

## Jim

Jim is unable to utter a lie. He simply cannot believe them.

Jim, sitting with friends around a hotel pool, once said: "I think every word says something about its author."

After overhearing a tasteless joke, Jim no longer spoke with Darrell.

Jim disbelieved everyone. His boss and his pastor, his spouse and his children; in fact, he found it impossible to trust humans (including himself) to know what they were talking about. And yet he believed what they actually *said*. The words they used.

Every statement or exclamation, every question, harrumph or faux-pas, he deciphered. Jim doubted each "slip of the tongue." He said he believed in our languages.

Jim's work was in "managing waste," a lie that he knew they believed. He spent most of his time in the noisy outdoors. Chaotic, due to the mind-grinding sounds of the vehicular beasts they crept the city streets in, feeding them trashy fuel and guarding their grueling mastication. Loud and smelly as well. Rotten food, molded carpets, all manner of grotesque and disfigured things. Jim saw what was hidden, discarded. What most of us keep covered up.

His coworkers primarily proffered profanity. He believed them. But branching to politics or domestic intricacies, Jim only trusted their language. It didn't really matter what content spilled forth (he would say), the words that they chose and the ways they were delivered provided the confessions they "meant." "I'm afraid my wife no longer loves me" often intended its opposite, for instance, and nearly always equaled "I'm unhappy." Words worked like that, held Jim, worked all around one another. "Assume the people are lying and the words will speak for themselves."

Jim's wife called this the "double bind," or his "contra-contra-diction." And "paranoia" in worser moods. "If you don't believe in people," she'd say, "and always think they lie, particularly to themselves...then say you believe their 'language,' but never what they actually say – really Jim – what have you?!" "You've got nothing!" she'd complain, "no substance, no content, no motive – just a jumble of words that *you* (one of them!) reassemble...what else can that be but the rattling workings of your garbage-compactor of a mind, Jim?" And Jim heard: "I don't like the way you think. It's not practicable. It's egomaniacal and unfair." How Jim reads an utterance, with faith in the language, between all the lines, "it's *relation*," he'd say.

“I can’t speak for somebody else, dear,” Jim replied, “I just translate what I hear, or apprehend.” “You say tomahtuh, I say tomaytoe, sort of a thing. That’s paying attention.” How words wrestle around and decompose, what parts go first, or crumble, get smashed. What words stick out, slide easy, remain. “And watch out for the oily and slime,” Jim would say, “that’s the trickiest danger to ‘manage.’”

“You’re not dealing with garbage here,” his boss declared, “I’m giving you straightforward instructions. There’s nothing to sift through or weed out, Jim. I need you to perform this task,” and on he would speak, accustomed to Jim’s sorting appraisal of words.

For Jim it was all the same.

Words were some overused and available aggregate, he thought. People picked them out according to habits and taste, “nature and nurture,” he’d cliché, and then bandy them about until they felt understood, or relieved, or just plain empty. But the resemblance was rarely precise. Jim believed that most people simply grabbed at terms and sounds, gestures and wincing without much a thought for precision. “Think what all could be covered in silence,” he’d say, holding a field guide to transportation signage, or fingering the moves of sign language.

Most people just want to make contact, he’d hold forth, to be heard or effect something – a playing of power, a quest to convey – but not given much thought or concern. “I basically rummage through all their crap,” Jim continued, “with an eye out for volatile substances, wounded heirlooms or inadvertent mistakes they rid themselves of, and put a pretty clear picture together. Of their values and style, relations and status, family, religion and work.”

Joan (Jim’s wife) often speaks of what she deems Jim’s “arrogance.” “How can *he* suppose to know,” she’d decry, “a person’s life story or intentions, education or political beliefs from a talk about weather or baseball or drinks?” “It’s hypocritically bigoted, as if truth were the eye of beholding, each person’s puzzle to piece. Unaware of themselves, Jim presents some ‘true meaning’ – its Gnostic, religious, a myth,” she’d complain.

Yet Jim was resoundingly insightful and most often correct, which simply bugged them more. It seemed people really *were* giving something away when they opened their mouths, no matter what language they used.

“Words are functions,” Jim stated, “where text and image collide in a complex silence or sound.” “Nothing escapes, really, just gets alternatively pressured and squeezed, mangled and reformed, mashed into a mushed conversation.” “Every talker a monologue, every listener too, for the most part,” he said, “a dialogue running oneself, a wrecked chorus, I listen for pauses and patterns, I try to decipher the breathing of noise.”

“These are just Jim’s thoughts,” snarled Joan, “things he puts into words like nonsense.”

(to be continued? you decide...)