



Touching The Language Electric

by Carmelita McGrath

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**JOURNEYS
IN LANGUAGE,
LEARNING AND CULTURE**

Helen Woodrow · Carmelita McGrath, Editors

Introduction

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TOUCHING THE LANGUAGE ELECTRIC

Carmelita McGrath

Learning

When I first heard *elocution*, I thought
it had to do with singing wires lately strung
through the walls that now carried
the currents of the world,
to the sky like lines on a map of the future,

and I didn't conceive that the word was about my tongue,
or my right hand, its extension
that I had been chosen for language outside my world
and, touching live wires, I would be stung
by the art of el — ectr — ocution.

For some time I have been working on a poem about my own experience with language. It's important to me, because I have somehow become comfortable with language, and can write freely, without the demons that once told me I wasn't good enough. I have thought that if I could understand this, then I could teach better. The workshops and classes in writing I lead from time to time would benefit from my knowledge of my own journey.

But this is complex. I grew up in a Newfoundland fishing community at a time when the past intersected with the present and the future in new ways.

Up to this time, in the age every child thinks of as Before I Was Born, the outside world had entered and exited like a peddler in a play where all the other characters are known to each other. The Second World War had brought the Americans, calling out "Hey, doll," to the girls on the road; Confederation had brought a fuzzy association with Canada, the only evidence of which was a monthly family allowance cheque, for which we were much obliged. But the world I was born into was largely that of my grandparents. There's a picture of me at about age five, wearing an old woman's bandanna, playing house on the woodpile while hens clucked and laid the layers of compost that would later produce a garden of enduring beauty. The air was always scented with salt; fish were so large a child had to drag them home, their tails collecting dust. Around this world there was a language, old and durable as the community itself, a rich language full of silver thaw and brazen shaggers and pissmers and jammy buns. How then, at the age of fifteen, did I come to write:

The conservation of our forests is a key issue facing us today. All of us must learn to do our part to ensure that our forests remain as an enduring legacy for future generations...

Politically right-on, in the 1970s, but dry as a gully in August.

Between purple fizzies and enduring legacies, something had happened to turn my tongue. Elocution, for sure, or electrocution. The thing was education.

In 1966, the year I went to school, the year my community was "wired," bringing television, education was a god, or at least a Pope. It was spoken of in the same hushed tones as Our Holy Mother in Rome, and it was no less daunting or foreign or important. Education — and I believe we always said it with a capital E — would lead us out of poverty, away from the smells of fish drying in the sun, away from the clouds of blueflies pitching on the molasses, away from our parents' memory-scars of the Great Depression, and into a beautiful future. This future was

vague, but all girls would be teachers or have nice jobs in offices, and all boys would be merchants or government health inspectors or maybe even priests, their skin preternaturally white, their tongues oiled with Latin. We'd come home blowing car horns so everyone could have a look, and our houses would blind you with the brightness of our white towels and our chrome sets.

We were the first generation for whom universal, public education was to be a reality. For my social class, it was the first time we would be encouraged to stay in school until graduation. Before this time, education was the preserve of the wealthy, the traditionally powerful, or the exceptionally spunky. Now it was to be for everyone. But, oh, what a job, what a job!

Our teachers were determined to do a good job of it.

All work was vetted, corrected. On the top of each careful page of our exercise books we inscribed painstakingly a homage to everything we would set down there. And so on a June day in 1968, the last slow days of Grade Two, I would write the day, the month, the year, the subject and then: JMJ — Jesus, Mary and Joseph — an invocation to the most powerful to help me do my best. Let no errors soil this white page. Let no sin stain this white life. Let nothing come unto this virgin paper that might invite a red circle.

Spelling tests were held in a hush every Friday, the results announced by who had to kneel in the corner or write out words fifty times. But the worship of good spelling went further; there were spelling contests, not only between teams in the school, but between teams in different communities, great contests organized by principals and parish priests. Thus the rivalries usually carried out with fists back of the parish hall between tipsy men after a hot set of the lancers were given to the younger generation with a new weapon — the alphabet. Spelling contests packed parish halls. People dressed up to go. When my twin brothers were spelling stars, and one of them spelled for Branch the "jawbreaker" that toppled St. Bride's, a shining motorcade with horns blowing sped the announcement of victory over the twelve miles of moonlit barrens all the way home. Men drank rum that night because their sons were good at spelling.

"Study the masters," I was advised when I began my own forays into competitive language via public speaking. And so I studied the essays of dead, privileged men and tried to imitate their cadences. These rhythms vibrated around the edges of all I wrote — early poems, stories, essays, speeches, articles for the school newspaper. Heavy rhythms, sounding of frock coats and country manors. What these rhythms had to do with the life or the language of a young working-class girl in rural Newfoundland in the latter part of the twentieth century was a mystery that produced awkwardness, in my words, in my confused voice.

Awkwardness. It was painfully there in public speaking, when the rule was to not only write, but speak, a standard English. So I was encouraged to work on my vowels, on the very flatnesses and peaks of my speech, to even out this landscape of language until it resembled the smooth, rolling countryside of a place I'd never visited.

Not *ile*: *oil*, my teacher said, as I practised a speech about the energy crisis. Oi, oi, oi, I'd say to the mirror, memorizing the strange shape of the sound. I tried so hard with this, that *oi* and *io* got tangled in my brain and I began to overcorrect myself, saying *voilence* in another speech, with the teacher interrupting, "No, no, no!" Still I persevered, a kind of deep embarrassment and rebellion growing in me. I was going to get this right, dammit. Others were willing to risk lives for public-speaking success. I remember the stalwart nun braving the ice hills of the Cape Shore, the car pitching and sliding all the way to Placentia so that I could speak on a Sunday afternoon. On the stage, we spruced-up teenagers were like politicians looking for votes. Or soldiers of language, our toughness and eagerness for battle fuelled by constant drill.

Drill. *Stand and recite the principal parts of the verb to be*, Sister would say. The yardstick in her hand would tilt dangerously close to the desk, to our clenched hands. In this world, a quick, unfaltering recitation of irregular verb forms was a soldier's ticket back to the relative safety of the ranks.

It is hardly surprising that I embraced wholeheartedly the droning grammar exercises of *Mastering Effective English*, that Bible of the 1970s high school. If this was the ammunition you needed, well, I was going to have my share. How much of such learning, I wonder now, has its roots in resentment?

There were breaks from soldiering. At times, we read the writers of our own century, of our own modern language, occasionally even those of our own culture. When I encountered these writers, I would think, *if they can say this and get away with it...* But it was the unfinished thought of a girl who was being schooled for a nice clean job, a girl who was being protected from desire and all the trouble it leads to.

Teaching

"Look at her home now," my mother said, "in her new car. She brought her mother a new chrome set."

The implications were there in what wasn't said. Wasn't teaching a nice, clean job, and wouldn't you come home with a nice car, and wouldn't you be able to help out your poor mother and father wore out from work, and wouldn't everyone look at you clicking your pumps up the aisle to Communion, and wouldn't they all see you'd done good?

One of my images of the successful outport girl involves a gleaming blue Chevy tracing a dusty path across the barrens, the shiny legs of a chrome set bristling off the top like antennae.

Necessity is the mother of compromise. In university, I did a degree in English for love, and one in education for work. At the ripe age of twenty-one, I took my language baggage, my new teacher clothes, and my secret desire to be a writer. I went to Labrador, into a classroom of Grade Eleven students. *Mastering Effective English* sat heavily on my desk; two brighter, living languages spoke to me everywhere I listened.

My students spoke to me with my own inner voice. Freer than I had been, they told me what was boring, what had no meaning for them, what they would agree to learn, not because they wanted to, but because they had to learn it to pass the public exam. I studied previous public exams in language and literature, and they struck me as offensive. This, I thought, is about power. It's about who gets to work on the door, and who gets let in. The public exam was less about language skills than it was about endurance and acceptance of a set of social rules. As a constant reader and secret writer, I was more interested in my students' thoughts about reading and writing. It didn't take me long to find out that the curriculum I had been handed was not going to offer me much that would stimulate anyone to *want* to read or write.

In those early teaching experiences, and later as a teacher in adult education, it seemed that this mysterious stimulus was always the thing I would have to look hard for. I wanted *materials*, and it took me quite a while to acknowledge where the materials lay — in life, in flesh and blood beings, in the uniqueness and yet familiarity of human experience. And in the wonderful explosion of poetry and prose happening in Newfoundland and throughout Canada.

Worrying about how students would do in an exam, I noted in an early journal: *When they just write for fun, they do pretty good. Why do they seize up on the exams?*

If I had had the courage, I might have given *Mastering Effective English* a ceremonial burning. My students and I could have roasted marshmallows over it instead of identifying types of dependent clauses. I might have brought in the most dangerous of modern literature. I might have helped my students learn about the power of literature to transform the world and put lives in danger. But I'd been brought up to embrace a whole set of antiquated assumptions. And when one leaves the nineteenth century while the twentieth is itself drawing to a close, where does one go?

Over the years I taught, my own methodologies and practices became, I think, sounder as they became more firmly rooted in my love affair with reading and writing.

If reading can make you laugh and cry and rage and desire, why not use the best literature you can find to help people learn how language works? Often, literature is used to talk about *literature* compartments and concerns — theme and image, plot and symbol, point of view and so on. Yet literature is made of language; if we are to learn the structures and patterns and conventions of language, why not observe *how* writers use language, build with it, make art with it? Language exercises are usually so sterile, those pages of flat, toneless, isolated sentences — language structure divorced from any real reason to become acquainted with it. I have never found a language exercise that pulses with the life and energy of a single line of a good poem.

"Why would anyone want to be a writer if there's no money in it?" a student asked me once.

"It's like marrying someone for love," I said. And I'm old enough to know now that desire is a big part of love.

In all the debates about technique and approach to teaching language, educators often forget desire. So too do workshop leaders in "creative" writing at times; I have sat in on debates about whether writing is art or craft, and in my mind the question has formed: What about desire? Why would anyone want to write? Which, of all the stories you might tell, the feelings or impressions or beliefs you might put on paper, is insistent enough to make you go through the hard work of writing them well? And how will you find out what the insistent thing is?

"I have nothing to say," students in my adult education night classes told me again and again. On the table between us usually lay a sheet of "essay topics." The learner, working all day, coming to school at night, raising children, and claiming *nothing to say*. The "essay topics," a strange invention when you think about it, as if our lives, our feelings, our relationship with the world was not rich enough. As if our own "essay topics" didn't twist in our guts, the unexpressed wishes and dreams and contradictions of our passage on this earth.

If the alienation of writer from language in teaching/learning situations involves nullifying desire, it also involves arbitrary distinctions and haphazard terminology which have no relation to real writing. *Narrative, descriptive, expository, persuasive*, the headings read, and neither the terms nor their strange categorization has anything to do with how or why a person writes. "I find the suppository essay really hard," one man I worked with told me, caught in a web of terminology. Not surprising. "Doesn't really good writing have all those things in it?" asked a woman who wrote freely — letters and journals — but was having difficulty with an Adult Basic Education Level 2 course. Oh yes, ma'am, you're absolutely right.

Writing

One of my earliest memories of writing is sitting in a multi-grade classroom, Grade One to Grade Three. I had finished all of the repetitive math exercises for that day, and had learned not to put up my hand and announce this proudly, as this would result in more of the same exercises. I doodled on the margins of a sheet of paper. I don't remember many of the words I wrote but I

do remember "river" "water" "sky." I tore the sheet of paper out of my notebook and hid it in my pencil case, proof that a knowledge of the consequences of unauthorized writing comes early.

River, water, sky.

The sky was clearly visible through a row of windows on one side of the school, the river's passage on the other side of the building could be heard, an insistent whisper through all our days. The sky held all the freedom my soul longed for; the river was the pulse of blood through my own body. I remember a secretive sense of pleasure. I could not have put words to it then, but I now see the pleasure as bringing the river and sky in to the dull drone of the afternoon, while simultaneously, by the act of writing, escaping outward into moving air and water, distance and depth.

What can I call this feeling, this thing I write for — grace? liberty? joy? Whatever it is, without it I would not have such great need for language.