“It was dark at night when they awoke, and Hansel comforted Gretel and said, ‘Wait, when the moon comes up, I will be able to see the crumbs of bread that I scattered, and they will show us the way back home.’”

— Hansel and Gretel, recorded by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm

I live far away from the place where I was born, and I am far from being the person I used to be. It seems to me that the best tool to gain a certain understanding of my life is memory. And memory, as I see it, is that vast and blurry landscape that spreads around a mere trail of words.

It was the summer of 1991 and I had just turned nine when I fell gravely ill. It all began with a mild but persistent fever. The pediatrician initially thought it was a virus.

“Stay hydrated,” he said. “Keep the fever under control. You must let the disease ride its course.”

A day later, I woke up in the middle of the night with paralyzing palpitations and a splitting headache. By the time my parents and I arrived at the Emergency Room, my spine had become as stiff as a metal pipe filled with cement. I could barely move my neck. It was too painful to speak; I thought my jaw was going to splinter. The doctor stared at me with a blank gaze. He was an old man, with gray hair and gray eyes and a round, ashen flat face. The last thing I remember before losing consciousness was the doctor’s mouth uttering a blurred, rounded sound, like that of a striped bass that has just been pulled out of the water and is gasping for air.
My tongue was rigid. My mouth tasted like rust. The hospital sheets were wet. I was barely awake for a few minutes, then plunged into a sequence of delirious dreams in which I kept seeing my dead body abandoned in a wasteland. Carrion birds dove from a sun-bleached sky, landed on the burning sand, and tore bits of flesh from my decomposing limbs. Days went by and my body began to disappear. The harsh desert winds eroded the scattered bones. Meanwhile, someone was making me sip water in a world where I was still alive. My head was burning. I kept falling asleep and returning to that wasteland.

In my last dream, I saw only my bone palate. It had lost all its teeth and a strong gust of wind had turned it upward. It suddenly began to rain, and fresh water accumulated on what had once been the roof of my mouth, now an improvised shell. A group of nomads walked into that dream and noticed the small basin. They took it for a magical well, one they could easily carry during their long desert crossing. One by one, each nomad thanked the gods as they raised the palate to the sky and drank from it. It was only then that they all began to utter words in a language that they had never heard before, a language whose source was the water itself. They sang those newfound words as they walked across the desert, and the more they sang, the more the singing satiated their thirst and the more my head emptied itself of the pulsing weight that oppressed it. At last, I was fully emptied by the nomads’ singing and lived.

When I woke up, I saw the same doctor with the same gray hair and gray eyes and round, ashen flat face. He kept saying: “You’re going to be ok, boy. You’re going to be ok.” I saw his mouth turning into a circular shape and saw in that shape a fish gasping for air. But then I realized it was not a fish, but an old doctor saying, “Ok, ok, ok.” Then I noticed that Mom and Dad were standing by the doctor’s side. Dad was holding a cup of water with a plastic straw. His hand was trembling. He was pale except for the swollen purple bags under his eyes. His skin was sagging and weary and it made his face look like a wet tea bag. Mom’s lips were cracked, her hair was greasy and undone. They both looked like they had walked through a barren land for ages.

“What happened?” I asked. But the consonants and vowels came out in the wrong order and produced a sound akin to one uttered by a wounded animal in the middle of the night.

The doctor explained with his scientific language what that night meant. A tick had bitten me, infecting my body with Lyme disease, which quickly evolved into acute meningitis. My organism was still in shock. I had
fought against the beast for a couple of weeks. If only I could tell them about my dreams, I thought. If only they knew that I hadn’t defeated the beast alone.

“We’ll keep you here for a few days,” the doctor said, “Just to make sure there is no relapse, ok?”

Exhausted, I simply nodded.

“You’ll be home soon, Amal. You’re out of the woods now,” the doctor informed me.

I didn’t understand what he meant: “Out of the woods.” What woods? Was I still delirious?

***

By the age of nine, a boy’s brain is a true language factory; it possesses a vocabulary of 25,000 words, give or take. More so in a multilingual household. I was born in Concord, Massachusetts; my mother tongue is English. Both my parents, however, are native French speakers. They were born and raised in Marseille. My father came from a family of Italian horse breeders. My mother was the daughter of a Lebanese painter, who emigrated with his wife to France in the late 50s, where the haute bourgeoisie had become very fond of his art. My parents spoke French at home, but most times I replied to them in English. Additionally, my mother used Arabic whenever she called tayta, my grandmother, on weekends. Tayta had moved back to the old family house in Beirut after my grandfather, my jedo, had passed away of stomach cancer. Taytawanted to be near her rose bushes and bougainvillea. Meanwhile, my parents pursued their undergraduate studies in the United States and later found jobs as professors at the same institution. That is where they met, not in Marseille. They had spent their respective childhoods living no more than ten minutes away from each other, yet they only met in their thirties, across the Atlantic Ocean. I guess the saying “All roads lead to Rome” was simply created to explain the lack of logic in people’s lives.

My mother taught sociology. My father, comparative literature. He specialized in Proust and claimed that when I was a baby, pushing the stroller and reciting In Search of Lost Time aloud was the only way to put me to sleep. I read Proust during my college years and took it as a longer version of the brothers’ Grimm tale “Hansel and Gretel.” In both stories, the protagonists are trying to find their way back home. Proust uses a madeleine. Hansel and Gretel breadcrumbs.
Now, back to that summer of 1991. I was nine and had grown up exposed to three different languages. Thousands of words and sounds and meanings swarmed in my head and yet when I woke up from that never-ending nightmare at the hospital, I could not understand why the doctor told me that I was finally out of the woods. In the following days, I went over that sentence again and again. I could recognize each individual word, but I couldn’t make sense of the whole. I was at a hospital, not near any woods. Why would the doctor have said that? As soon as I could walk again, I went to the window and looked out. There was not a single tree in sight. Just tall buildings, cars in the street, people walking on the sidewalks, one or two dogs, that’s all. Little by little, I regained my speech and asked my father what the doctor meant. He told me that I was out of danger.

“Ok,” I said, even more confused. The woods? Danger? I finally let go of it. All I wanted was to go back home.

Three weeks later, my classmates received me with enthusiasm. Life was back to normal. My words finally sounded like words, not like agonizing howls. My body felt like a healthy body. I could write, run, eat, go to the bathroom on my own, focus on my homework, and get dressed without help. My mind emitted orders and my body responded.

A week later, I happened to hurt my knee while playing soccer and went to the bathroom to wash it off. As I stood in the dark, confined stall, with toilet paper pressed against the wound, I overheard two classmates talking about me.

“His words make no sense,” one of them said.

The other replied that something had bitten me and fried my brain. Then he said something that shocked me to the core:

“Poor Amal. He’ll never be the same again.”

What did he mean by that? Never the same again? Why?

The boys left. I shut my eyes and tried not to cry. The smell of urine and disinfectant made me feel dizzy.

In biology class I asked to be excused and went to the Health Center. When I described my symptoms, the nurse said that I was light-headed, nothing to worry about. She offered some crackers, which I dismissed. What did she mean by “light-headed?” Was my head losing weight? Was it emptying itself? Was that why I was making no sense when I spoke? Was I going mad? Never the same again, the boy had said, Never.
“I’m just feeling dizzy, goddammit!” I screamed at the nurse as tears started to drop from my eyes.

The nurse called my parents and they picked me up thirty minutes later. The incident came as no surprise to them. Apparently, a week after my return from the hospital, I had begun saying things like: “Dad, someone is knocking at the female door,” and “the bathroom’s male mirror is crooked.” These sentences seemed normal to me. Nobody had warned me that they weren’t. At the hospital, the doctor had anticipated what he called “brief linguistic crises.” He had told my parents that it was part of the healing process. After all, my brain had suffered a severe trauma. Still, after the incident at the school’s Health Center, my parents insisted that I get an MRI. It came back clear. My PCP recommended a psychologist to offer some extra support.

When I first met her, she asked me what I wanted to talk about.

“I don’t know,” I said.

“Anything in particular bothering you?” she asked.

Her office walls were decorated with paintings of bright flowers. There was a big purple orchid on a vase by the window. From where I was sitting, it was hard to tell if it was real or plastic. The tissue box also had flower drawings on it.

“I’m allergic to pollen,” I said and chuckled, but the psychologist looked at me with raised eyebrows. I don’t think she understood my joke. There was a long silence, she looked around waiting for me to say something else. I couldn’t believe she wasn’t noticing all those fake flowers in her office. I finally told her that something had bitten me and had fried my brain. Then I told her that I could understand certain words, but not what they meant.

“I’ve lost my language,” I said, my lips trembling, my throat as rough as sandpaper.

“You mean your mother tongue?”

“What do you mean by that?” I asked, frowning.

“English,” she said.

“Yes, that’s right, I have lost my English even if I can speak it. I know it doesn’t make much sense, but that’s just how it is. I feel cheated by the words inside my brain. About a month ago, I was taken to the hospital. There, I lost consciousness and when I came to, my language was gone. It was like
going on a trip and returning to an empty lot where my house used to be. You know what I mean?"

The psychologist nodded and then handed me a tissue from the flower box. It smelled of violets. Artificial violets, that is.

"Worse," I added. "It's like returning home and noticing that they have turned it into something else entirely."

"Turned into what?" she asked.

"An asylum for lunatics who speak gibberish," I replied and crushed the violet-scented tissue in my sweaty fist.

During our second session, I asked the psychologist why it was possible to say something as bizarre as "I am feeling under the weather," but not something as simple as "I am going to sleep myself." After all, I was the one putting myself to sleep each night. No one else was. She looked down at her notebook, which she tended to do when she was out of answers. Then she asked me to talk about my sleep pattern. "Was I getting enough sleep?" "Was it hard to fall asleep?" "Did I enjoy sleeping?" That was our very last session. I have made myself forget her name, but not the fake flowers that infested her office.

"I need someone who brings my language back, not a shrink," I told my parents.

A week later, I met the speech therapist and shared my concerns with her.

"Oh, I totally get it," she said, giggling. "I also try to put myself to sleep every night, but sometimes I can’t and need the television to help me out." She was a funny woman, short, thin, soft-spoken. Her name was Mei Wu.

"You know," Mei said during that first session, "my mother was from Beijing, and she never understood why English speakers talk in the past tense or the future, even the present."

"Why wouldn’t we?"

"That’s exactly what I asked her. And you know what she told me? She said that Chinese people view time as a perfect circle. In other words, there is no present, no past and no future. Life is just happening. Maybe my mother made that up. Maybe she didn’t. I never asked her. It felt unique, like some kind of spell, and I wanted to keep it that way."

"That is fascinating," I said.
“That be fascinating, my mother would say,” said Mei and snapped her fingers as if her words had produced a magic trick.

“That be fascinating,” I repeated. “It makes total sense!”

“It make total sense,” Mei corrected me with a mischievous smile.

“My mother always spoke Chinese to me,” Mei said. “But I always replied in English. I even forbade her to speak Chinese in front of my friends. She had a thick accent and made many mistakes when she spoke in English. I was ashamed of her. I wanted to be a normal kid. You know what I mean?”

“I understand,” I said.

“Ok. Now let’s talk about the female tables and the male mirrors.”

Mei explained what my brain had done with my mother tongue: it had applied to English some of the rules of my parents’ mother tongue: French. The French translation for “the table” was la table, which is feminine, while the one for “the mirror” was le miroir.

“That’s all,” she said. “No big deal!”

She explained that I was “putting myself to sleep” simply because French speakers were very fond of reflexive verbs: s’endormir, se baigner, se brosser, s’habiller, se coiffer. The list went on and on.

“Does it mean that I will speak normal English again?” I asked.

That made her chuckle. Mei nodded, but I sensed there was something she wasn’t telling me. It took me about a year to place French and English in their own circuits inside my head. Arabic was only a peripheral language at that time and didn’t pose a big problem. It took a bit longer to understand idioms and the way they work. But once I got the hang of it, a whole new world unfolded, which I documented in a small notebook. The expression “to be out of the woods” was at the top of my list, but there were other really good ones, such as “to beat around the bush, to kick the bucket, a blessing in disguise, to pull someone’s leg, and heartburn.” My favorite was, evidently, “mother tongue.”

The truth is that thanks to my sessions with Mei Wu, I developed a deep interest in languages. She had encouraged me to do some research so that each time we met, we could speak about a different language. I discovered that Chinese was not the only tenseless language. Thai, Burmese, Mayan, and Guaraní were other examples. I also found out that Scots have more than 400 words for “snow,” and learned about the complex language of the Navajo, who worked as code talkers during World War II.
“That’s exactly right,” Mei said. “And do you know why they asked the Navajo to be code talkers? Because their language was unique. Nobody else spoke it. Nobody. Do you understand?”

I nodded, although at the time I didn’t know what secret message Mei was trying to convey to me. Now I do.

By the time Mei Wu and I got to our last session, I felt like a normal kid again, and yet, oddly enough, I missed that bizarre language that only my brain and nobody else’s had crafted during my delirious dreams at the hospital. I missed my “female tables and male mirrors.” Oddly enough, it felt as if I had buried a precious gift. When Mei Wu bid me farewell, she told me something I will never forget:

“You know, Amal, you can always go back to your English now that you’re aware of how your head works.”

***

Around the age of thirteen, my body began to change. My voice cracked, hair started to grow under my armpits and genital area, my face was covered with acne. I sensed that whatever had lodged itself in my head during my illness had disappeared only momentarily. Now that my body was changing, so was that monstrous creature inside my head. By then, I had managed to normalize my speech. In fact, my reading and writing skills were very strong. With Mei’s help, I had developed a powerful linguistic machinery inside my brain. The problem was that the hidden beast had been waiting for that precise moment when it could turn all that linguistic power against me.

Around May, our house was infested by a termite colony. My parents informed me that we would have to leave home for at least a week until a group of expert fumigators got rid of the plague.

“How long have the termites been there?” I asked, shocked by the fact that we had been invaded without my even noticing the presence of the invader.

“I don’t know,” said my mother. “Maybe a year. Maybe longer than that. Termites can stay dormant for long periods of time.”

“A year! You’re kidding!”

“I’m not,” my mother said. “Go check for yourself.”

That day I went to the public library and ended up staying there for the entire afternoon. I was astounded by the enormous coherence of the
termites’ social structure. Every member of the colony knows exactly what to do without the need of words to communicate. Everything gravitates around the queen. The king enables reproduction. The soldiers defend the nest. The workers get the food. It’s that simple. The matriarch is clearly a supernatural creature. She can lay one egg every three seconds and she lives an average of twenty years; that is a total of 210,379,506 eggs in her lifetime.

The termites proved more resilient than expected; fumigators needed a second week to exterminate all of them.

“Unless the termites exterminate the fumigators first,” I told my parents.

They both laughed at what they thought was a joke. It wasn’t.

We were staying at a bed and breakfast somewhere in Vermont, not far away from the Connecticut River. There is not much I remember about that place, except that the owners had only Hemingway novels. I would spend my days walking by the riverbank, thinking about termites, remembering the data I had gathered at the public library back home. I soon found myself mumbling the words “dig, gnaw, tear, masticate, copulate, grow, spread,” as if the queen herself had begun laying eggs in my brain, each containing a new termite-word.

The fumigators finally informed my parents that we could return home; the termites were all gone. It wasn’t true. They were now in my head. I could feel minuscule termite-words crawling in my brain with their wiry limbs, digging deep into my spongy lobes, carving out tunnels, tearing flesh with their small and snapping mandibles. For the second time in my life, my own language was betraying me, devouring me from within, consuming old words like “river,” “sleep,” “happy,” to provide space for new termite-words: “vermin, pest, larvae.”

I began to think like them. If I walked by a pile of papers, I would say to myself: “They’d like that.” If in math class I saw a large number written on the board, I would think of the queen’s frenzied copulation. If we spoke of war in history class, I would reflect on how vulnerable men are in a world plagued by vast armies of insects. Did thinking like a bug turn me into one? “Stop it,” I said to myself. “Stop thinking about them. Stop thinking like them.” I was not myself anymore. I was now crawling under my bed sheets, munching food rich in fiber, spending time reading more books on termites in the dimly illuminated basement. I couldn’t recognize myself any longer; the language inside my head had turned me into a complete stranger.
Of course, there were no real insects inside my head. The problem was that the post-meningitis trauma had not been fully resolved. In fact, it had now been exacerbated by the hormonal cocktail inside a teenager’s body. I was diagnosed by a psychiatrist with delusional parasitosis, a mental disorder that makes one believe that the body has been infested with parasites, in my case, all residing in a single confined area: my brain.

The public library had books on termites as well as books on how to kill them. I learned that the best way to get rid of an entire colony is by feeding poison to its inhabitants. Since my plague was made of termite-words, I would have to silence every single one of them inside my head. I imagined a bait station filled with pure silence. That would finish them, I thought. The public library offered a vast collection of meditation music: Tibetan singing bowls, relaxing river sounds, healing Gregorian chants. It was all new to me, but when I saw a CD titled “Natural White Noise,” I knew I had found the weapon I needed.

It was hard at first, and the more I tried not to think about termites, the more I thought about them. I then decided to keep the music on during my sleep. It worked. Little by little, my dreams became muted. Just like in a silent film, I could see myself traveling in a train but couldn’t hear the metallic grinding of its wheels. On one occasion, I dreamed I was back in the public library, but all the books were blank. They didn’t even have titles written on their spines. It was a very bizarre experience. After several months, my brain went fully silent. I had emptied it, scooped out all the language that it had stored throughout my life. I was finally free of termite-words. The experiment, however, thrust me into a deep depression. I didn’t make it to the end of school that year. It was 1995. Around mid-April, my parents pulled me out on a medical leave. To make things worse, when they tried reaching Mei Wu, they were informed that she had passed away from a sudden stroke. By that time, we all seemed to have run out of options. It was clear we needed a change of air. As a result, that Christmas we traveled to visit my tayta in Beirut.

***

Many people in Lebanon, be they rich or poor, practice some kind of gardening. Tayta had a small plot of land attached to her house, which she turned into a modest garden. Her house had survived the massive shelling during the Civil War. She lived in a two-story whitewashed house in a neighborhood named Al Zarif. The garden was organized around an almost prehistoric fig tree whose roots had lifted the foundation of the house, which now stood slightly crooked on the cobbled stone street. Tayta had planted
various rose bushes so that they would get the full morning sun. The jasmine, by the opposite wall, slowly released its powerful scent once the evening settled. Bougainvillea vines cascaded over the white walls. It was a true Eden. All sorts of stray cats came to visit and tayta always had two bowls—one with water and one with a few remnants of her meal—by the side of a wicker chair under the fig tree where she used to sit and sing various salawat from her silver-plated Qur’an. Her voice had the warmth and melodiousness of mint tea pouring out of a kettle’s gooseneck.

She and my parents let me wander in that garden for most of Christmas. The weather was mild, the Mediterranean sun was gentle. At times, words from the pedestrians would reach tayta’s garden. They spoke in a dialect that I couldn’t fully comprehend. Arabic is a language that has as many local variations as light has shades. Think of the light that brightens a rose in Beirut. Is it the same light that enlivens a rose 38 kilometers north, in Byblos? Is it the same as the one that makes rose bushes glow in Cairo or Marrakech? No, it isn’t, and we would do little justice to all those roses if we named them all with the exact same sounds. This is how I like to envision a language as mysterious and fruitful as Arabic. It is not a scientific approach, but it is mine and mine alone.

One afternoon, tayta took me to her favorite ice cream shop: Hanna Mitri. It is a one-room shop no bigger than a hotel elevator in the United States. The place is in Achrafieh, on the ground floor of an ochre, soot-stained building. One can still see bullet holes and shrapnel on its façade from the Civil War. Tayta knew the owner, Mitri Moussa, well.

“Salaam Alaykum,” tayta said.

“Wa Alaykum as-salaam,” Mitri Moussa answered. His gray mustache curled into a smile.

Tayta looked at me and said with a thick accent:

“What want you, habib?”

I had never heard her utter a single word in English and was immediately shocked by her question.

“You speak English,” I said.

“You speak!” Tayta replied with a roaring laughter.

“He speaks! He speaks!” said Mitri Moussa as if he were witnessing the most astounding of miracles.

“How much English do you speak, tayta?” I said.

I said “ok” as I turned towards Mitri Mousa and pointed at the container with the lemon ice cream, then at the one with almond flavor, and finally at the one with pistachio. Mitri Moussa stood still and shook his head; he had clearly struck a secret deal with tayta, who proceeded to pronounce the names of each flavor in Arabic.

“How you,” she said.

“Lymun, luz, alfustuq,” I recited hesitantly.

“Very good,” said Mitri Moussa.

“Very good!” repeated tayta.

“How you,” I said.

“Rose water sorbet,” tayta whispered with a faint blush. Although it was one flavor, it contained three English words. Tayta was indeed the wittiest and cleverest person I have ever met. She repopulated my head with words both in English and Arabic. By having me teach her how to speak my mother tongue, she made me remember every word I had silenced.

“What is that?” Tayta would ask me.

“A cat,” I would say.

“Cat,” she would repeat. And then: “Bsayne.”

And I would clumsily imitate that new word: “Bsayne.”

Arabic is a wonderfully fertile language. It is based on a three—sometimes four-consonant root system. The root contains a main concept from which many words derive. It literally feels like placing a seed on one’s tongue and witnessing it sprout into a lush garden. Take for instance the root k-t-b and see how various terms flourish from it: kāṭīb, “writer,” kitāb, “book,” and maktaba, “library.” If the English language has 171,476 words in use nowadays, Arabic has more than 12 million.

My tayta and I spent hours in the garden renaming the world: “Wind” was “hawa” and “light” was “dawē” and “flower” was “warde.” On rainy days, we stayed indoors, looking at my grandfather’s paintings and named the objects we found in them: “Manfada” for “ashtray,” “mekhde” for “pillow,” “siyara” for “car.” Yes, my jedo was a heavy smoker and a dreamer and a traveler. These simple translations from tayta’s mother tongue to mine
rewired my brain. I began to learn an Anglicized Arabic while tayta learned an Arabized English.

As our Christmas stay was coming to an end, I told my parents that I wanted to remain in Beirut with tayta. I wasn’t ready to fly back to the United States and resume my classes at my old high school. Although at the time, I was still quite lost and disoriented, I could already sense that spending time with tayta in Beirut felt right. It brought a sense of comfort, serenity, and meaning to my life. Tayta told my parents that I was no burden at all. In fact, she wanted company.

“He is staying with me,” she told my mother in perfect English. “With me. Nobody else.” And then said in Arabic that my health was getting better. I could now understand many of the words tayta was using. It was easier to fill in the gaps. She said that the Mediterranean sun was good for me and added that learning Arabic was also good for me.

She was right. And obstinate. My parents finally agreed to let me stay another three months. Then I would fly back home.

“Only three months,” I remember them saying under the fig tree. “Three months.” That, of course, didn’t happen. I haven’t left Beirut since then.

After two months, I convinced my parents to place me in the Grand Lycée Franco-Libanais, a day-school that was only twenty minutes away from tayta’s house. There, I received a wonderful education, mostly in French. Many of my classmates came from an international background and, for most of them, the notion of home was still as blurry and elusive as it was for me. Some had parents who were diplomats and had spent their entire lives traveling around the world. Others were born in France but were now living in Lebanon. A few came from places as distant as Senegal, Togo, and Guadeloupe. We all read and analyzed the same novels and poems, yet all these texts had a slightly different meaning for each of us, for we were all trying to build our own unique language, one that would allow us to forge our identity.

In 2001, after graduating from the Lycée, I pursued my studies in linguistics at the American University of Beirut. Nine years later, I would receive my doctorate from that same institution. I titled my Ph.D. thesis: “Translation: The Art of Moving between the Self and the Other.” Many experts in the field described it as solid academic work. Only I know how vital and personal the process of writing it had been. The first page contains the following words: “To Mei Wu. In loving memory.”
I am now a professor at the place where I was once an undergraduate. Oftentimes, I mention female tables and male mirrors in my lectures. It is always good not to take oneself too seriously, especially in the world of academia. More importantly, it is important to highlight the power and humor of words. If there is a force capable of enlivening language it is language itself. It will point at its own idiosyncrasies and say: “Here! Look at me. Look at all these tricks I can play in your mind!” It has certainly played many games in my brain. I am still healing from that one incident that changed my life when, at the age of nine, a tick bit me in a now-distant rural Massachusetts. With time, I have come to learn that healing requires us to recover that trail of words that traces our way back to a language we can call home.