ahead, some were hurling themselves through the open door. She couldn't see where they landed or what happened to them.

My friend leapt from the open door. She balled herself up and rolled into a silent ditch filled with flowers, which she tells me she recalls with manic clarity. Opening her eyes, she saw delicate, slender purple iris, pink lilies with tiger faces. At the bottom of the gully stood a group of tall, prickly-looking scarlet cone flowers. In the field on the other side of the ditch, she could see squat little green plants set in rows across the ashy black soil. Far above her, the clouds traveled on in the absurd blue sky, and in the vast silence, she heard the iterated chirp of a single bird. She lay there for a long time. Eventually, two firemen picked her up tenderly and moved her to a stretcher. There were a lot of fatalities on the train. It took over six months for her to recover enough to come back to classes.

What I know about her—what little anyone can know about a friend, the one-tenth of the iceberg you see sailing above the surface—is funny and garrulous. She tells about the fire as if it happened to another woman a long time ago. When I saw her recently at a conference, I reminded her of the train story.

Eventually, we drifted into a discussion of politics. She mentioned that Jim Lehrer, at the end of his *NewsHour*, was still screening the faces of American servicemen killed in Iraq and Afghanistan. The first time I saw those pictures of faces, I told her, I was stunned that instead of hearing the info-news chatter typical on most other stations, we watched the pictures go by in total silence. We talked about the rising cost of health care, and the bad jobs numbers, and we narrated the tragedies of some our unemployed friends, who had given up on finding new jobs. We worried in 2008 about whether we

would ever be in a position to retire, given the recent catastrophic loss of our retirement funds. And then our discussion moved to Iran, which then was defiantly insisting on developing nuclear energy, and to the shocking changes in weather all over the globe. On the East Coast, we had just suffered a series of blizzards which closed schools and stopped business for days at a time and which, we agreed, were symptoms of global warming.

The two of us spoke about this quickly, in code, speeding up feverishly as we became more certain that we still agreed with one another. We were worried and angry. We held the Other Side responsible. We referred to George Bush, to his lies about WMDs, to his incompetence after Hurricane Katrina, to his laws rescinding constitutional protections against wiretapping, to tax cuts to the super-rich. We ticked down our lists. And then we had to leave for other appointments.

Later that day, I felt haunted by a peculiar emptiness as I realized that we had not really talked, that we had simply rehearsed a script. What about her marriage, her children, her career as a lawyer, her personal discoveries and changes? I began to feel bereft. We had substituted political speech for our own experience. The truth is, I was beginning to feel the bankruptcy of name-calling and re-circling the same angry, despairing political accusations in the company of friends who agree with me.

Fast forward. It's months later, late August 2009, and I'm writing during the blistering dog days of summer. Our glorious basil, which has grown waist-high, needs to be cut for pesto. The hedges need trimming again. Afternoons are so hot that when I step through the door of my study onto the patio, I feel like a candle, melting. My shirt is damp in ten minutes. Most of our neighborhood has cleared out and friends are off on vacation. Senators and U.S. Representatives are back in their districts talking about the health care bill. We have a different President now and a different set of policies. A different set of citizens opposes his policies than the citizens who opposed George Bush's. These people have been showing up around the country to disrupt and drown out town hall-style discussions. Some of them

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arrived at a meeting in Colorado yesterday carrying guns. “They” are the political Right, and they include a fair number of Christian fundamentalists.

You might say the engine of civil conversation, which should be moving America into the future, is on fire. Meanwhile, those of us on the train are screaming and pushing one another down. Much about this country needs to be fixed—the economy, our environment, health care, our fear of terrorism, racial inequality, education, and our troubled cities. Without solutions to some of these problems, our future as a nation looks dim. In fact, our future on the planet appears to be in jeopardy. But we have trouble reaching a solution because we can’t talk to one another. Neither can our representatives in Washington. We are a deeply and disastrously divided nation.

Several weeks before George W. Bush ordered the attack on Iraq to bring about *regime change*, as he called it, my husband and I marched against the war. Sort of. We were in Paris. It was February 14th. The early evening was chilly and because the Metro was undergoing repairs, the stations were cluttered with scaffolding. We were going to celebrate Valentine’s Day with a special dinner at Le Petit Prince, where we had first dined a decade ago. We emerged from the underground around 5:00 p.m. to glimpse a river of French men and women, young and old, pouring down Boulevard de la Mutualité. People walked, rode bicycles, waved flags from the backs of trucks. They wore scarves and berets and layers of sweaters. Slender, beautiful young people defied the cold wind by leaving their shirts open. Ragtag dudes hoisted bed sheets with slogans. Pregnant women sang. Professor-like figures trudged along in full length coats reading books. A child wearing mittens led a puppy on a red leash.

The first time I protested a war, I was twenty. Mike Burton, the editor of our campus newspaper at Wheaton College, joined me in the lunch line. He had just come from reading modern philosophy, and as I ordered a hamburger, he quietly effervesced about Heidegger. Then he slipped me a copy of *TIME* magazine opened to a picture of an American soldier’s astonished face, snapped by a photographer at the



very moment the young fighter took a bullet to the stomach. The caption reported that the soldier was twenty. I was shocked at how young he was: my age.

I glanced at the close-up, stepped out of line, and, feeling I might throw up, wandered off to the ladies' room. When I returned to the lunchroom, Mike, who was by nature courtly and generous, apologized but nevertheless went on to make a case against the war. The authorities—President Johnson, Dean Rusk, Robert McNamara—and our administration at Wheaton—argued that if we pulled out of Vietnam the country would turn Communist. If Vietnam turned Communist, a string of other countries in the region would follow suit. This was known as the Domino Theory. Michael had been arguing against it quietly for a year. I paid for my cheeseburger, then scraped it into the trash, listening while he turned the fire hose of his powerful logic on me. Shaken as I was, I hung on for dear life to my skepticism. How could any of us know? We weren't there in Vietnam. And we didn't possess the statistics.

I was the dutiful child of a father who died early and a mother who had heroically taken on both parenting roles. I needed to believe the parent is right. The child who rocks the boat sinks the ship. I believed that if a parent makes a mistake, at least she might have an idea about how to fix it. How could McNamara, who was reputed to be a genius, who had been head of Ford, who had access to so much information, be mistaken? How could any of us who had not run the world guess its complications?

Like many students at Wheaton at the time, however, I was reading philosophy, taking what I understood of it to heart, struggling to comprehend the stunning, recent deaths of my father and my brother. Like many of my friends at the school, I was beginning to see that I had a responsibility to behave ethically in the world. Reading Sartre and Kierkegaard and Camus, talking about them until late at night, some of us began trying to act, not as a person "should," but as we said, "authentically." I wanted to take my freedom as an individual seriously, to feel each moment honestly as it passed. The immediacy of that young soldier's expression became a catalyst for me. I began

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to question why he had to die. I no longer felt so certain that people who had started the war were right.

The year before that, as president of my freshman class, I was expected to appear in a routine ROTC ceremony to review the cadets. The truth is, as I thought about the event, I was mainly preoccupied with what to wear. The morning dawned, cool and crisp and full of blue sky, as only the Midwest can be. I had bought a white suit with gold buttons. I could ill afford to buy new clothes, but I justified the price by thinking of the occasion as a responsibility. The suit with its gold braid looked vaguely military to me. For two weeks, I kept it hanging on the handle of my closet door, so I could admire it. That morning after taking a shower, I tore off the sheltering plastic and put it on for the first time. I pulled on white gloves. I stood in front of the mirror looking like a million dollars.

Then reluctantly, I began to pay attention to the war inside me. I knew some of my friends believed our support of the Saigon government was immoral. I went to the refrigerator and gnawed on raw carrots for a while, then paced my room, wracking my brain about whether I should go through with the ceremony. I phoned a friend and told her I felt torn between opposing duties. I had been summoned by the college administration, and I wanted to fulfill my responsibilities as class president. On the other hand, I had been horrified several weeks before when one of my close friends had shipped out to fight in Vietnam. On the other, *other* hand, I knew my distress at his leaving wasn't proof the war was wrong. My friend on the phone was kind enough to take me seriously, to ask sympathetic questions.

What I did not confess to her, or even to myself, was that I loved the idea of standing at attention on a reviewing stand, looking spiffy in my white suit as the wind blew gently through my hair. I probably did not quite understand that the ceremony involved role-playing that did not require the presence of any particular individual. If I had declined to review the troops, our administrators would quickly have substituted one of the other freshman class officers. But I loved the notion that they had personally summoned me. After a long, tortured,

semi-honest debate with my friend, I said goodbye, put the phone down, and dashed off to review the troops.

Would it have made a real difference if I hadn't?

To me, it would have.

To students at the school or the wider world? I doubt it.

The Vietnam War drove a wedge between the generations in my family because both sides were absolutely sure they were right. Several times a year, I visited my mother, who after ten years of surviving as a widow, had married my stepfather and gone to live with him in Dallas. During the day, my mother and I gallivanted around to museums and stores, never mentioning politics, but one night at dinner, my stepfather, who was usually mild-mannered, generous, began ranting against the spoiled, presumptuous, out-of-control youth who were taking over buildings on campuses. He had been watching TV.

I got up from their dining room table, pretending to clear the plates, and walked around their kitchen, fuming. I wanted to scream, so I stuffed a red plaid dish towel into my mouth. In truth, at the time, I wasn't sure about the war. But my parents' staunch, unflinching refusal to think or to investigate, to consider alternatives, drove me nuts.

For years we stood on opposite sides and glowered at one another. We spoke to each other about the war in prefabricated, ready-made slabs of language that we had probably picked up from political rallies or television or our separate churches. After that, the subject of the war flared up only occasionally, but for years it lay beneath the surface of our visits, the implacable conflict that defied resolution or even civil discussion.

Why? What was at stake? I can only answer for myself. If I'd had a real conversation with my parents, they might have won because, in my heart of hearts, I wasn't as sure of my own position as I pretended to be. And my definition as a member of my generation—rather than theirs—rested, in part, on my stance on the Vietnam War. What was at stake for me in holding my position against my parents was dignity, what the Spanish speakers in Lima, Peru, where I traveled the next year (in an effort to gain some independence) called

*dignidad*—self-respect, a sense of my own nobility as a human being. Like most children, I needed to define myself as separate from my parents, which I did in some arbitrary ways. But this didn't feel arbitrary; it felt like a matter of morality.

As it turned out, I was right about the war, but I was, perhaps, as much at fault as my mother. I disdained her for her opinion, and I am sure she never felt contempt toward me for mine. The scorn I felt for the other side helped me to barricade myself against real discussion. What I'd have risked by having a real conversation with my parents was that if they had convinced me, I would have needed to change. To change would have meant to stop being the self I recognized. I did not want to stop being myself.

My fundamentalist parents were always driven by anxiety about change. I realize now, as I did not at twenty-three, that my mother had a history that pre-disposed her to see the Vietnam War as she did. She was a teenager during the Depression when her parents lost a good bit of their farmland. In 1933, she taught twenty-two kids in a one-room schoolhouse in rural Minnesota for \$60 a month. My father, during the war, dropped out of college. After they married, they wanted something they could count on at any cost, something that would not change. No wonder they joined the fundamentalist movement.

Any form of gambling or card-playing became a symbol of the kind of financial and moral risk my fundamentalist parents abhorred. Shortly after they were married, they spent a blowout weekend at the cabin of some friends on Lake Miltona, a resort community close to Parkers Prairie, where my father served as postmaster before he took over the general store from his father. Apparently, during that weekend, which later became notorious in our family stories, a number of couples my parents' age had celebrated the mild June weather by drinking and dancing and playing cards on the shore of the lake. My father had grown up with these people in Parkers, and his with-it childhood friends now socialized as couples. He had brought his farm wife home to the town, and she had, apparently, passed the test and joined his group. They'd been swimming, the women in their

flowered World War II bathing suits with pleated skirts, the men daring one another to take off their shorts and skinny dip. For Saturday night dinner, they splurged on butter and eggs and meat, and they told ribald jokes and bet a small bit on card games. The next day they skipped church, lingering at the beach until late in the afternoon.

That Sunday night, as my parents drove back to town, they talked about the money they had lost, which was not much, but which they needed to pay the rent, and about the drinking and the way they had unaccountably abandoned caution to join the loose lifestyle of my father's group. Later that night, in a solemn ritual that my mother could still describe when she was eighty, they climbed downstairs together to the wood-fire furnace, opened the door to the red-hot coals, tossed their playing cards into the iron jaws, and watched the flames eagerly leap up to devour the pack. After that, my parents never allowed cards in the house, and they renounced parties at the beach and alcohol of all kinds.

My parents' need for certainty also manifested itself in the concept of personal "reputation." My father, in particular, drilled into his children that however we felt about our duties, we needed to follow through on what we had promised. Our whims would come and go, but in a small town like Parkers Prairie, and in the small world of the fundamentalist subculture, people had long memories and character counted.

One day in the autumn, a high school kid, the son of my parents' friends, asked to borrow my father's hunting decoys. He took them out on the lake over the weekend. When my father ran into the kid at the hardware store a week later, he enthusiastically described using them to bag a couple of ducks.

My father came home puzzled. The kid had said nothing about bringing the decoys back. When he didn't return them the following week, my parents convened a family discussion over a dinner of scalloped potatoes and ham. What should they do? My older brother suggested that my father should buy more decoys.

"They're expensive," my father said. "They have to be ordered from Minneapolis."

“For how much?” my brother asked. He was older and he knew more about money than I did.

“Hmmm. More than your bike.”

“Well, ask for them back, then.”

“I shouldn’t have to do that.”

“Why?”

“He borrowed them. He should know enough to bring them back. It’s been three months and I’d like to go hunting before we get a lot of snow.”

At this point, my mother pitched in with the story about how, when she was a young wife, she had borrowed a cake pan from my father’s aunt, a short, stout beloved woman named Aunt Joe. When my mother failed to return it the next day, Aunt Joe marched the two blocks to our house, rang the doorbell, demanded it back, and read my mother the riot act for not promptly returning what she had borrowed. The rule was you don’t merely return a borrowed pan. You return it promptly and you fill it with a gift of candy or freshly baked bread or canned peaches.

We kids stirred our potatoes around on our plates and blinked at the seriousness of not returning property we had borrowed.

“Why don’t you talk to Morris?” my mother suggested. Morris was the father of the teenager who had borrowed the decoys.

“Don’t you figure he’s got enough to worry about?” Morris had six children and he was struggling to keep his farmland.

In the end, my father spoke to the kid—weeks later—who told him that the decoys had floated away. Just disappeared. Poof. As if that were enough to convince my father that the score was settled. This story became famous in our family. *Remember the decoys*, our parents would say to us. It became a marker, warning us that we needed to build a reputation for reliability.

My parents’ love of stability and permanence may have been what made my father design and build two houses for us with his own hands. He knew the plumbing was reliable because he had put it in himself. He could depend on the electrical system because he had wired the house. The first house he built was in Minnesota. The

second was in Lincoln, Nebraska, where my parents moved us so my mother could find a job. And so we could be close to the *Back to the Bible* broadcast, an early fundamentalist radio show produced in Lincoln. And so, after my father (who was terminally ill) died, we kids could save money by living at home while we attended the University of Nebraska. That was my parents' idea. None of us went to school there. But we could have. What my parents wanted was insurance. If we needed it, the university was close by.

I watched my father build our second house. On a spring day when the fledgling leaves were budding on our tiny dogwoods, I stood beside him at the edge of our new lot line on the outskirts of Lincoln and watched an earth-moving machine slowly roll onto our land. The din of the machine made us plug our ears. I could feel vibrations in my feet. As its jaws bit cleanly through the grass, I understood that the way to start building a house is simply to subtract earth.

For months afterward, whenever I wasn't in school or doing my homework, I was helping to raise the walls of our house. My father let me practice pounding nails until every time I whammed the head three times, the shaft flew straight in. Every time the hammer hit home, I felt closure. There. That's done. That will never come out. I still hear the clang of my handsome father's pounding, and I can feel the rhythmic swing of his freckled right arm as he nailed the raw studs in place. His straight reddish hair fell over his forehead as he pounded. He was *going to die, going to die, going to die*. For himself, he wasn't afraid. He wanted to finish this house before he left us. I suspect he wanted to anchor the studs of that house to the foundation of the universe.

My father was not afraid to die because he felt convinced of the one most essential and final thing. With absolute certainty, he believed that to be absent from us was to be present with the Lord. We would all be reunited. Both my parents repeated that often as a fact. As a result, they faced his death with bravery that—especially since I've been a parent—seems inconceivable to me. My father never became an invalid. He was looking for adventure until the week before he died.

The certainty that buoyed my father was esteemed among my fundamentalist people and it was strengthened by hymns and the fundamentalist culture, which was set apart from the secular world. We sang about blessed assurance. We lustily harmonized, *I'm a child of the King*, and *When the roll is called up yonder, I'll be there*. These convictions, of course, obligated us to feel happy. We kids sang *Jesus wants me for a sunbeam*, and *I've got the joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart!* Our private dialect and potlucks and prayer chains and Christian school reinforced the certainty my fundamentalist parents so prized. We lived in a feedback loop.

Above all, our language set us apart from the mainstream culture. We were washed in the blood of the Lamb. We bore witness to the faith and let our lights shine before men. We wanted to fully surrender to the Lord. Jesus knocked patiently at the doors of our hearts. We repeated the same words and images until we knew—we *knew*—the world through those images. My parents tended to live the way they talked. We said grace before meals. Before long car trips, we bowed our heads and prayed for safety. My parents quite clearly loved one another, and they got along famously. I had no inkling then, of course, that their fervent beliefs and language could be called an ideology. I thought it was just obviously and simply the truth.

Years after my father died, when I was in my twenties and visiting my mother in Dallas, she had the dial tuned to a radio preacher, as she often did all day. She loved to feel awash in the music and language of fundamentalism, which by then had started driving me bonkers. We were making turkey sandwiches for lunch. The preacher was praying. *Oh Lord, shower your blessings right now on our radio audience. And we just thank you that you have adopted us as your sons!* I was reflecting on why the Lord never seemed to adopt any daughters when, out of the blue, my mother remarked, “He’s a godly man.”

“How can you tell?” I asked.

She looked at me strangely as if I should know. “His language.”

I had never before heard my mother comment on language. I had never realized that she understood so clearly her own linguistic



choices. *There's a code*, she was warning me. *Follow the code I've taught you*. I knew she thought that when I went off to graduate school I was sailing in dangerous waters. By then, I was reading *Moby Dick* and Spenser's *Faerie Queene* and the difficult, radiant poems of Emily Dickinson. I had already apprenticed myself to these masters. I was, indeed, sailing in fresh waters—beyond shallow fundamentalist clichés, out into the deep, ferocious ocean of the English language. To me, the waters felt not dangerous but heady and freeing.

My mother was right. There is a code. The idiom my parents spoke was a language of fundamentalist protest against modernism and consumerism. Back then, it was the dialect of people who had almost no power. Many of the fundamentalists I knew had little control over politics and they tended to be lower middle class. Their echo-chamber language tended to be limited to religious ideas. But with the political mobilization of the fundamentalist right in the middle of the twentieth century, the dialect of fundamentalism became a language of power, and it took on a new dimension: politics.

Ideological language, whether it's the language of religion or of politics, deals in prefabricated slabs of words. A phrase can frame and define a whole issue. The phrases are often metaphorical. The metaphor makes an argument that may not be surfaced, that smuggles a hidden assumption into the conversation.

Language is endlessly shifting, of course, so specific examples become outdated before a book like this is through the publishing process. But consider idioms like *death panels*, or *the war on terror*, or *government takeover of health care*, or *socialized medicine*. These phrases imply whole ideas. Take *death panels*, for example. This term, which Sarah Palin concocted, argues that the authorities under the new health care bill—those who decide which medical procedures can be reimbursed and which can't—are going to pull the plug on your loved ones. Of course, insurance companies, who are currently the “deciders,” may pull the plug. But the term *death panels* banishes discussion about these questions. It puts the rabbit in the hat. It obscures problems and questions with a clever phrase.

The political right is not alone in its use of ideological language. The left refers to itself as *the progressives* and refers to conservatives as *the lunatic fringe*. It frames its own agenda as *tax relief* and its proponents chant *Yes we can!* Of course, prefabricated, ideological language is nothing new, but it increasingly takes the place of discussion, not only on the streets, but in Washington. Both the liberals and the conservatives—whatever those words mean anymore—both Republicans and Democrats hire linguists to shape language. They scheme ways to distort political issues in favor of their points of view. They repeat the new clichés until they seem natural. They imprison us in points of view before we open our mouths. And since by and large we listen to news that confirms our biases, we lock ourselves ever more firmly into our prejudices.

Given that we're together on a train—and the train is on fire—we could use some discussion. But what language can we use? What assumptions do we both agree on to start with? Those of Glenn Beck or those of Rachel Maddow? Talking politics with someone on the opposite side is scary. The effort to get past all the manufactured phrases takes reflection. The risk of offending is great. So instead of talking, we just push one another down in the aisle of the train.

Or maybe it's not our separate languages that keep us from talking. Maybe it's the fear that drove me during my discussions with my parents about the Vietnam War. I had a compulsive need to think of myself as correct. I didn't want to risk having to admit to them that they were right and I was wrong. And I was afraid to change. If I really listened to their point of view, if I gave them a chance to convince me, I would not leave their house as the same person. I would cease to recognize myself.

I don't know about you, but most of the time I feel a great need for certainty. In that way, I am not unlike my parents. I would like everything around me to be safe and predictable. Until I'm bored. Then I would like only small changes—only the ones I want. Among other things, I love to feel certain of my political positions, for example, that street people can be cleaned up and made productive and that it's possible to create a healthcare system that doesn't exclude fifty

million Americans. So why should I talk with anyone who disagrees, especially since I don't really know how that kind of talk might go. I have my own prefabricated language and they have theirs. Hate speech is the business of some of them who write blogs and host talk shows. But I know the people who tune in to hear those personalities might be less doctrinaire, more capable of compassion and empathy than the speakers are. I just don't know many of them. I have opinions about them, but generally, I'm afraid to talk to them. I don't even know where to start. *Hi. What a cute dachshund! Is he yours?* Anything more complicated—like discussing the coming election—and I'm out of my depth.

And besides, I've spent many years now *not* talking to "them."

But here's the rub. There's a difference between *knowing* I'm right and actually *being* right. My parents knew they were right about the Vietnam War. They were absolutely certain. They were so certain that after a while, they didn't entertain discussion about the war. Feeling certain about something doesn't guarantee that you're right. It just prevents any connection with the other side. As I have said, in the argument about the Vietnam War, I was even less well-behaved than my parents because I *wasn't* certain the war was wrong, but I pretended I was.

Certainty is one of the fundamentalist values I don't believe is possible anymore. I say that with sadness. Who doesn't long to be certain? But unfortunately, because we're human, there's a limit to how certain we can be of anything. At least, that's what I believe when I'm not climbing the wall with anxiety. I understand how important *blessed assurance* was to my father and mother, who knew my father was dying and wanted to be positive that we kids would be safe and that we would all be reunited. I think my parents were right. We'll all be reunited. But how can I know for sure? The only way of knowing that is through faith.

I nominate faith to take the place of certainty. The problem is faith is scary, at least for me. For the last several decades, I have spent a fair amount of time in London. I worship sometimes at St. Paul's, one of London's magnificent cathedrals. A few weeks ago, I

was sitting on a wooden chair in the nave with six hundred other people, listening to a boys' choir. Their treble soared through white marble columns to the dome three hundred and fifty feet above us. At the end of the service, the procession of robed clergy filed up the center aisle toward the rear. Our triumphant voices sang *All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name*, rising to mingle with sunlight from the balcony windows.

After the service, I decided to change my perspective from the vast and exalted and holy marble expanse of the nave to the more dangerous tower. I decided to climb to the top of the dome. I've decided that many times, and I've always backed out. This time I promised my students; I swore to them and to myself that I would follow through.

The stairs are shabby and cramped. Five hundred and thirty rickety wooden steps circle around and around, leading to a platform where a person can get a birds-eye view of the city. I feel alternately nauseated and exhilarated. My legs tremble with animal terror. Several times I decide to turn back. But I'm enclosed in a small circular passage. There's no room to turn around and walk down. And the steps aren't solid, either. When I look through the steps, I can see the whole precipitous, dizzying way to the bottom.

Abandoning certainty in favor of faith feels like climbing those five hundred plus steps. But those steps have taken hundreds of thousands of pilgrims to the top of the dome, and, so far as I know, they have always held.

There's a fire in the train, sweeping towards us from the car ahead. The air is looking shimmery with heat, and the hair on my arms is singed, and I would like to say bad people are pushing and shoving in the aisles. But I'm pushing and shoving, too. My own shouting is preventing me from hearing anyone who disagrees with me. And when I think about it, I feel like I'm going to be sick. Because I don't know what to do to stop us from attacking one another—even to stop myself. It seems to me that the impasse between factions in this country might be permanent. The standoff has been so long in the making it seems impossible to resolve.

Then I go to a theater conference, and a tall, skinny graduate student named James with cowlicky red hair gets up and tells us he'll be talking about the parable of the Good Samaritan. I feel myself nodding toward boredom. Everybody knows that one. It's about doing good to your neighbor. Except James—who, it turns out, is a smart cookie—has already counted on us knowing that way of looking at the story, so he isn't focusing on being nice to the Samaritan. The story about the good Samaritan is one most of us know.

James is talking about the setup for the parable. Although there are about twenty of us in the room, somehow, he speaks as if to each of us personally. He holds a piece of chalk in his left hand and occasionally marks a blackboard. He hooks his finger in a belt loop while he tells how Jesus went to the Temple so he could talk to his political opponents. After a Pharisee spotted him and asked him a smart-aleck question to put him down, James says, Jesus must have wanted to attack, just like we do when we've strayed off our own turf. Just like I feel when I have to do more than repeat my favorite positions to people who agree with me.

James's point is that Jesus didn't repeat his same old positions. Instead, he told a story. That story got everyone in the Temple involved in the messy, complicated aspects of being human. It got their minds off ideology and confronted them with their own bodies, with sickness, death, and their regular need for assistance. Sitting there listening to James that day, I thought, *Ah ha! This is the way to talk to people I disagree with. Everyone loves a story.*

I'm reminded that I once went to a nursing home to teach a poetry workshop. The wiry, energetic director informed me that she had invited a special needs class at the local high school to join us. This freaked me out slightly because I knew the age differences in the audience would be so huge. I wondered how I'd ever find something that would work for both groups. Soon the students arrived. The young women in the group were showing a lot of low-cut black and purple lingerie. Many of their orifices were be-ringed with metal, and the entire bodies of several of the men were covered with tattoos. The white-haired nursing home residents, who were wearing carpet

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slippers and cheap flowered cotton dresses with zippers up the front, watched coldly as the students trooped in. Each group sat in its own little enclave with a no man's land of empty chairs between them.

It was a disaster. I began to grasp that the hour would be a catastrophe. But I asked them all to close their eyes and picture the house where they had lived when they were ten. Obediently they closed their eyes. Suppose they were walking up the front sidewalk, I said. What did they smell? The greenness of grass as a father mowed the lawn? A mother cooking spaghetti sauce in the kitchen? What did they hear? Quarreling? Someone practicing scales? A record playing the Beatles? What did they see? The assignment was to write for twenty minutes as fast as they could—everything they felt and sensed.

They didn't want to stop, but eventually, I asked for volunteers to read the images aloud. Every single one of them read. They didn't weep. Not openly. Well, not the high school students, at least. But a surprising number of them ended the session with smudged mascara. And they all lingered afterward to talk to one another. The wiry director, who knew what she was doing, as it turned out, broke out cookies and coffee.

All the preconceived notions we had in our heads about one another got short-circuited by those stories. Ironically, I, who was being paid to run the workshop, also moved beyond my own limitations for a while when one of the participants asked me to remember my own home. It was our stories—our own images and emotions—that gave us a way of talking to one another.

Poetry and music and other kinds of images circumvent our ideological language, and they can forge connections too. I am remembering what happened in Sarajevo after they closed the opera. It had been shelled until the frightened patrons stopped coming. The singers and many orchestra members, who had been braving gunfire, disbanded. Some of them pawned their instruments to buy food. They barricaded themselves in their houses. Sporadic gunshots from soldiers reminded them they had no power. Music had been their only power, and their music had been shut down by guns.

*Leaping from the Burning Train*

Then one day, the army shot to death twenty-two citizens of Sarajevo while they were standing in a bread line. The next day Vedran Smailovic took his cello to the town square, anchored it in the dirt, and began playing. For days after that, he walked out to the square alone in clear sight of the gunmen and sat down, arranged his cello, and played the Bruch, the Dvorak, the Elgar. He played for twenty-two days, one day for each of the twenty-two citizens who had been murdered.

No one fired at him.

He played music. That's all. Drawing horsehair across catgut, he let loose the unearthly music of the great cello concertos. The long, rich notes echoed against the buildings and resonated in the central square. Maybe to some people, it was the sound of this truth: guns are not stronger than music.

At any rate, he offered what he had, and so did the kids and the old people at the nursing home. The language of personal stories and the various languages of art short-circuit politics, replacing ideology with experience. Both provide ways for us to connect with people from the other side.

I aspire to write a truth that is stronger than guns. I want to plow the locked and infertile soil of our politicized, abused English language. I want to find new and fair and striking ways to tell what I know. What I am trying to say by telling my own story is this: we can quarry our own lives for images instead of buying the ready-made ones from political and religious operatives. And we can be aware, as we talk, that we might be wrong. We might even keep a sense of humor and revel in the fact that we still have something to learn. Risk is scary, but along with it come possibilities that are worth celebrating.

Think of it. We might find ways to talk to one another.

My friend said that, as the noise of the tracks jolted her feet and hammered her ears, she realized that she was more likely to die if she stayed on that train than if she jumped. She thought she would never make it down the blocked aisle. People were shouting, and pushing, and savaging one another. Some passengers burned to death. But she made it to the open door. The wind sucked her orange scarf away.

And then she leapt.