

Navigating Through

Reversing Abusive and Narrative

by Victoria C. Littman

Ce témoignage relie la dyslexie à l'agression sexuelle subie pendant l'enfance. L'auteure décrit son expérience personnelle et ses sentiments face à ce handicap invisible. Elle relie la honte du handicap à celle de l'agression et elle associe également sa guérison de l'agression à une habileté accrue de compenser pour sa dyslexie.

Doors. Doors. Doors. Push left, pull right, tirez gauche, pousser droigt, left, droigt, gauche, right, tirez, poussez, push pull.¹ i could never get directions straight no matter what language the letters were from. Which way does it open? i silently pleaded as the Montreal snow flurried through the doors and gripped my neck. i pushed against the jammed slab of door—pushed, pulled. Which way does it open cried out from inside the cold-sliced throat, mute, amid the crowd. Breathe breathe i would tell myself breathe and watch him, anyone, try again, slower this time, try again. For me the act of faith is in the attempt not the success. Someone once asked me how i could persist in an endeavor when i kept coming up short. A word unfamiliar to my tongue came out smooth, like varnished wood, Faith, i replied, meaning faith in human effort not in a higher authority.

Calm, cool, collected, It's a phrase which used to help me negotiate doors, directions, letters, and other traps when the odds seemed stacked against me. Minor frustrations, that's what doors and directions in general are. On a return visit to the city where i was born, i drove toward the Bay, drove alongside Mission Street's wide palm lined sidewalks, up Van Ness Ave., beside the old car lots and the new theatres, up the hill toward the Bay chopping against the wind coming in from the ocean and sliding down the back of Sleeping Lady Mountain. In my mind the map of the streets rests laden with the warmth of familiar memories. Take Sutter downtown toward the center, toward the pyramid and the Bank of America's long dark marble, follow the grid of memory. Shifting into the slope, i turned down the street and saw headlights flashing on through the clear, ocean-swept day, heard the honk of horns jabbing towards my car. Pull over, now!

Wrong. Wrong. Wrong way on a one way street. What are you doing? Breathe. Breathe and get off this street. Turn down the side street. That's it. Whew, another close call dodged. Shift. That's it. Follow the grid. Come on, you know this city. Take Sutter. That's one way the other way. But, during that moment spent in recovery, traveling down the side street by the sun bleached apartment buildings, i reversed the grid once more and turned into another wall of head lights and horns. Find a spot. Swerve into it now! There, parking the wrong way. Lucky. Lucky. So damn lucky you are. It's okay. Let the waves inside, dissipate. Let go; you're okay. Laughing, i heard myself and came back to my body. In a puddle of dripping fear and laughter i sat, laughing at the ridiculousness, the idiocy, the ever so typical, so mundane, wrong direction twice, same mistake twice.²

Mistake. Don't ever make the same mistake twice. Error, wrong, incorrect. Don't make the same mistake. For God's sake that's so stupid. i am reaching for the dictionary again, looking again and again for that word, scanning across the print unable to find it because my jumbled version is so far from the one in the dictionary. Find it. Don't make the same mistake twice, thrice. Nincompoop. How many times have i looked up the simplest of words? How many thousands of times have i made the same mistake twice, thrice, over and over again, scraping blood from bone. Which, witch, wich, wcih, ciwih, whince. i do not know... i do not know the simplest of words. The order of letters escapes me like a rattler in retreat no matter how many tools i use to grab, it slithers out of reach. i have even gotten the letters in my own name wrong, placed them out of order, lost even that familiar sequence. Forget that list of the 101 most difficult words in the English language; it's the ones used over and over again which i cannot reproduce. It's all the words that sound alike that become substituted one for the other in my writing, the homonyms like their, there, hear, here. Meanings get lost in the jumble of letters placed out of order or reversed on the page.

If only i tried harder, worked longer, when other people played, then i

Dyslexia and Abuse

Power Relationships Structures

Insane. You're insane. You must be. Anyone as bright as you who could produce this. Looking down at my History notes in grade eleven, i concluded that the person who wrote like that must be insane. Anyone who could turn language into that level of chaotic unintelligibility must be certifiable, i thought. The effort had been there in the curve of my back over the desk, in the listening, trying not to let the words fly away beneath the classroom desks. Though i grabbed hold of meaning, set it down, tucked it into the lined page—made order—i thought, the sense had fled: *Illiterate, illegible, illogical, scattered letters unable to hold the line, creeping all over the page, words that were not words.* Letters did not combine into meaningful words or structures (see graphic, next page).

Even now recreating the scene, a surge of frustration clogs my throat stripping the muscles bare and hoisting drops out through the eyes. After years and years of learning compensatory techniques, after all that, doing it, writing that way slips the visceral memory back in place. The struggle fought every day, moment to moment, the struggle not to make so many mistakes, propels me as it saps and drains my energy. *Can't you get it right Victoria? It's a simple thing. I just showed you.* i have to look several times at things that i'm copying to make sure that i haven't juggled the letters out of order. *How lazy can you be? How could someone as bright as you turn in something like this. Lazy. Lazy. Careless.* And like my mother before me, i was sent off to spelling tutor after spelling tutor at school. When the other children went out to play, i stayed inside beside the leaning head of a woman whose hairspray i can still smell, whose stiffened brown hairs i can still see tilting over my pencil-clutching hand which shook with the grip that tightened in the hope that a firm hold might reduce the recurrence of mistakes. The pattern rests deep. If only i tried harder, worked longer, when other people play, then i wouldn't make so many mistakes, if only i tried harder the abuse would stop. i still must force myself to take time for not working. Try

again. Once more. Memorize these rules. I before e except after c. It's only recess. It will be good for you. Don't be so lazy. i can still remember the look in the tutor's eyes as my ten year old self copied the rules, said them over and over to her, but wrote the letters backwards, again, repeated the error. i can still see the water of confusion in her brown eyes following me as i fled out the door to run and catch the last seconds of recess.

There are many persistent and contradictory memories of my work being set apart for its creativity and also for its abundance of errors. My work was held up for its ingenuity on the one hand and reviled for its errors on the other. One phrase epitomizes my memory of school: *How can someone as smart as you turn something in like this?* Implicit in that phrase is an intention, a purpose on my part. As if the errors were calculated. Why could no one ever see that i did not do it on purpose. In fact, I was trying so hard, still am trying so hard to speak and write clearly. English 1A at UC Berkeley, the required course for all we thousands of Arts and Science majors: my paper served as the prime example, copied for everyone to see, passed out. My name was deleted but my words lay typed across the page covered in red. *The assignment: write a letter to a prospective employer.* i played with it, stretched it the same way i had so many other assignments in the past, found some way to make it interesting, found some way to speak, some way to cover up for the recurrent errors. My letter was addressed to God for the position of St. Peter at the gates of heaven. People laughed, as i had planned, at the audacity and the irony. *Please find something to laugh about.* And there in that classroom it was laughed at as well for the fourteen misspelled words on one double spaced page glaring up at all of us from the 35 photocopies. Fourteen spelling errors and eleven syntactical errors. She had counted them, marked them at the top of the page. *Unacceptable. This is unacceptable work from a talented writer. Sloppy. Not worthy of this institution. The errors are that of someone in grade school. I can not accept work like this.*

Subsequently, i transferred to McGill hoping through distance to escape the abusive clutches of my family and majored in

wouldn't make so many mistakes, if only i tried harder, the abuse would stop.

so hard to say what I want
 say help help it say not ever
 the write way can't even get it
 write not I fly so hard hard so
 damn hard and it doesn't go
 where it should

theatre where they gave credit for building sets and acting. i found friends to help me edit my work, created group projects so that my disability might go unnoticed, might remain not only invisible but imperceptible. Always my mind harbors a fear that the written word will betray me, the way authority betrayed me repeatedly so early on in life. Now, as my master's thesis and the course work for the Ph.D. looms closer, i realize that much of the work done to qualify for this privilege was done in order to maintain the invisibility of a disability. My projects entail group work. They become presentations of some sort. One commonality of all these multi-media, presentational, *artistic* projects is a de-emphasis of the written word. Because of this transformation of the grounds of judgment, i feel that i have hoodwinked people. Somehow i have slid in the side door and will be caught at any moment, thrown out for being the *lazy, stupid, careless* person that i was taught to believe was me.

And just beneath this fear of being caught out for reversed syntax, for letters out of order, for misspelled words is a fear of being caught out for the other *mistake* in my life. Child sexual abuse and incest cannot be separated cleanly from my dyslexia. Not only are they two experiences that robbed me of a sense of control over myself and my direction, they are also two experiences that do not seem to go away. Just as i continue to confuse the order and orientation of letters and directions, so do i also continue to feel the effects of those sexual violations, those traumas visited upon my body. Furthermore, in some mysterious way, the disability and the trauma seem to be linked in recovery. As i work to understand the ways in which the violation of my body has influenced my behaviors, the compensatory techniques for dealing with the dyslexia become easier. It's as if the two are links in an unraveling chain. Because they are hooked, one release frees the other.

In 1985 my housemate's boyfriend raped me in our Boston apartment. That experience brought back the memories of a rape

at age seven or eight and incestuous molestations that had occurred from ages ten to fifteen. Shortly after that incident i moved to Philadelphia from Boston to start anew, to change behavior, to find work. i was determined to "fix" myself and conceived of it in that way. Steady, decently paid work gave me some room to negotiate. i found a female therapist to help me work on recovering memories of my childhood and finding ways to steer through fears about the present. On a whim i sent a packet of poetry and an application to the University of Pennsylvania writing program. The director of the program wrote back saying that he wanted me to work there, and *by the way has anyone ever told you that you might be dyslexic?* Apparently i had spelled the same word six different ways in one poem. After losing a job, i contacted this professor once again. Perhaps with enough effort, work and creative ways of asking for help i could compensate—could get by, until then i had always believed that my difficulty with reading and writing came from laziness and carelessness.

Stumbling on this name for my mistakes changed my relationship to them. The word gave me something to hold on to, a grounding, a method of releasing myself from shame. At the same time, the word opened up a new narrative path toward responsibility without self blame. Some people think that in naming the disability, i am somehow making excuses for the mistakes. But, they do not understand a disability's presence. I have learned similarly that some people whom i wish to be witnesses to my child abuse cannot become witnesses. Some people hear but do not understand. They cannot conceive of the ramifications in the present of historical trauma. The lack in them, their inability to understand feels similar to the denial that surrounded me when the trauma occurred, and thus my wish for a witness leads me sometimes to a new kind of dysfunction, a kind of silence of meaning. Some people do not understand that naming a disability and naming abuse has allowed me to act responsibly, has helped me unleash the tentacles of physical

violations from the abuser's narratives which cast me as at fault and cast shame onto me. Naming has helped release me from the shame of linguistic mistakes and allowed me to compensate at an accelerated rate. Naming these two experiences has inched me closer toward autonomy. Now, looking back, the inordinate amount of shame which i bore for an inability to spell and write in standard English seems alien.

Naming, however, was only the first step in a long journey, for i had trudged through the weight of that shame for years and years, dragging someone else's guilt in my foot prints. After the naming of the disability, it has taken me seven years to step out of the snares of visceral fear around making mistakes. Years have intervened to loosen the grip on the feeling that in the end it doesn't matter how hard i try, i will not succeed either in language or in escaping abuse. Each step, each undoing of a link in the chain around the ankles of my memory of child abuse, and each step toward authorship, each step in learning to write, learning to compensate, has reverberated throughout my being, allowing me to trust a little bit more my own instincts and intuitions. Perhaps that is where the two experiences so different in substance have a similarity. Both experiences taught me not to trust my perceptions; both left me with a feeling that i was out of control; both robbed me of a feeling that i could manage, get through, somehow navigate difficult terrain.

Now when i exit a building and dart off in the direction that i know by instincts is my destination, i force myself to stop and look at landmarks. Ninety percent of the time i am indeed striding in the opposite direction of my intended destination. But, now it is merely a technique, to simply stop, check, and turn around. And, with that technique comes a release from panic's grip. i used to feel, later, blocks down the street, a surge of biting hot shame stab through my spine upon seeing a street sign or an apartment number pointing out the *error*, once again, proving to me that i was lost. Lost—not just without direction but lost—and that feeling of being lost, unable to find my way brought up that old feeling of being violated, those feelings of separation from my surroundings and body that had been forced upon me when my brother's hands grabbed across my breasts and into my vagina, when those hands made my body his rightful territory. i had left that body and in the leaving felt the loss of a sense of self, a loss of a sense of standing on this green earth; felt instead a heavy empty pulsating air around me so empty it threatened to suffocate.

Now when i write, the letters tumble out less hampered initially. My hand does not stop to chastise a letter missplaced, a structure reversed. Only later after patiently allowing meaning to bubble up slowly in its own time do i rewrite and then edit, and finally *correct*. Ironically i learned these techniques while teaching English with process writing methods such as those fostered by The Bay Area Writers Project and Richard Elbow. More

recently i have begun integrating those techniques at a deeper level through *The Courage to Heal* and essays like this one. In the same way that my physical disorientation is corrected by reversing something, after the initial torrent of letters, i look first to see if the sentence could make more sense if the structure, the subject-object relationship, were reversed. If there is no time for rewriting, i consciously do the reversals in my head before putting the words to the page. Usually the order or orientation of the letters can be changed, shifted to make meaning. Ninety per cent of the time with a reversal of some sort meaning comes through. In an almost too symmetrical way the violation visited upon my body and the recovery from that violation is written in my language. As my body was made to be the subject of someone else's will, as my abuser wrenched my autonomy from the skin of my body, so too did i lose my autonomy over the rules of language. Reclaiming my right to authorship is deeply connected to reclaiming my body.

The naming of dyslexia and the naming of the abuse in my life as a violation happened within the same calendar year. i had

always remembered the rape and molestations but within the narrative dysfunction of the family which had nurtured the abuse, it was not named as such. When i tried to name my brother's molestation, tried to voice it as a teenager, i was sent for psychiatric sessions. The doctor eventually said his piece, *what happened to you is normal*. Unfortunately, according to popular statistics, the frequency of child abuse is a normal thing. But it is not OK. It is not an acceptable standard, a model, or any of the other meanings that are attributed to the word normal. It is only a statistical norm because of its frequency. We were not children experimenting with our sexuality. Instead, systemic abuse was inflicted upon me precisely because i was the only female child in

that system, precisely because of the misogyny that held that patriarchal system together and named it "family" in order to protect the rights and privileges of the abusers, in order to maintain the unequal relations of power.

As i learn again how to write by doing the exercises in *The Courage to Heal*, a book designed to help women heal from sexual abuse through writing, i regain autonomy over my narrative. In the apartment of a friend, the same friend with whom i had cooperatively forged a safe living space for a year while studying at McGill, i began one of the exercises. In her small windowless, Montreal, spare-bedroom, i wrote straight through one of the memory exercises fighting down the feeling that my whole body would explode if i kept putting words on the page, fighting down the waves of body memory that had my groin revisit the rocky shore where sexuality and violence met. Following the book's instructions to do something nurturing for myself afterwards, i walked up the mountain. Feeling lost in that space, feeling so completely disoriented i called a friend on the other side of the

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and the trauma seem to
be linked in recovery.*

continent in San Francisco, a friend whom i have known since we were three. In the hope that hearing her voice would put something back beneath my feet, i called. And it worked, her voice helped me find my footing. i could walk down the mountain with the other friend, could walk and talk, and miraculously my body had not exploded. As i learn to trust my memories and write them down, i learn to trust my ability to compensate for the letter misplacements and syntactic reversals. i put new italics in my head, reverse the narrative that my abusers and the witnesses in denial put there, reverse the subject-object relationship to power forced on me, and reverse the subject-object relationships within my language.

The italics in my head now say more often things like, *You can get through. You can do this. Hold on. Do what you want to. If you were a person, what would you do in this instance? Follow your instincts, they are not lying to you.* i forge a different narrative and take a more autonomous direction, learn to act responsibly. i learn that i can become a subject and write my way toward opening doors that lead in new directions.

Victoria Littman currently lives in Toronto where she is pursuing a degree in Curriculum at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. Formerly, she taught English and U.S. history at the secondary level in Northern California. She is now working on fiction and a children's book.

¹The italics represent both phrases that other people have said to me and those phrases which i have incorporated into an internal dialogue.

²In the writing of this i have accidentally once again reversed directions. Those readers who know San Francisco will notice that i reverse orientations to the Marina Bayside district and the downtown districts in the process of telling about reversing the directions of Bush and Sutter streets. i leave this in to demonstrate that the process of reversal is ongoing in the present.

ALEXANDRA PASIAN

undr the dislexic tree

ther iks a plaec
whre speling dose not count
wheer thots and imaginatons
run free
wher we express waht we feel
and no one laghs
ad it is important

there is plase
where eveyrone is equal
wher is not a lukery
where cleen air adounbs
where women are safe
and never alone
and speling dose not cont

I was diagnosed as dyslexic at age eight. I read my first book when I was twelve. This is how I see the world.

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