

Faking It



All that language in the cafes (those brown-skinned men pinch me and talk in Chinese not to me but to the mysterious guttural 9-toned air by the big maple chopping block in the kitchen) and then hear my father speak from out of his/our mouth these same words with an axe to the edge of them, him with command and authority because he's smart, he's the boss, and he can scorn their playfulness, I think it is, their naiveté, because his mouth can move with

dexterity between these men-sounds, between these secret sounds we only hear in the kitchen of the Elite or in the silent smoke-filled Chinese store, between these dense vocables of nonsense, and English, which was everywhere, at the front of the cafe, on the street, and at home. And that he did this alone, that no one else could move between these two tongues like he did, that put him at the centre of our life, with more pivot to the world than anyone I knew.

At home the English was my mother love with laughing and Just Mary on CBC and big red volumes of *Journeys Through Bookland* and at supper when we'd see him he might make a little slip of tongue, an accent which we would think twice about correcting and at least a quick glance before laughing at, sometimes with him, but watch out for his quick dagger defense, "you smart-aleck kids, you think you know so much, you don't know anything, you go to school but you're not so high-muck-a-muck," and that'd be the redness in his face the English problem, him exposed.

Sometimes my mother's parents spoke a little Swedish in front of me but they didn't speak much except to argue, and my mother had been to school so she spoke only English. She said finally she could understand the Swedish but could no longer speak it. She had been half-erased by the time she met my dad and her English was good, it was blonde.

My father joined the Lions Club in Nelson. The Lions Club is one of those "service" clubs like the Rotary Club. We also had the Gyros and

the JC's; JC stood for Junior Chamber of Commerce I think. And that's what most of the clubs were for, business connections, working on community projects, and having some fun. Most of the clubs met at the Hume Hotel for lunch or dinner once a week and each meeting was full of shenanigans, like having to pay a fine for not wearing a tie and things like that. My dad really enjoyed the Lions Club and he worked hard on projects for the club, like coaching Little League baseball and putting on the mid-summer bonspiel pancake breakfast on Baker street. I think what he enjoyed most, though, was the kidding around. Some of the old guys in town still say to me, "Your dad was quite a kidder."

I think a lot of his kidding around was in order to hide his embarrassment at not knowing English as well as he'd have liked to. His only schooling in English he picked up during six months in Cabri Saskatchewan, just north of Swift Current. His father sent him there to work in a small cafe when he first came back from China. And then one of his sisters, Hanna, helped him out with reading and writing a bit during those first years back with his English-speaking family. Whatever else he learned about English he picked up from working in the cafe. So, when he joined the Lions Club and had to give an initiation speech, he had my mother help him write something up. She says he was very nervous about this event; worried that he might flub it, make a fool of himself, the only Chinaman in an all-white dinner meeting. So there he was, with his little speech on a piece of paper in front of all these Baker St. nickel millionaires in the Hume Hotel dining room, thanking these guys for inviting him to join their club, thanking them for making Nelson such a wonderful place to live and raise his family, and then thanking them for this meal with the wonderful "sloup." We always kidded around at home when he said "sloup" and he'd laugh and, we thought, even say it that way intentionally just to horse around with us. But here such a slip just turned him copper red (the colour you get when you mix yellow with either embarrassment or liquor). So when he heard himself say "sloup" for "soup" he stopped suddenly and looked out at the expected embarrassed and patronizing smiles from the crowd. Then he did what he had learned to do so well in such instances, he turned it into a joke, a kind of self put-down that he knew these white guys liked to hear: he bluffed that chinamen called soup "sloup" because, as everyone knew, the Chinese made their cafe soup from the slop water in which they washed their underwear and socks, and besides, as everyone also knew, Chinamen liked to "slurp" their soup and make a lot of noise.

So he faked it, and I guess I picked up on that sense of faking it from him, that English could be faked, and I quickly learned that when you fake language you see everything else is a fake.

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Amo Amas Amat, Amamus Amatus, Amant. At least that's how I remember it. Miss Darough was my first very British Latin teacher. We were offered French, German, or Latin. The major minority language in school was Russian, the Doukhobors. They had an accent. And no one wanted one. If we learned Latin, we were told, we would learn the basics of English grammar; we would get the real stuff, from the source, the mother tongue. So I spent a few years, even into the pompous classrooms of Latin at UBC, reading about Caesar's invasion of Britain. We could pretend we were speaking a foreign language, we could imitate what we had been told was the most authentic world view around. It wasn't until years later when I discovered Louis Zukofsky whitewashing the whole notion of accurate translation that I could smile about the sham of my synthetic education.

By the time Charles Olson delivered his lectures at Beloit and entitled them "Poetry and Truth," I was committed to the big bamboozle of writing. "You tell the truth the way the words lie," Robert Duncan had admonished us young writers. Olson had performed, in Washington, in the American "Space," in our graduate seminars in Buffalo, at his readings everywhere, a rhetoric of public sleight-of-hand. Now you see it, now you don't. Just try to knock old Kronos off the podium, he threatened. Don't play all your cards. His three-hour poetry reading at Berkeley in 1985 outraged his audience as he bobbed and wove through a labyrinth of poetic politics without reading a poem. They thought he was just a buffoon, but back in Buffalo we, his students, praised his braggadocio for showing up the false front of the public poem, for challenging those San Francisco four-flushers' attempt to appropriate the scene. The politics of poetry, at least American poetry, didn't seem, finally, any different from the bluster and fanfare of my Eurocentric teachers.

And when I got back to Canada I ran into fiction. How to fake love in a new land. The tall tale, the anecdote, the fib, the jest—the novel. The Stud Horse Man, indeed. The horse, indeed. Sick and lonely BC chinaman, out looking for the ancestral bones, falls in love with an indian sorceress who is the daughter of an old chinese cooley. Vancouver's ships cross Rockies. A foothills picara screws every man in sight, without a condom. "What about aids" I said. "It's only fiction" she screams back. And so we smile complicity as the counterfeits and forgeries of the dreamed-of language of paradise lead us on, and deke us, finally, into trusting these "labyrinths of voice."

I had always stumbled through grammar tests and essays in a haze, nearly failing English in my first year at UBC. I faked as best I could, trying to overcome the imprint of accent or just plain ignorance. Who knows. I studied music, which seemed somehow more forgiving as a

language, until finally the formalities (again, all European) constrained. Except for jazz, where dissonance and unpredictability are welcomed, where the contrived, the flash, is valued. And except for Warren Tallman who took my wild (and by then, a little angry) jabs at poetry as serious. I wanted truth and the real, the absolute face of feeling and, above all, a language that wasn't British. Anything in translation, particularly Rilke. So I took to the poem as to jazz, as a way to subvert the authority of the formal, as a way to sluice out "my" own voice for myself.

But the more I wrote the more I discovered that faking it is a continual theatre of necessity. No other way to be in language, but to bluff your way through it, stalling for more time. And when I get it, that little gap of renewal, I see the accent not in my own little voice, but there in the mouth of the word within the word, there in the "land only of what is," right there at the tips of our fingers, in the "sniff" of the pen as it hunts the page.