

The Room of the Book

In the hexagonal Room of the Book, Loohay sat reciting the names of her ancestors. ‘Oomela,’ she said at last, the plumpness gone from her mango-flesh voice. Like the prickle-haired sinews preceding that fruit’s stone, the name of her mother nearly got caught between her teeth. But she pushed it out with her tongue, the ‘la’ too loud, too hard, the ridges of her front teeth cutting shapes into the backside of her tongue. It was the day after her mother’s death.

“Why must we say their names?” she remembered asking, long ago, when the whole world was only everything right in front of her.

“So that they don’t fall out of The Book,” her mother replied.

The Room of the Book was no white sterility, as she’d often imagined. Instead it was dusty ochre and tiger lily, its mood subject to the graying or minting light, for the room’s only influence was the flow of time. The Book lay mighty across the room’s central axes, perhaps ten feet tall, maybe one thousand pounds, and Loohay thought upon seeing it of a black-haired pig that her friend had once bought, the roiling fits of laughter his shape had drawn out of her. She’d never seen a creature so magnificently big.

Head-on, that sleeping pig had looked like a bullet in the night. And like him, The Book twitched and sighed from time to time, its stuttering body defying the precision of character Loohay had long ago, from a shrouded distance, ascribed it. Here, she knew, lived pure calculation, the perfect

collision of language and time – The Book. And yet there was dust and color, there were cracks in the floor, and perhaps most unexpected of all, pushed up against a moon-cool wall running perpendicular to The Book’s spine, was Loohay’s own prune-shriveled body.

Of course, she had spent a lifetime envisioning The Room, as we all do. But she had never expected to encounter its physicality. And so it took her a while – perhaps an hour, perhaps a day or a week, for though the light ebbed and flowed, it was never truly ‘dark’ or ‘bright’ in The Room – before she began to recognize that with every twitch or shrug of The Book, tiny black shapes fell and scurried out of The Room, making their escape through capillary-stemming inconsistencies in the walls, and twilight holes in the floor.

Loohay remembered laying across her mother’s moon belly before her little brother had become an angel in the sky, another name – Jezphal – to be uttered at the end of each day.

“What’s my day name today, mama?” she asked.

“Traloleia.”

“And what does it mean?”

“It means,” Oomela had paused, thinking. “It means you’re a tortious-shelled wonder. Because even though when you lay on my belly or climb on my back, it looks like I’m carrying you, really you’re carrying me, too.”

Her daughter had knit her brow, tried to understand.

“And what about Jezphal,” she asked at last, “what’s his day name?”

“That’s easy – Brukus – the hungry brick baby!”

They had both laughed, three bodies shaking in unison, Oomela’s upward-swooping curve a dreamy influence on them all. Then, for a long while, mother and daughter and fetus lay still, assuming the shapes of sleeping things.

“Mama,” Loohay had finally whispered.

“Hmmm?”

“How come me and Jezphal and you get our always names *and* our day names when every one else just gets their always name?”

Her mother shifted her head to the right, glanced at her reflection in the low-hanging mirror against the far wall.

“Loohay,” she said, her voice heavy and decisive, “a name is a communication of an essence. Every name is a truth fully realized. That’s what an always name communicates – the true essence of its possessor. But there is also a shared essence, fundamental to all beings since the name Adam, the suspected first utterance, was pronounced. It’s why we say everything in the world is made of teeny tiny *atoms*, to remind us of that.”

Loohay shifted her weight and rolled off of her mother’s body, turned to look at her face.

Her mother continued.

“But there is a third essence, too. I realized it when you first started to grow inside of me. You had an essence and I had one as well, but now there was also our *together* essence.”

Loohay nodded slowly.

“That made me so happy,” continued Oomela, her mouth moving faster, propelled by the memory of revelation.

“I tried for a long time to think of what our together essence might be called. But the name wouldn’t come to me because it wasn’t mine to give. Not the way a daughter’s name is a mother’s to give. So I thought instead we could give each other day names, names which drift in and out of the world. They only live in The Book for a year, same as any word that’s only uttered once – after a year gone unsaid, every word, young or old, always falls out of The Book. Now you’re Traloleia, and that name’s in The Book with all the other names I’ve given you for the past year. And all the names you’ve given me are there, too. But next year, they’ll be gone, The Book will be different, and our together essence will be, too. So our day names remind us to love each other our whole lives through. In doing so, we put love-filled words into The Book – we help make it a little more beautiful.”

“Rospeldrop!” her daughter had suddenly exclaimed.

“Huh?”

“That’s your day name today, mama. It means big and smart and as easy to love as an always name is to say.”

Loohay sat in The Room and felt the undulating speeds of time. Often The Book lay perfectly still for what seemed an expanse, and Loohay wondered what, a year prior, had made the whole world stop and hold its breath, briefly forgetting the music of language. Perhaps a child had fallen through thin ice and drowned, and all had felt, for that moment, that there could be no space to create, but only to recollect. Or maybe the whole world had been drunk, or sleeping, or making love.

But then The Book would un-still itself, a sharp black line would poke out from between two pages and curl along its vertical, delicately gripping the ridges between pages until it's whole form had been revealed. And then it might dart, spider-like, all the way to the floor, or else it might gingerly dance, its curves and angles expanding and contracting and arabesque-ing until it shrunk like an octopus and disappeared through the tinniest hole in the floor-boards.

Mostly, pressed against the wall, only a spectator, Loohay was too far away to recognize the falling shapes. She couldn't make sense enough of their curvatures to sound them out, reason through their etymologies, or spot finally forgotten colloquialisms of her childhood. Instead, through drifting memory day-dreams, it was the patterns of their motion that she began to recognize.

After the war, when Loohay was a young woman, she had watched the execution of Rexel Audinosem on a static-driven television. His crime had been the crafted invention of seven words

- a dark propaganda - which had formed the core of a new rhetoric toward Dreeanthon genocide. He was declared 'a polluter of The Book.'

She remembered how, years later, Neo-Audinoosems would attempt to deny the crimes of their founder. Seventy-nine Dreeanthon would be found following silent deaths, men and woman too young and full of vigor to have drifted into a sleep that lacks morning. Civilians, too - suspected of speaking Audinoosems' seven words each day, so that their history might never be forgotten or denied - disappeared silently, wordlessly. On the way home from the market, during a cool evening walk.

Then, at last, there had been riots. Dreeanthon took to the streets, screaming the ugly words that Audinoosem had brought to life, words which now gave shape to their history. Violence erupted between civilians and Neo-Audinoosems, but there was much confusion, too, for some Dreeanthon allies filled chests with fire-air and screamed their friends' histories beside them, only to become confused with the very Neo-Audinoosems with whom they wanted nothing to do. The streets were alive with slurs and hot blood, language a focal point splintering towards incoherence.

Loohay had been too afraid to go out on the streets then. But at night she'd lain under the stars, pin-prick openings into the universe, and whispered those seven words over and over again, so that they might never fall out of The Book.

"History, like tree roots, dangles off of all of us," her mother had said then.

There were words that fell out of The Book writhing and contorting terribly, moving ugly towards their deaths. Some danced a slow spiral around and around The Book, gliding the third-dimensional slice of every page, caressing the heights of each individual sheet of paper, slowly releasing themselves from centuries or eons within and riding the vast wake of every lost word ever to exist, for all had traveled these paths before touching the floor and disappearing from the world.

Loohay watched, still caught in a protracted daze, until at last she seemed to come to, for she began to suspect that the way each word moved had something to do with its essence. When five hundred words fell out at once, those that spiraled slowly around The Book's perimeter continued to circle slowly around the room, finally disappearing into a crack beyond Loohay's line of vision. There were some that leapt happily from The Book, seeming to fall treacherously to the hard floor, but instead using it to rebound and fly into an asymmetric hole just above Loohay's head. The first time this had happened, Loohay had shouted, afraid that the word would land on her head, graze her eyebrow or the bridge of her nose. Would she be forced to disappear into the crack as well, punished for having let the word smack into her? But it had only plopped down gracefully beside its vertical hole and slithered inside. Now, the approach of a hopping word was regarded with delight. She squealed when they hit the mark exactly, sailing smooth out of the room, though more often than not, they landed a few inches away before making the final leap and disappearing from sight.

Loohay had once known a man who claimed to have found a cluster of lost words hiding in the underbrush of a mangled tree.

For a while after the riots, speaking the names of her ancestors had induced nightmare visions of The Book at the end of the world. All of humanity dead, The Book would stand in the room, purging itself of its contents every day for a year, until most letters and sounds were spent, and only one word remained. What, she wondered, would be the last word spoken on earth?

And then it didn't matter, for it, too, would be gone.

So when Perlenel began to court her, slipping the word 'dolenar' into her hand as they stood beside each other searching for soft plums at the fruit-stand, she did not smack his hand away, as she might have ten months previous.

"If he had a day name, it would be 'Xefstule' meaning 'man who soils the name of The Book to paint pretty pictures in a young girl's head!'" Oomela had yelled as Loohay unfurled her fist, face full of wonder, to show her mother the lost word she had been gifted.

"And what did he tell you of its meaning?"

Loohay had cast her eyes down, wrapped her fingers protectively back around the edges of the word.

“To read poetry in the dark by the light of a candle,” she answered at last.

Oomela snorted. “Words do not hide in the world, Loohay. They do not fall from The Book only to wait to be rediscovered by trifling me who would give them as though they were their own property, who would sell them to crooked collectors of novelty-sounds. Language cannot be owned, Loohay. It exists to be used, carefully, as the mechanism through which we all seek understanding.”

Loohay did not see Perenel again. Still, she took comfort in a new image of the end of the world, where some words might escape the funnel into the void, instead hiding under piles of dust or beneath custard swamp foam, waiting to be discovered by an ant or a worm.

Now, in The Room of the Book, Loohay knew that her mother had been right. What Perenel had given her had only been a paper cutout, a false work of the imagination. It had never flickered or twirled with life, that non-gesticulatory shape. It was inanimate, never imbibed with the force of motion that propels any true work of language.

For language and motion, she now saw, were two complementary forces. Words gathered in clusters through patterns of motion, and patterns of motion were determined by the essences of words.

Loohay had existed in The Room of the Book for what she supposed amounted to a few months, though it was near impossible to say, for her body here was exempt from the worldly flow of time, and so she never felt hunger or cold or a desire to sleep, and she saw only the waxing and waning of light, punctuated always by scrambling essences donning gilded black.

And then, amidst a spurting of words, for they occasionally poured fourth like a hydrant unhinged, releasing an invisible pressure built between thin whitenesses, Loohay spotted a movement that she recognized. She could not give a name to it, and it was too far away for her to try to pronounce, but the word, she was certain, performed in mannerisms which could otherwise have only belonged to her own body. She watched it for as long as she could, but it was soon swallowed up amidst so much running ink.

The movement was glimpsed eight times more in what must have been the same lengthy space of time, but all eight times it was lost, evaporating from her line of vision as The Book purged itself of history. And the room thus transformed from a place of joyous curiosity into one of despair.

Words which hopped and gallivanted no longer brought Loohay joy, for in hopping and gallivanting, they never resembled Loohay herself. She was a softer mover than that, more intentional, though not always full of grace. She had come to The Room, she realized, not to sit and ponder and recollect, but to discover something. And so she grew anxious, for she had wasted so much time daydreaming.

Finally, though, in a mist reminiscent of early morning, Loohay spotted one such wordy self-resemblance skirting along the floorboards. She moved to lunge for it, but just then, one of the hopping words careened into the floor-gliding figurine and hooked a sharp tale through a sturdy loop, such that when it rebounded upward and toward the hole above Loohay's head, Loohay's word leapt with it, dangling and squirming, hanging on by the line of a letter. And then, when the hopping word disappeared into its hole, Loohay's word was yanked loose, the connective letter – an S – torn open at its upper left curve. The word fell heavy onto Loohay's right shoulder, and she pressed gently against it with the tips of her left fingers, palm up, so that it crawled onto her hand, which she then curled into a cup, letting it rest inside.

“Wasquind” Loohay pronounced.

“A widow of the wind,” her mother had said, shortly before her death, “for now you live steady and firm.”

Wasquind whimpered. Loohay walked for the first time since she had entered the room, the word silently propelling her toward its disappearing place. They arrived at a small obelisk opening in the floorboards, in a section of the room heretofore hidden to Loohay, for it lay directly behind the great Book from her previous line of vision. Loohay stooped and gently lowered the damaged word into the tiny hole, but as she did so, the wood around the hole stretched and cracked, apparently opening up to accommodate the shape of her fist. She let that appendage dissolve into the wood, and then, when it was fully disappeared, she pressed further, and the wood opened

further in turn, the hole absorbing her arm and then her head, torso, legs, and finally, her gossamer feet and toes. Loohay reached until she was entirely submerged, and then she fell, landing heavy in some quiet place outside of the world. For a while she lay still, Wasquind still resting soft, draped over her ravine-creased left palm.

And then she felt a stern nudging at her calf, like the hard leather of her mother's pointer finger poking into her cheek and twisting left and right, left and right, when, in her youth, she had slept too late. Loohay lifted her head and glanced body-wise. And there she saw hundreds of little black creatures beginning to crawl over her, mounting her flesh to massage varicose veins and snuggle into stretch-marks, blanketing her from above and below. They snuck into the hollow where her low-back arched above the floor, and they lifted her gently, squeezing into the nano-spaces between buttocks and shoulders and earth below. And there she slept, cocooned in the ten-thousand day names passed between mother and daughter over the course of a lifetime. She slept and slept, and each day, another name came and nuzzled into her. Loohay carried the names as they carried her - still the Traloleia of her childhood - and she bathed in the complexities of that primeval together essence.

Then, at the one-year anniversary of her great mother's death, so many words uncradled her.

Loohay fell, with soft flesh, back into the world. That night she sat up late, pronouncing the names of her ancestors.