

Words, Words
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1/16384

So there I was, in the front row of my tiny university class, stared down by the professor and unable to speak.

“Tayce? Can you read? Book one of *Paradise Lost*, the fall into language, Satan’s —.”

“Sorry, Dr. Onya, Satan’s what?”

She gave me an odd look. “His —.” I could see her mouth moving but heard nothing. “Line 242,” she directed.

I nodded and looked back to my text, bracing myself for Milton’s complicated language, but the few words I could see on the page were simple, scattered among unreadable blobs of ink. I may as well have been reading Greek.

“I... I can’t read this. There must have been a misprint in my book.”

Dr. Onya turned the book around on my desk and scanned the page. “See me after class, Tayce.”

“I can’t. I have another class right after.”

She stared at me with a look I couldn’t define in her eyes. “Then come before class next week. We’ll figure it out. Dawn, can you pick up at 242?”

Class resumed its normal pace around me, but I was lost in the book I knew I’d been able to read just a few nights ago.

I barely heard a word.

2/8192

“I think you’re losing your —.”

I wrinkled my brow when the sound stopped coming from my professor’s moving lips. “My what?”

She closed her eyes for a few moments before continuing. “Your words. Things you knew that you can’t identify anymore.”

“That’s ridiculous. How could I lose words?”

"I don't know," she admitted, "but I know you've been slipping. Here's a paper you turned in last month. Read it to me."

I took the pages from her outstretched hand and thumbed through them. Whole passages were unrecognizable as English. "There's no way this is my paper. It's not even words!"

"What do you see?" she coaxed.

"Well, I see my name and a few words here and there, but chunks of it just look like... like... um, the picture writing."

"Picture writing?"

"You know, in the... the king graves, in the old triangle buildings." Why didn't I know what they were called? My little cousins could probably get this.

"See what I mean?"

"No, no, no. I'm supposed to learn more, not lose them!" My chest was getting tight and black spots were creeping into my vision. "I'm an English major! How will I read?"

"I expect you won't," I heard. Arms wrapped around me before I pitched forward off the desk.

3/4096

I have to drop out, which is a shame because I love my school. But I can't understand anything in any of my classes. Technical stuff goes over my head in classes that are new to me and classical literature is hard enough when you know what words you're looking at. All I see is a dark smear, getting bigger every week with every new word I lose.

I wanted to be a writer, but how can I possibly be a writer when I can't even make a... a...

A word line collection?

I hate myself.

I hear myself and don't even know my own mind. I can't carry on a normal conversation without tripping up. I can't read a book without losing many words on a single page. These were a few of my favorite things, and they're gone. No singing ex-nun can help me find them again. I've watched the movie a dozen times. I loved it when I was a kid and I knew every song by heart. Now when they get to the song about happy things in a thunderstorm and I know the tune, but I can't even remember a verse anymore.

I can't remember my roommate's name. I think she'll be glad to see me go. I haven't been good company the last few weeks. Sometimes I say every word I can think of just to prove

that I can. She does the same to get back at me when I do it for too long, but it doesn't work, not like she wants it to.

When all I hear is silence for every other word, it just makes me realize how much more I'm losing.

4/2048

Little kids know more words than I do. You know, according to studies. I made someone look it up for me since I couldn't get an accurate search with my own word bank.

If I'm on the same level as a child, then I should be with them. I walked to the playground by the library today, the one where I used to go all the time when I was little. Now I'm stuck up in the tube slide. It rained earlier and there's a big puddle at the bottom so none of the little kids want to use it after the first one sailed through, screaming and soaking. When I was a kid I would come up here and hide with a book from the library across the street. Now I have next to no use for a book, but I'm listening to the tots running around and yelling and the parents chasing after them.

I might know some bigger words than these little kids, but listening to them leaves no doubt in my mind that while they can't always say more, they can at least hear it.

I can't even hear the calls that bring all the children running back to their parents' minivans.

5/1024

Trying to hold a conversation now is harder than writing deep poetry ever used to be—and I wrote a lot. Pulled out my hair a lot over them, too. I'd rather take poems, I'd give almost anything now to know words to twist.

I pulled out some old pieces. For maybe half of them I could read more than my name. They look like blackout poems with impossible scribbles and not dark ink stripes. Things that used to make me so proud being replaced with incoherent babbling that wouldn't impress a parrot on its first day speaking.

What is world coming to?

What am *I* coming to?

6/512

Too hard to see people now. Friends and family—except Mom and Dad—don't understand that I can't understand. Too hard to explain, too weird to find new words. A big challenge, anyway, because I have a weird collection of words. I never know which ones work.

I stay home mostly, now, and watch movies, old movies with no words. They make me feel less wrong and more myself.

7/256

Driving with Mom today. Much time since no school and tired of room, so went with her. Got hungry while out and said so.

“Am hungry, Mom.”

“What?”

“Am very hungry. Can we drive by food window and get lunch? Want sandwich and drink.”

Mom is quiet for minute. “You sound broken.”

Am confused. “Always sound broken. Words going. Can’t talk normal.”

She shakes her head. “This is different. Say the —.”

Frown. “Can’t understand word, Mom. Do different.”

“Say all letters, Tayce,” Mom says.

“B C D E F G H J—”

Hear self not say right. Go quiet for minute.

Mom cries and self cries.

Locked self in room and will not come out.

8/128

Little words before big words. Those are gone. Little words mean “Tayce.” Those gone too. Why do some go and not others? Why understand “understand” but not little, little words? One letter is hard but many letters are fine. Work good together, but not alone. Sometimes can think of word almost. Know meaning, but do not know word. Makes Tayce sad and mad.

Teacher visited today. Know name but also do not know, like many words. Makes Tayce crazy. She try for small words that work. Did not work. Sat in silence, then teacher gave up. Tayce sad to see her go.

But Tayce will not give up.

9/64

Mom and Dad be understand. Very nice. Try use small words—or no words—for Tayce. Make shapes with hands instead. Hand words. But no work. Too many, hard learn, and sometimes hands be gone, make blur. No write, no hear, no see, no shape. Words all gone.

Fake understand. Smile, nod. Sad only alone.

10/32

Home small dark room, lady, man, Tayce, food, sleep, music no words for Tayce. Small words left but good words. Lady love Tayce, man love Tayce. Tayce love back, but quiet. Quiet life.

Do little, but still good, still love.

Home sad but good.

11/16

Door opens. Shape, “Tayce, — love —.” Shape shape heart, point. Hug.

Heart, point, hug back.

Love.

12/8

No name now. Small words. Good small words. Small life.

13/4

Life good. Words good. Love good words.

14/2

Love life.

15/1

Love love.

16/0