

THE TROUBLE WITH LANGUAGE



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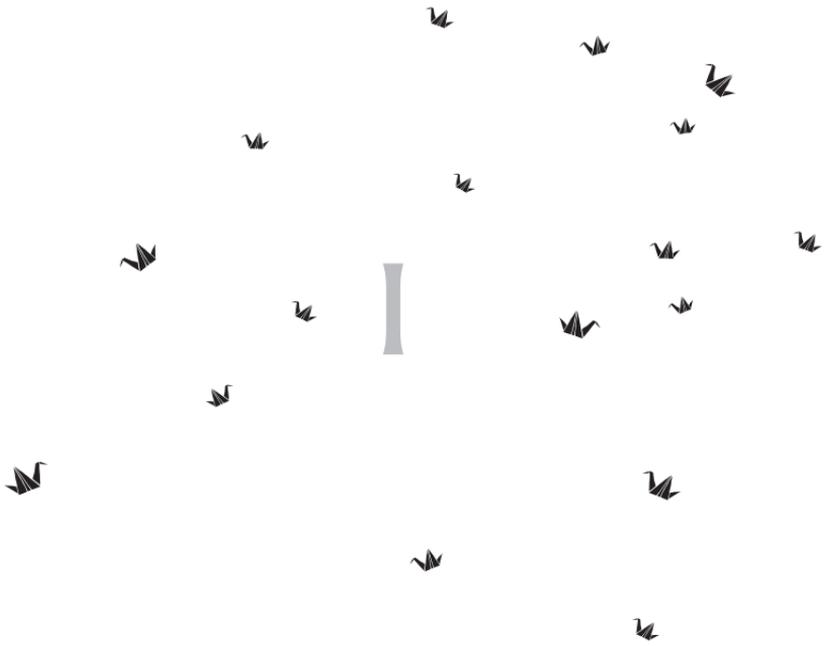
TRNSFR BOOKS *Grand Rapids, MI*



THE TROUBLE WITH LANGUAGE

STORIES





NONE OF THIS IS YOUR FAULT

Last Sunday I nearly ran over your dog. I couldn't have done it without you. Why wasn't he secured in the yard? Why wasn't he tethered by some kind of leash, to some kind of tree?

I admit I had been looking down at the time, rummaging for something below the passenger seat, for a map, a lost love letter, my own severed hand. It seems I am always looking down. On the good days, I am rummaging too.

Last Sunday was not a good day, despite the rummaging. I do not know if life is precious. I do not know who gets to choose what lives and what dies.

Your dog lived, another dog died. Later that day I came out of my apartment and, because I had been looking down, I saw it lying on the empty patio of a French restaurant. He was still, save for the slightest tide of his fleeting breath. His eyes were open. They had become two landing strips for flies. Underneath his tail, a small

brown splotch. A wet spot on the concrete around his body widened. I called my lover, who rushed home to help. But he could not help the dog and he could not help me. I could not help him. Funny how we felt like help was what we needed.

I am not doing a lot of living these days. Living requires a name. I've misplaced mine somewhere. I'm still searching though, beneath the passenger seat, where I could not find my severed hand. None of this is your fault. Nonetheless, I implore you, please be more careful.

THE TALL, THIN MAN

A tall, thin man came to the city. He crossed the bridge in the middle of the darkest night of the year. The moon had eaten itself three days ago, and the crumbs left over looked like weak stars.

Sadness had set in to the cracked brains of people here, the way a building softens at the corners. I had packed my bags and was carrying my suitcase to the bus station, but the sight of the man halted me. I turned around, went home, wondered about the nature of hope.

In the morning, the tall man went door to door, passing out gifts. He said, "These gifts are your new moons." He gave an old woman a set of salt and pepper shakers, shaped like clones. He gave a little boy a Native American headdress. He gave a pair of newlyweds a long rope ladder. He gave me a tall coatrack with brass hooks. To each person, he spoke the very same words: "You are living in my dream."

By noon a crowd assembled along the fountain, in

front of city hall. The tall, thin man stood in the center of the crowd, as though he were a planet and the people were his moons. The people all held their gifts, like weapons, and the old woman threw her pepper shakers at his head. The little boy held his headdress around the man's neck. The newlyweds whipped him with their rope ladder. I waited, clutching my coatrack, for somebody to stop me. By the end of the day, the man had gone black. And we all cried, our grief was so deep.

Along the bottom of the fountain, tiny wildflowers grew. Some were purple. Some were so yellow we mistook them for gold. I knew that I would miss them. I went home and found my suitcase, still packed. Still full of gifts I would one day give to people, in some city far away that I would never understand.

THE DAY THERE WAS A PICNIC

At the corner store, patrons were making love transactions, swapping money for the largest quantities of affection they can hurl over their shoulders and haul away. I didn't have any money, and love, who knows? But the people looked so happy. Or else sad. I couldn't tell.

It was so windy outside we could hardly stand. We pressed our bodies into an invisible wall. Then the rain came. Then the snow. Then discarded objects began to fall from the sky. Telephone booths and abacuses, dryer sheets and prisoners of war.

We covered our faces with our arms, hoped for the best—for life to continue, for whatever we already had. We stood blinded that way, until all the mad weather simply stopped.

Thankful, we set picnic tables and red checkered blankets out on the road in front of the corner store. We forced the cars to honk and go around. We ate up all

the love that had been bought, then stuffed on the feast, waddled back to our own homes.

I didn't sleep well that night. My body ached in ways I never knew it could. I couldn't settle down, so I turned on a lamp. The light filled every corner of the room. It had a strange expansive quality, as though it would just keep going if I took a sledgehammer to the walls. To calm myself, I tried a form of meditation—with each inhale, I imagined sucking in a puff of clean white air. With each exhale I expelled thick black clouds of dust. Let the good in. Let the bad out. Let the good in.

I couldn't sustain the rhythm very long. Who was I to hoard all the earthly good, to send my black pain off like a forgotten daughter. I closed my eyes and felt a certain sense of hopelessness, thankful for the walls, for my own tiny world of love.