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The Lexical Heart: A Dictionary

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MEGAN M. CARPENTER

The Lexical Heart: A Dictionary

A

Afternoon

Silence, hammering in the distance. The smell of must. And a bird's nest on my pillow.

Authentication

I have been meaning to tell you: When I was little, my cousin Abby and I used to try and think up ways that we would be able to tell if someone, like, say, an Alien, came and tried to impersonate us. How would I be sure that Abby was the real Abby? How would she know that Megan was Megan?

I used to have a triangle of freckles on my cheek. Over the years, years being what they are, the triangle has grown into more of a parallelogram. This method, therefore, is somewhat outdated. So, after much careful thought—and some sidelong glances—I will tell you two ways I have come up with: I have a (thus far) lone freckle on the left side of my fourth toe on the right foot. And, and this could be key, my right hand is always much, much colder than the left.

B

C

Circumstance

My stepfather gave me the baby calf that was born yesterday. It is my first calf. I must bestow upon it a name. I have some thoughts, but I need to spend more time with it before I can be sure. I think it is a boy. I went up this morning at daybreak to

visit it, and it came up to me and we touched, its soft and silken fur, its tiny whiskers coming out of its nose, its eyes too young yet to know about unsightly facial hair. If it is a boy, then I must decide whether he will be a bull, in which case I must sell him, or a steer, in which case I can keep him, but I must later turn him into Sunday dinner. If he is to become a steer, then I must put rubber bands around his testicles until they fall off. The choice I have: To lose him forever, or to put rubber bands on his balls.

Close

One of my favorite mailboxes we pass on the way to my son's school reads: Henry B. Close. It is hand-painted in the kind of calligraphy that is not calligraphy at all, the kind that women try when they are feeling crafty, when they verticalize the line on the letter "e," when their soul is a dusty birdcage in the basement, wiped off with a wet cloth for craft fairs and gift shops and bake sales, handpainted rocks and signs and mailboxes.

(Do you think after all those holes in the bucket, those orders to fix it, the chaos of Everything Wrong, at night, in the dark, Dear Liza said to Dear Henry, "Dear Henry B Close?")

One of my other favorite signs reads:

VIRGIL H. LEDSONE
CONCRETE

Confrontation

The radio announcer interviewed a woman who has been displaced from her home because of forest fires. She was staying at a shelter, and said she had no idea whether her house was still standing. She just wanted to know, she said. Her voice had that overly controlled sound that masked, not nearly well enough, her fragility, and her wanting to know so much more than just wanting to know. The only way she could know whether she still had her house was to phone it, she said. If the phone rang, that meant there was a good chance her house was still there.

I pictured that phone ringing, at this moment, in a house that had been quickly abandoned when the fires blazed close, piercing the emptiness, the sound echoing across half-eaten plates of food, a half-folded basket of laundry, messages blinking on the answering machine. I pictured that phone ringing in a pile of charred rubble, next to a broken salt shaker and a melted toilet bowl brush. I pictured it ringing, from somewhere far below. I pictured the woman dialing her house, over and over, each time waiting for the phone to ring. Surely she would misdial in her nervousness. Surely it would take her a couple of tries. "Come onnnn!" I hear her say.

Consecution

I bought a bird once in college, and when I spoke of him I would laugh and say, "I just needed something to love that wouldn't demand anything of me." His name was Nacho and I made Picasso-like portraits of him and he died on the night I fell in love with someone else. It was a cartoon death, feet sticking up at a 90 degree angle from the floor of the cage.

D

Dedication

Everything I write is for you, she whispered to him, in the quiet of night, in the ten miles between the lightning and the thunder. She stared while the ceiling was frozen in strobe. *One Mississippi. Two Mississippi.* If you are for me you are only for me, he said. *Three Mississippi.* But, she said. It is love, she said. *Four Mississippi.* You make it false, he said. But it is truth, she said. *Five Mississippi.* I do not hear you, he said. Don't run from me, she said. *Six Mississippi.* I've never heard you, he said. Come back, she said. *Seven Mississippi. Eight Mississippi.* I've never heard you, he said. *Nine Mississippi.* Above the rumble, lying above the crashing of everything waiting no more, she said, I love you, and this is me. *Ten Mississippi.*

Devotion

I put a fossil under my mattress tonight so I can feel like a princess. I will feel it and be uncomfortable, complain to everyone I see tomorrow: "I just didn't sleep well. I have no idea why."

Sigh and put the back of my hand against my forehead. Think that the life of a princess is hard.

E

Excess

Today the outside smelled like dead animals and beached earthworms, rotting leaves. The smell makes the stark sterility of winter seem like an anxious relief.

F

February

One February, and now every February, we go to see the play "Chicago" with Jim and Helene. We meet them at Southwest Bistro, go to the play, have a whiskey at the Renaissance.

The next morning the air is crisp. We eat at the Cuban diner and I buy a paper, clutch it under my arm, and resent it ever so slightly for keeping my arm farther away from my body in the cold.

I am wearing a white baseball shirt with red sleeves.

I go upstairs to lie down with the baby and Dan says to me, "You're gonna need to get up." I look at him as if he is clearly mistaken (for how many years will he make this mistake, over and over?), and he says, "something has happened to your grandmother."

I call her name sometimes, uncontrollably in reflex, half expecting her to answer me. I am always a little afraid to call her name aloud, but more afraid not to, as if she will only stop to talk if I call out.

I miss her, back underneath my molars in a raw ache that goes through the jaw to the back of my throat, to the lump somewhere at my base. I don't like the way I sound when I call for her.

The letter, she never wrote me.

February, a reason left in my head.

Flowers

I spent a lot of time at The Penny Pincher on Tuesday. The Penny Pincher is kind of like a thrift store, some of its customers are college students who think vintage clothing is cool, far more of its customers are mentally unstable people in assisted living who go there on a daily basis.

I went there to get a vase for the flowers I was taking my friend Barbara in the hospital. Barbara lives near me on the river. She is my grandmother's cousin and she has lived in the same house all her life and she is not married and her mother died when she was only six months old, but that is quite another story, quite. More relevant—for this story, that is—she has some lovely autumn flowers in her yard, and I thought to pick some and take them to her in the hospital, so she could have her yard in her room.

I stopped at The Penny Pincher to get a vase.

Nearly stymied by the multitude of vases on the shelf, I picked one. (It was green, like the others. It was big, like the others. It was textured, like the others. And it was 25 cents.) And then I went out to arrange the flowers in my truck. After some longer-than-appropriate length of time spent making what I—with squinted eyes and stretched arms—deemed a suitable arrangement, I shut the truck door. Quickly, but not quickly enough, I realized that my keys were still inside. Suddenly, like a bad horror movie except for the absence of a silk nightgown, it suddenly started to rain in a terrible storm, (a hurricano, my son would say).

A delivery boy from The Pincher called AAA for me while his coworker asked me out. Our conversation was thus:

"You from 'round here?"

"Yes, but I haven't lived here for awhile. How about you?"

"Nope. Jersey."

“Oh, what brings you from New Jersey to Fairmont?”

“Long story. (weird laugh) Don’t think I should say.”

“Oh.” (skipping parole? murder? drugs? running hopelessly away from all the rotting teeth in his mouth?)

“Wanna go have coffee sometime?”

(I’m never good at that . . . what do you say?, “No” never seems a viable option.) “Mmmm, mmmaaybe.” There was a long pause while we both chewed on the awkwardness of my response (I chewed, he gummed), and I thought of an alternative. I blurted, “I’m married!” and, because my adrenal glands thought flight to be a reasonable next move, I ran outside.

I waited outside for an hour or so longer, and during much of that time talked with Curtis Franklin Thorne II, a passer-cum-stander-by who collects bottles (apparently, in his pockets), and who draws—“All my drawings have this naked woman, smoking and farting and getting bullets up the ass”—and who told me the secrets of all the magicians.

After the bottles, and the women, and the secrets, I said goodbye to Curtis Franklin Thorne II, and did some more shopping in the Penny Pincher. I bought a dress with red and blue sailboats on it, and clutched it in my arms as we both got drenched in the rain, as we watched the man unlock my truck, as I rendered an unlikely number of thank you’s.

I took the flowers, then, up to Barbara, who informed me that the flowers in her yard had never been picked. I told her (I was wet, I was happy, I was good) that I hoped I didn’t ruin the flowerbeds. “I hope you did,” she said. “I hate flowers. Can’t stand ’em. Not one bit. Always have.”

G

Grammar

In marriage, the list of prepositions (aboard, about, above . . .) becomes replaced by conjunctions, and the occasional non-sequitur. And. But.

H

Handwriting

Two things: It's impossible to edit. And it's not designed for the loquacious.

I

Ice

The male protagonist in the book I'm reading (still reading, now an act of endurance, turning the corners of the pages like rosary beads), the male protagonist in the book says, "There are hints of you everywhere," and I scoff at him, what does he know of you, what does he know of everywhere, what does he know of hints, hints are manageable, hints are gardenia and this is musk, hints are droplets of dew and this is the glacial lake, after all.

Intimacy

And she said, "Whom I will never forgive for having loved me and having said, 'Yes, this will do'."

J

Jealousy

We lost the baby calf the other day on the farm. We looked for it for over an hour, and eventually found it where its mama had hidden it in some tall grass. I petted it and held it and loved it, for a minute until the mother spotted us across the hill. She came galloping, as close to a gallop as a cow can come, which is really, surprisingly, close, galloping across the hill and herding her baby away from us. The two older brother steers came out, jealous, butting heads, fighting so much they didn't even notice the mother and calf disappear over the ridge.

K

L

M

Memory (by Aesop)

I can remember an ink spot on my sheets when I was one year old, and I can remember getting my first camera, a Polaroid (and those first pictures that day, including one of my mother holding what my dad called kumquats but were really grapefruits), and I can remember most everything else from when I was four, and every single pretty one of my dad's girl friends, and most phone numbers, even those I haven't dialed for years and years.

These incidental and peculiar memories fool people into thinking I have a good memory. I do not. Sometimes, I wonder if I remembered everything until I was equipped with the tools to create my own reality. With a cross section of Everything, I can choose Some Things. Or, if I have a finite memory space, and I greedily soaked up so many little memories, so many games and adventures and experiences and smells (and combinations of phone numbers) from early early on, because I so selfishly wanted to remember it all, with brazen disregard for capacity. And now I am left with a full memory card, so full I must delete old memories to fit the recent ones.

Miracles

Tonight, my son and I bathed together and he used my body as the island upon which to dock his boats. "How did I fit out of your vagina?" he asked me. "Not without a great deal of effort," I assured him. "Was I one inch small?" "You were about this big," I gestured with my hands, a few inches shy of two feet, and my hands round to the shape of his newborn head. "But that's too big!" "I thought that too, sometimes, but a mama's body can do amazing things. And also," I added, "it was a miracle." "I hate miracles," he proclaimed with the kind of absolute truth only a small child can assert with a straight face, and picked up an earlier conversation about the characters from a favorite TV program. (Miracles are the end, miracles are what you get when

there are no more answers, when there is no more possible analysis. When all the whys stop, and everything grows quiet. Of course he hates miracles. However did I not think of that before.)

Moment

(the “yes” and “do you know” and “I have things to tell you” of the sun)

Morning

You awaken to the realization that you need to check in with your grandmother. Realizing you need to check in with your grandmother makes you imagine reaching for the yellow phone on the nightstand. Reaching for the phone in your mind reminds you that your grandmother is thirty-four days dead. Being reminded that your grandmother is thirty-four days dead reminds you that your other grandmother is 2,007 days dead. Remembering that your other grandmother is 2,007 days dead reminds you that you miss her everyday with no sign of abatement. The thought of now missing two grandmothers so intensely for 2,007 days with no sign of abatement reminds you of the list of sorrows that you carry. Allowing your mind to peer beyond the empty space next to you and instead over the shoulder of the List of Sorrows Extrapolated you are reminded that you will never marry Kurt Vonnegut and that you have no milk in the refrigerator. Remembering that you have no milk in the refrigerator makes you think of coffee. You swing your legs over the side of the bed. Because if you give a pig a pancake, or a mouse a cookie, or a girl a grandmother, she’s going to need some coffee.

N

Need

A bearded man sits alone in a room. The room is rather dark, just dark enough so that it looks empty. If you look hard enough, you could imagine yellowed paint, peeling wallpaper. But you don’t look that hard. At least, I don’t. Framed by blank walls, the man sits in a chair, his head slightly bent forward, his button-down shirt all buttoned down, not quite untucked. Light from a side window illuminates his dark eyes, tight lips. And

there is a hole in the ceiling, above his head, the spider in a web of cracks, from which drips of water are lining up to be set free, in turn to land on his head, his cheek, to run down his collar. His expression never changes. You can't stop looking, captivated and ashamed, as if you had caught your parents in some sexual act. Drip. Drip. You watch. The drops slide down his cheek and linger on the edge of his chin before falling. Everything is quiet but need.

Nostalgia

(so she burned the thing that stopped her going back)

O

P

Package

I brought the box into the living room (I had been standing in the kitchen, with my one sharp knife, which I used to open the box), and sat on the floor in front of the fire. I took out each piece of packing paper, uncrumpled it, smoothed it out with the flats of my palms, and sometimes I bent over and rested my cheek against the growing spongy soft pile of pages. I thought of Shirley.

Shirley was a woman at the Union Mission where I volunteered in high school. I would go there some evenings and play bingo with her. When the bingo caller called a number on Shirley's card, she would pick up a disc, would pick up the disc very carefully and set it down on the number, then would methodically, carefully, move it with the pad of her finger so that it was positioned precisely in the center of the square. As her bingo card became more spotted with discs, she continued to go back and arrange the others, always moving them in the same way, with the flat of her fingerpad, making sure that each disc was exactly, evenly in the middle of its own little square. And then again. And again.

Taking out each crumpled ball of paper, unfolding it carefully, placing it gently on the pile, smoothing it with my palms, feeling the flattened ridges against my palm, over and over, life lines

and love lines and health lines and line lines, line me with your
paper, match my edges, in wide sweeps,

(and move on).

Postcard

A few years ago (where “few” can be construed to mean “nearly ten”), I was on a train going through the northwest of Spain. We decided to go until we reached the end of the line, the end of Spain, as it were, and then explore our surroundings. We ended up in a small town in the northwest, called . . . oh dear, my memory is beginning to fail . . . only colors left, shades of consonants like r and l and g. As we strapped backpacks onto sore shoulders and exited the train to get coffee, we saw large groups of people, loud young people, uncharacteristic of a small Spanish town. We got coffee, because it seemed the thing to do. We asked questions. As it turned out, the Rolling Stones were in town. So were, not coincidentally, all of the rock concert-goers in Spain. Many black t-shirts. Much acid wash on erstwhile blue jeans.

We made simultaneous efforts to get more coffee and our bearings while we decided what to do. We caught another train, and (out of determined spontaneity not really typical of spontaneity), we decided to get off when the mood struck. We watched out the window for a couple of hours. At one point, we saw some huge mountains in the background, the peaks so high and close we couldn't see them from the train window, and a small wooden sign that said: *Villamanin*. There was a small collection of buildings at the foot of the mountains, surely not more than thirty houses and businesses in total. We looked at each other, grabbed our bags (the backpacker's cross), and jumped off the train. We found a building that doubled at the time as a summer camp for small children. We stayed in an empty room there for a couple of days, eating in the cafeteria with the children, playing with them sometimes. They were about six years old, and were fascinated that we were from America. They wanted to know all about America. They wanted to know whether we knew Bill Clinton, if we had ever been to the White House. They asked my travel companion to make muscles, over and over again, and called him Arnold Schwarzenegger. My favorite little boy was

named Juanito. He hid from me. He had a round face and round hair to match.

One day, we spent all day climbing one of those mountains. When we were nearly at the top, we built a monument. Sometimes—not too often, and with much less sentimentality than I would have imagined at the time—I wonder if it is still there.

One morning, I awakened to the sound of all of the camp kids singing. *Dream, dream, dream.* They were being taught a new song. *When I want you.* In their little voices, and their strong Spanish accents, their inability to speak English, they added one more line of the lyrics each time. *All I have to do, is dreeeeam.* I lay and listen, as still as possible. *Whenever I want you.* It is that song, that particular rendition of that (particular) song in my (particular) memory, that I send to you now. *Dreamin' my life away.*

Prurience

Etymology: L prurient—, pruriens, present participle of prurire to itch, crave; akin to Latin pruna glowing coal, Sanskrit plosati he sings, and probably to Latin pruina hoarfrost—more at *freeze.*

Q

R

Rain

My college roommate just got engaged. My friend Barbara is moving toward death like a snowball rolling down a hill of new fallen snow. My dad is going to Spain tomorrow. It doesn't seem to rain any longer on the roof of my bedroom.

Rain will not fall on me in here, as I lie here waiting for it with varying degrees of patience. I hear it, I see it hit the skylight in my bathroom from where I lie, I want it on me, over me, around me, I want it to drown my thoughts and not take no for an answer, but it refuses, repeatedly, and I am confused, unable to figure out why.

I think I will go to my grandmother's grave today and ask her why. I asked a bird yesterday, but the answer was encoded in a series of squeaks and chirps and I jumped and jumped, my toes flexed, ear to the sky, but as I fell to a heap on the grass I realized my failing—that, after everything, I had forgotten my secret agent decoder ring.

Redemption

Sean told me I should rent "On the Waterfront." "I like Marlon Brando," I said. Sean started to describe the movie: "He plays a boxer . . ." "I don't like movies about boxers," I interrupted. "It's not about boxers," he said, "Marlon Brando works down on the docks in this ring with his brother . . ." "Is it about the mob? I don't like movies about boxers *or* the mob." "It's not about the mob," he said—and at this point we're both cracking up—"it's not about boxers, and it's not about the mob. It's about . . ." (and he thinks for awhile), "redemption!" "Now you're talking my language," I said. "I love redemption!"

Regret

And here, now, thinking of all the books I've yet to read, the ones I'll never read, a worry comforting in its regularity. And another worry, that ebbs and flows, constantly lapping, that we will never be able to be friends like we were, like we should be, kicking the "n" off of never like an old tin can down the street, holding hands as we change "almost" to "alongside."

Resignation

You lie on your bed, staring out the window. You realize that a day can be harder than it's worth.

You imagine raising the window, pulling up the sash. 'Twas the Night Before Nothing. You picture the fall from afar. Your legs, a matter of human interest, Theisman-style. Food on a tray in the hospital. "Butterscotch pudding would be fine," you say. "It really didn't hurt that much; I must have been in shock," you say.

You think of alligators, and wonder if you would jump off a houseboat in the Atchafalaya Swamp into the infested waters.

If you had built that houseboat, if you lived on it with your lover, if you wore a flimsy nightgown, if you felt like this. You feel the alligator's jaws cracking you like one of the pecans that lies in your yard, and you wonder if the dulled sound of the break and flow of blood into water would bring some relief. The nightgown, billowing to the surface.

You drag yourself out of bed and walk downstairs. Open the dishwasher. Walk to the cabinet. Walk to the dishwasher. Walk to the drawer. Walk to the dishwasher. You put back two forks because they are dirty. One, two, and no, this one is fine, and yes, dear, I'll be right there. You wipe the counters, cupping your hands to catch the crumbs, and then brush them onto the floor. You fold a dishtowel into fourths. Without thinking, you turn it over to the clean side. Lock both doors. Walk up the stairs. You brush your teeth thoroughly, as that might change something. Pull the door to your bedroom just to.

You take off your clothes, and look at yourself in the mirror, a split second dare, before turning off the light. You crawl into bed.

Restraint

It is raining here, as it rarely, so rarely, rains in Ireland, all emotion and intensity, equal parts catching and releasing of breath, enough clamoring to be calm. The river is raging, my river, and it scares me, unrecognizable underneath.

A few minutes ago I took a big Maglite flashlight and put on my stepfather's coat and went down to the river to see how high it has risen. (There is a flood warning and I needed to check our canoes.) As I nearly slid down the rapidly eroding bank it started to rain even harder (though I would have thought that impossible moments beforehand), and I was surprised—for not the first time in my life—at the magnificent umbrella of the trees.

One of our neighborhood dogs died today. Amos. Amos ate a rotting purple deer and would not give it up even when my neighbor tried to pull it from his mouth and it destroyed his pancreas. Amos grew more and more feverish over the course of two days and then went down to the river to die, and I think we were all a bit envious in a place where we would never admit it,

to see him, lying there, in the flow of the water. A young attorney at the firm committed suicide today, and there was a 73 car pile-up on the interstate that I have traveled six times in the past ten days, and, it is the anniversary of the date that I lost my virginity. (Lost? How odd. "It is not that we are losing a daughter, it is that we are gaining a son!," I say.) Today, today. Rest in peace, sweet Amos, may you feast on strictly non-poisonous rotting animals in your big, rounded, smelly July of a dog heaven.

It was good to see Dave today, for the first time since I've been back this side of the Atlantic, his eyes were so blue and his teeth so white and his cheeks so pink from the beers we drank at lunch. He and I sat in my truck on Sixth Street afterward, in front of the church, I with my hazards and Dave in his cap, just settled down for a long winter's nap . . . or, I with my hazards and Dave sitting there waiting for me to ask him already-anticipated questions (why are there only three letters in the word you?), me talking too much and mentally noting my failure to comply with one New Year's resolution, which was to Exercise More Restraint.

Just try and pull that purple rotting carcass from my mouth.

Good night. There are windows to open, sashes to throw up if ever I can find them, a river that wants to tell me stories as I fall asleep. And the birds, just waiting for the gossipy post-mortem they'll have of this night at sunrise.

S

T

Time

I have the distinct feeling that it's time to take the cookies out of the oven. But I haven't made any cookies. No, not yet.

Truth

Inch by inch,

folding down,
zipping up,
naked skin.

U

V

W

Without

And I awakened like a suitcase falling out of the back of a truckbed, thuds and spastic skids into the morning. And I looked at the fog, beginning to lift off of the river.

At one branch, which seemed so sharp.

X

Y

Z