

The Naming of Fear

After a stroke debilitated the language portion of his brain, my father taught himself how to read and speak again. He worked in a detached library in our backyard, diligently bent over a desk filled with words: the dizzying array of their meanings, the blinding song of long consonants and vowels, the semantic mysteries of a universe he once knew. This means *this*, but also *this*.

Before the stroke, he taught high school biology, and behind his workstation sat volumes of marine biology, the intricate and nuanced layers of the intertidal zones—a universe of life that existed beneath the waves, just out of sight. Ed Ricketts, his marine biology hero, watched from a charcoal portrait over the door. Contained around my father were taxonomies of meaning, but also the catalog of an intimate and lost memory. How would those slippery bivalves and limpets be named? How would he find the right word to describe the corrugated shells of mollusks? Would it all fit into his brain again?

I imagine the task to be overwhelming—the effort and patience it took to relearn words, their pronunciations and meanings irretrievable, buried in the recesses of his mind. I think about the expressions held captive and changing in the fine lines of his mind's attrition and envision the process of relearning ruled half by sentiment, half by logic, shoving meaning into new forms, new orders, all while combating the fear of possibly losing words forever—even the ability to name fear itself.

For one whole year, he worked tirelessly to teach the gray matter of his brain to trip the triggers of memory, and in the process wrote hundreds of words on small flashcards that would appear for years after his death, crumpled in drawers and nestled in books, like tiny messages from the universe. In the years after his death, I found the definition of *pear*, the semantics of *spoon*, and the idea of *voyage* etched on small cards in his thin cursive—his frustration palpable through the shaky slant of his writing. The hand-cut slips of pink paper all bore the definition of the word countered with its pronunciation on the other side, as if the very word that eluded him was the only thing that could give meaning to what he lacked.

The stroke happened before I went to middle school, before I joined him in the halls of our shared high school, before he died unexpectedly on Christmas my senior year, before my world plunged into a

realm that lacked explanation—a life in between words, a life of white space. I fell into this wordless existence before I learned the language of rugby, before concussions gave me a taste for a slip of the tongue or an irretrievable word. Before I gained entry to a world where fear was everywhere, but never named.

In the rolling plains beyond the oil fields of Edmonton, I stood beneath a showerhead, concussed. After the U.S. Under-23 National Rugby Team's convincing loss to Canada, my teammates and I soaped up and scrubbed the game away. Afternoon light shined through the high windows and the din of laughter filled the tiled room. While others made easy jokes, I watched slips of grass glide down the drain, markers that bound us to each other on the field, measures of the sweat and hope and hours of training I had poured into this tour. I'd been knocked out cold during the game, and under the water, the slow, familiar draw of pain through my muscles softened me.

After our showers, we would head to dinner with the Canadians—a formality in rugby culture. In the hours that followed, we would debrief, be evaluated by coaches, evaluate each other and, silently, ourselves. For now, though, I was happy simply to be alone with my physical pain, removed from words that would give meaning to our loss, even though I knew there would be no escaping them. At some point in the night, the full sting of this embarrassing game would hit a full, obsessive throttle in my mind, and I would be shackled to an endless loop of images, mistakes, and decisions I'd wish I could revisit.

Kim, the marine, showered next to me. A tattoo fell over her shoulder: an eagle clutching the world in its talons, *semper fidelis* scrawled in cursive across her back. She loved her country, her god, her girlfriend, and rugby, and wore her U.S. jersey as the highest badge of honor.

We were the only ones not talking. I sensed she felt the same as I did: small relief under the water, the smarting bruise of loss. Her silence was a comfort, much like she was on the field. Her background had conditioned her to work as part of a team, to take the hits and, when the time was right, deliver her own.

Kim was someone you wanted on the field with you because, on the surface, she was a warrior. I saw it in the way she received feedback: straight back, hard jaw, soft eyes. I knew it in the way she listened to me on the field, how she methodically taped her jersey to her shoulders and didn't parse her words and didn't talk about her feelings. And all of this is how I knew she was telling the absolute truth when she turned

to me, hair lathered up and shoulder ablaze with that tattoo, and said without a hint of aphorism, “I would take a bullet for you.”

Her voice was low and steady, perhaps to convey the unspoken understanding that her kind did not make false promises or die without cause.

One of the aims of rugby is to completely disrupt the scrumhalf—my position—the way a linebacker sacks a quarterback. The hits I took were often late, and I rarely saw them coming. Throughout my rugby career, this scene would repeat: a large woman, teeth encased in a mouth-guard, head wrapped with electrical tape like some monstrous dream incarnate, levels me. She uses her weight and momentum to drive me into the ground and some part of my head or shoulder or chest to push herself up. Sometimes she’ll hold me down, stand over me, smile her strange, toothless smile, and say, “You like that?”

I reply by getting up. No matter how hurt I am, I always get up. Sometimes, as I jog away, I’ll smirk and say, “All day.”

And just as the women who played these positions were taught to do this to me, I was taught to betray no emotion. You could not rattle me, hurt me, or scare me. Unshakable character was the nature of my game.

A classic misconception about rugby is that we are fearless. But the truth is that fear, in rugby, is ubiquitous. Fear has a relentless refrain on the pitch. It’s in conversation with every nuance of the game, although it never actually enters the dialogue. Instead, it treads lightly, constantly, beneath the surface. What allowed us to suit up and take the field without pads or helmets or reserve was a conditioning against the inherent risk of a contact sport—a denial, not a lack of fear. The actual hits, the actual opponents, the back-alley tricks the refs didn’t see, the hits I never saw coming—these were the elements of the game that eliminated the possibility of fear. When I was forced by my position to look these women in the face, fear could not have a name; it could not be given meaning—otherwise I would be worthless at my position; I would not be able to rise to the occasion or the joy of the game. And it was this white space between semantics and emotion, this conditioning, this somatic, bone-driven refusal to acknowledge the fear and play anyway that allowed us to walk onto the field, blinded by a collective and mistaken sense of security.

And there was Kim, as noble as they come, saying these unparsed, sentimental words to me. Perhaps she felt we shared the same kind of fearlessness. Perhaps she believed my antics on the field. Perhaps she believed that I was truly unafraid.

I stood there and watched water flow down the drain. I searched for the right thing to say—the right words of gratitude. But I was stuck at an impasse, my brain muddled with emotion and the fog of concussion. I smiled at her and searched for the right reply, and when nothing came, I wished to not be so foolish as to allow simple words to elude me.

When I first met Anna, she reminded me of my rugby past. She was nearly six feet tall, athletic but overweight. She walked with an ungainly step—an easy, tomboy swagger that belied insecurity about her build and size. She wore stained baseball hats and men’s shorts and spoke with a bravado that rung through the walls of our apartment complex.

As I unpacked my first night there, I overheard her and another neighbor talking about me—the new girl—so I stepped into the courtyard to introduce myself.

“So. Rugby,” Anna said immediately, eyeing my USA rugby sweat-shirt. Her eyebrows lifted. “You play?”

“I’m very retired,” I said, and it was true. It had been at least five years since I limped off the field for the last time, nursing a completely detached elbow.

She slapped her knee and looked away in mock surprise.

I was used to this response. I bear no resemblance to the clichéd image of the toothless, snarling, bone-breaker people often associate with the sport.

“A little thing like you?” she said.

“You’d be surprised,” I said.

She seemed entertained by this reply, and since it was my first night in town, she took it upon herself to explain the neighbors, the landlord, the ins and outs of life in our small apartment complex by the beach. Our banter was immediately familiar, so I was not surprised when she invited me to the weekly street fair that happened a block away. No stranger to street food and eager to explore, I accepted her invitation to go the next night.

The fair fell on Halloween. Entire families were dressed up, eating corn on the cob and street tacos. An ’80s cover band dressed like a ’70s cover band played on the corner. Toy helicopters whizzed overhead, tired ponies turned in circles and the smell of corn dogs and nearby ocean filled the air. Anna brought up rugby right away.

“You didn’t tell me you played for the national team,” she said.

“It’s not necessarily something I tell people the first time I meet them,” I said, knowing she must have searched my name online.

She immediately resumed her familiar banter from the night before, and with palpable fascination asked me about the sport. As we walked from stall to stall, dodging dogs and children, I explained the rules of the game, the places I'd been, and the injuries I'd suffered. She wanted to hear the gory details. I told her about the dislocated elbow that ended my career. I told her about head staples and stitches and torn ligaments.

It was clear she was impressed. I was flattered but wary. She deftly joked, but her quick-witted turns of phrase were proving hard to interpret. This could mean *this*, but also *this*. I wondered if she was flirting, even though I had given her no encouragement. I was simply following the unspoken rules of being a neighbor, of being polite.

After we ate, she suggested we get a beer. As we stood in line outside a bar, the night began to feel long. I felt the pull of unpacked boxes and the desire to settle into my new apartment. Before I could excuse myself, she turned to me and said, "Screw this. Let's drink at my place," then led me away by gripping my forearm with a touch that was too soft to be friendly and too long to be mistaken. I gently pulled my arm away.

At her apartment, she circled back to rugby, and it became clear that she knew more about me than my rugby past. She knew everything you could find out about me online. She'd read my rugby interviews and correctly guessed, then mocked, my age. She even knew about the death of my father.

"I did a search online, and here's what it says about the personality of scrumhalf," she said as she pulled up a page to read an aggrandized and ridiculous description of my former position aloud—delighted that it might have spoken to the person sitting in her apartment.

I laughed at the description. "That's not a scrumhalf," I said.

These were my foolish, prideful words to her: A good scrumhalf can mildly seduce any referee to work in her favor. A good scrumhalf can read the field, read her players. A good scrumhalf calls the plays but allows other people to think they call the shots. A good scrumhalf always knows what's happening three plays in advance.

Rugby is filled with rules. It's a complex game of archaic names and positions. It's called a gentleman's game because of its elegance when played well, and because we drink and sing with the people we batter on the field. There is a unique social element to the game, a familiarity not found in other sports. But for all the love and brutality and beer, there is one unspoken rule: no biting.

Biting is often an instinctual response. It's an act of frustration or last resort. When your hair is being pulled beneath a pile of bodies, or the

soft underside of your arm is being pinched, biting might seem like a good retort, a closing statement to end the unspoken conversation at hand.

But it's not. It's merely the act of someone who is helpless or driven by misinformed instinct.

In rugby, if you want retaliation, if you need to exact revenge, it must be swift and wordless. It has to be unseen and unspoken. It should fit neatly into the space between risk and fear, registering lightly on the surface of consciousness. It cannot enter fully into discourse.

A week after our night out, Anna heard me coming through the courtyard. She stuck her head out her door, not five feet from my own, and asked me if I wanted a drink. I hesitated. I was tired from starting a new job. I still had boxes to unpack and a new life in a new town to contemplate. She seemed agitated. Even though we were friendly, I didn't want any expectations for this to be a weekly date. I also didn't want to be rude. "Just one," I said.

"Lucky you," she said. "I just bought scratchers at the liquor store."

After she poured me a drink, I noticed she was sweating. After a few moments, she started pacing. "I have an issue with Laurel," she said.

Laurel and I had played rugby together on the U.C. Berkeley team and later for the Under-23 National Team. She'd been there in Canada, in the showers, when Kim told me she'd take a bullet for me. Though it's easy enough to find Laurel's name alongside mine on rugby websites, this felt too intimate. Too researched.

"Laurel is a really good person," I said, and laughed nervously because I couldn't tell if Anna was joking or serious.

"She was never as good as you. Second team this, second team that. Why didn't she just give up?"

I shook my head and laughed. I thought she was being facetious. "She was really good. She's one of my best friends."

Anna told me she wanted to see my scar.

"What scar?" I said, and pulled back in my seat.

"The one from your elbow."

"No scar from that," I said.

She paused and appraised me with the look of a prospector, hungry-eyed for a claim. Even as the conversation raced along and meaning trailed behind, I should have known that look. I should have recognized that strange smile, the nervous sweat of a woman going in for a blind-side hit. So when she approached me, leaned in, put her hands on my crossed legs, and asked, "What color are your eyes?" I knew it was too

late. It had gone too far. The frame of our unspoken agreement had bent at the hinge and snapped, leaving me to navigate this uncomfortable territory more quickly than my mind could grasp the new picture.

I searched for a witty comeback, a deflection. I remembered how we had been friendly in the past. I found myself not wanting to embarrass her. A quiet voice in the back of my head reminded me of unspoken rules of neighborly kindness. Under those rules, this could not be happening.

I finally replied, "They're blue."

She backed off. I took a giant sip of my drink, aiming to leave. She turned and ripped off her sweatshirt.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"I have something I need to ask you."

"I don't think we need to go there," I said.

She gave me another look of appraisal. "Is this going to happen?" she said. Her affect was flat. She was serious.

I paused long enough to make sure she was suggesting what I hoped she wasn't. When it became clear she was, I searched for common ground, an easy way out. "I'm just being neighborly," I said.

"Man. Ouch. Zing," she replied. "I can't believe you just rejected me like that."

I stared into my drink.

She asked me if I was sure.

"I need to go," I said.

"Don't go."

"I have work to do."

"Stay. Do one scratcher."

"I write at night. I need to get to work."

She softened. "Just do one."

"One," I said. I was firm.

She handed me a scratcher. I placed it on my knee. It was a spelling puzzle. I bent over and scratched furiously, uncovering letters in an effort to spell common words worth varying amounts of money. She walked to my side and bent down. I thought she was inspecting the results, but instead, she reached over, wrapped her hand around my neck, and pressed her thumb to my windpipe. In a voice filled with wonder, she said, "I could crush your trachea just like that."

I froze.

I did not fight back.

My heart pounded in my ears. I didn't say a word.

She removed her hand.

I put the scratcher down and left.

The year after his stroke, my father did not work. He picked me up from elementary school, and together we ran errands. At the hardware or grocery store, I interpreted the slur of his reply when the cashier asked him a question. I served as a link between him and the outside world. Once a week I would go to the pharmacy to retrieve the heart medication that, in ten years, would fail him. I would tell the pharmacist how he was doing, serving as a surrogate for the wealth of words that he could not find, and in doing so, navigated his silence with him.

I've often wondered why, as an eight-year-old, I did not find the mess of words that fell from his lips disconcerting, or why I thought nothing of interpreting for him. Perhaps it was because of the gestures that served in place of language: his kind touch, the dinners he cooked, the stacks of his flash cards spread throughout the library. He was alive and speaking in so many ways. Perhaps I did not worry because the dangerous and unspoken lean of my optimism allowed me to believe in the resurgence of his language. Beneath our breaths, my family believed he would find words and we would live in a world of meaning again, unaware that the short episode of his language loss was merely foreshadowing a lifetime of his silence.

Now, years after his death, I wish for nothing more than to know the interiority of his days. To hear his voice, to hear his words. What I conjure up in his absence—advice, directives, and musings—are paltry imitations at best. They're often projections of words I wished for myself: the right force of confrontation, the hitch of power, a simple *yes*, a forceful *no*. In the long days after he died, I often found myself voiceless, submerged and mute with the weight of loss. It was hard to contemplate a time away from it, a time when I could finally give words to how I felt, a time when I could move again through the world with explanation, with meaning. My language has returned, but I'm still jealous of that little girl in the pharmacy who believed her father would get better.

Back in my apartment, after Anna threatened to kill me, I shut my door, turned the deadbolt, and drew the blinds. I convinced myself that I was fine, safe, fine. But the scene stayed with me: the fluidity of her action, the heat of her hand, the ease of her words as she held my throat. I looked around my room full of boxes, my old life tight and still in each. I felt the twelve days I had lived in the apartment squeeze immediately upon a line: the time *before* and the heavy future of *after*. Those early, peaceful moments in the apartment had slipped away from

me as quickly as Anna's hand had slipped around my neck. *After* was a new landscape. A new reality.

I stood in the dark, unable to think about the intricacies of right and wrong. I focused on parsing reality, on suppressing a palpable fear I could not name—a dreadful, encompassing weight. In that moment, it seemed impossible that I could leave. I'd signed a lease and paid three months in advance with money I didn't have. I knew one person in the area. I'd been at my new job for eight days.

With that weight upon me, against everything I'd been groomed to do, I let Anna's words burrow in.

Although I did my best to avoid her, Anna echoed through the thin walls of my apartment. I heard her smoker's cough throughout the night, as loud and clear as if she were in the room with me. I heard her water run, her bed frame groan, and her chair rumble as she pulled it across the floor. The neighbor who shared my other wall often issued stern warnings to her cat. When people chatted in the courtyard, I found myself nodding to the beat of their unending songs—laments about ex-wives and shitty bosses and long days. Some stayed silent, speaking only through wisps of cigarette smoke and blaring TVs. When their keys rattled in their locks, I could see their tired bones straining toward the solace of home beneath the weight of the clinking bottles in the bags they carried.

In the weeks after Anna's assault, I found no solace.

Her door was always open. She spent her days at home. I listened for her coming and going, for the click of a key in her lock or her voice in the courtyard. My heart raced with every noise, terrified that she would knock on my door. Her threat haunted me, but I told no one.

Fear found a language of its own. My body interpreted the chaos of my situation more adroitly than my mind could. Three days after Anna threatened to kill me, I contracted hand, foot, and mouth disease. The recovery took two weeks and was followed by food poisoning, then the flu. I was constantly sick, emptied out, tired. I began to sweat at night, waking up in sheets so soaked I would move to the couch, where I'd wake up dehydrated and disoriented, as if I had run miles in my sleep.

At night, after work, I sat at my desk and tried to write, but I couldn't concentrate. I felt her through the walls. I tightened curtains that were already closed and read in the half-dark room. I pretended nothing was wrong but avoided her at all costs. I didn't want to give her a reason to hurt me, and in doing so, I believed that I was protecting myself. If I did not acknowledge the fear, if I did not name it, I could overcome it.

One night, I heard my name muttered through the wall. Anna was talking about me to another neighbor. She railed against me for my recent absence, against the boss who had fired her for no reason, against the Internet company and the landlords and the large and unjust world. She told the neighbor that I had “shut her out” for no reason. Blood slammed through my veins, and my heart welled up in my throat. But what cut to the heart of my fear, what elicited the most outrage and shame, was when she said she didn’t know what she did to deserve my silence.

In the strange days after the incident with Anna, sick in bed and confounded by what had happened, I found myself reexamining the strange language I encountered on the rugby field—the dance between me and the women who wanted to hurt me. Even as I tried to muster that old brave facade, the denial of risk that led me onto the rugby field no longer held my fear at bay; instead, it exposed me to a vulnerability I had never known—the fear of a world without rules, spoken or unspoken. I knew but could not say: *this is not rugby*. This was a world that did not care about positions or scrums or lineups. I felt bound to this fear in the same way I imagine my father must have felt after the stroke: trapped in silence, unable to negotiate with words, helpless at the hands of a system that did not care for rules.

And so, without a way to reconcile it, my fear existed in a world without words. I couldn’t bear to admit what had happened aloud, and what I kept was my silence, the ease of her grasp, the slow-churning wonder of her strength, the physical need straining beneath her words.

Sometimes in rugby, it only took a word. When it did, I turned to Laurel. She towered over me with big blue eyes and blonde hair akimbo, bunched and puffed beneath the electrical tape she wrapped around her head to protect her ears. Laurel played lock—the powerhouse of the infamous scrum. She was a workhorse on the field and wore men’s cleats with metal studs that looked like frozen teeth.

“Laurel,” I would say. “Number seven.”

The frequency of meaning between us was sharp, exact. With few words between us and no explanation necessary, she would look for number seven on the opposing team. She wouldn’t need to know what number seven had done to me, what indiscretion, what late hit, what foul word had fallen from her mouth. All Laurel knew was that when number seven was at the bottom of a pile of bodies, she would find some

soft spot—the inner flesh of the thigh or underarm—and meet it with one of her cleats. Again and again and again.

I loved this silent aspect of the game, the understory to the score, the dynamic that allowed me to regain just a little bit of power after a late hit.

It might have occurred to number seven as she struggled beneath the pile of bodies that there was no word for revenge in rugby. Revenge, when it happened, occurred neatly beneath the surface. We couldn't play thinking that a late hit was going to earn us one in return; we could only maintain our fidelity to calculated risk. I've often wondered if those women thought about their risks as Laurel's cleats came down, their silent song singing like a whisper in the grass.

The day after Christmas, I was standing outside my door looking for my keys when Anna came into the courtyard.

"Whitmore. Long time. I thought you didn't like me anymore," she said.

"I've been sick," I said. "Out of town." Her use of my last name quickened my pulse.

"You don't call. You don't write."

"I've been really busy," I said.

"Do you want a tangerine?" she said.

I hesitated, so she picked one from her bag and lobbed it at me. I caught it, inspected it.

"It's not poisoned or anything. How was your Christmas?" she asked with sweetness that said she wanted to be friends. It said she was hurt. It asked me how I could be so cruel.

"It was okay," I said, looking deeper in my bag for my keys. My skin began to tingle.

"I bet it's hard," she said.

"Yeah," I muttered, not wanting to talk about family or traditions or my dead father.

"You're lucky he died on Christmas."

I looked at her. My mouth went dry. My heart drummed, my brain was razed and burning. A hit was coming. I couldn't see it, but my body felt it. "What are you talking about?" I said.

"I don't like to be shut out, Whitmore." She adjusted her pants and raised her voice. "I don't like to be shut out!" She walked into her kitchen and said it again.

Her anger was quick and frightening. I left the courtyard, floating on unstable legs. I shook uncontrollably. My mouth was dead dry. I felt the

stupor of my heart thrumming through my whole system. Instinctively, I put my hand to my temple to steady myself, as if I could stop my body's transition into pure, unadulterated panic.

That night, I dreamt that Anna had taken everything in my apartment: my clothes, the pictures of my father, my bed, my food. She'd also taken my books and my notes—pages filled with the words of a freer person whose mind was not shackled. The wooden floors were bare. Air blew through the window. Yet somehow in my dream I found the courage to confront her. I found the power to scream. I yelled, I demanded answers. I wanted to know why she did it, why she took everything. Why me? She stood with arms crossed and watched me. She did not reply. She held only an easy, complicit silence.

It's impossible to know the minds of others, the language they turn over, the small and subtle ways they negotiate their way in the world. I don't know what caused language to suddenly come back to my father on a street corner in downtown San Francisco—words erupting from his silence, the entirety of his speech boiling up, memory entwined. Something shuffled the drawers and a certain order fell into place. A stream of long-held thoughts found their way triumphantly to his lips, a stream that did not stop for several days.

But the way we use language defines us in every aspect, and my father's language did not reemerge perfectly. Words still went missing from time to time, and some elements of self-expression seemed more difficult, trapped beneath the surface. Perhaps that's why he was often frustrated and quick to temper after he regained the ability to speak—as if some innate, fundamental character trait manifested because of, or through, those lost words.

I often wonder why I did not have words for the fear we encountered in rugby. Perhaps by denying that fear, the language for it translated into other semiotics, other white spaces: spaces of physicality. I wonder if we all weren't afraid, raising the stakes beyond oblivion, beyond any culpable or translatable language, because we couldn't bear whatever truths about ourselves lie beneath the facades of our bravery.

I also cannot know why Anna did what she did—what mysteries lay in her head, what narrative she told herself about our relationship. And I can't begin to guess the narrative that led her to rip down my prayer flags. I will never know the story that allows her to negotiate the world through intimidation and fear.

The mystery of how to catalog the world—the language of language itself—is universal.

After the police and my landlord and my family and Laurel were told what had happened, even after the move and a new apartment, my story stays with me. When I tell people what happened, they ask me why I kept quiet, why I went into Anna's apartment in the first place, why I didn't immediately call the police. They ask me why I stayed.

What these people can't know is the sharp, nameless flutter of my memory, how rugby conditioned me to believe I could handle anything, or what it was like to look fear in the eye and pretend I didn't feel it. What they cannot comprehend in the brief seconds between the end of my story and the beginning of their assumptions is how words can come and go, and how fear, a new fear, can shatter the clear lines we draw for ourselves against our own realities.

When I tell these people that I was afraid, that I felt I was trapped, I wonder what they accept. I wonder if quietly they know, but will never admit to the fears housed in the chambers of their hearts. We all have those dark corners, the wordless dialogues, the white space that paints over a part of our lives. The language of fear is often the language of silence. And this silence, these pauses on the page, are a part of the story that moves us through the world—unknowable and unnamable at times; at others, succinct and clear. Sometimes the silences can be as loud and confusing as the words we would use to describe them.

All I can know is that I will not return to that scared life—to that apartment or even to that city by the beach—for answers that I cannot know, just as I will not return to the rugby pitch or to the false hope of the little girl who believed her father's silence was temporary. I continue to live as we all live: in a world of unspoken rules, in the stories we tell ourselves, in the vast landscape filled with accessible and deeply inaccessible meaning, hopeful for that fleeting moment when the ability to find the right words finally appears.