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The Ridge Between Words: Finding Poetry in the Everyday

There's a particular chill that settles over the mind when you're searching for the right word. Not the cold of winter mornings or the shiver of fear, but that suspended moment when language hovers just beyond reach—when you know exactly what you want to say but the perfect expression remains stubbornly elusive. It's in these moments that we become most aware of ourselves as residents of language, inhabitants of a vast and intricate system that both enables and constrains how we think, feel, and connect with others.

I experienced this sensation acutely last Tuesday while attempting to explain to a friend why I'd been feeling unsettled. The conversation had started simply enough, but as I tried to articulate the specific quality of my disquiet, I found myself cycling through inadequate approximations. "Anxious" wasn't quite right—too clinical, too pathological. "Worried" felt too specific, too tethered to concrete concerns. "Uneasy" came closest, but still missed something essential. What I needed was a word that could capture the feeling of standing on an emotional ridge, able to see clearly in multiple directions but uncertain which path to descend.

This experience reminded me of something the poet Mary Oliver once wrote about attention being "the beginning of devotion." When we pay close attention to language—really pause and consider the weight, texture, and history of our words—we're engaging in a kind of devotion to meaning itself. We're acknowledging that the gap between what we experience and what we can express isn't a failure but rather the fundamental challenge that makes us human.

The Legal Language of Emotion

The word "impeal" floated through my mind during that conversation—a legal term meaning to sue someone or to bring a third party into a lawsuit. It's an odd word, archaic even in legal contexts, but it struck me as oddly appropriate. Aren't we always, in some sense, impealing our emotions? Calling them forth, demanding they testify, attempting to prosecute or defend our feelings in the court of human exchange?

We live in an age that valorizes emotional articulation. From therapy-speak proliferating across social media to the endless supply of personality tests and emotional intelligence frameworks, we're constantly encouraged to name, claim, and explain our inner states. This isn't inherently problematic—indeed, the ability to identify and communicate feelings is crucial for mental health and relationship satisfaction. But there's something lost when we treat emotional life as purely a matter of proper labeling, as if we could perfectly map the territory of human experience with enough precise terminology.

The poet Jack Gilbert wrote, "We must have the stubbornness to accept our gladness in the ruthless furnace of this world." I've always loved that line for how it refuses easy categorization. "Gladness in the ruthless furnace"—these aren't emotions that typically appear together in our

modern taxonomies, yet the juxtaposition feels profoundly true. Life doesn't arrive in neatly separated feelings but in complex, contradictory tangles that resist simple naming.

Resident Aliens in Our Own Vocabulary

We are all residents of language, but we occupy it differently. Some people move through words with the ease of longtime homeowners, while others approach vocabulary like recent immigrants, always slightly uncertain of the local customs. I once taught English to adult learners, and I was repeatedly humbled by how the language I took for granted appeared to them—not as a transparent medium for expressing thoughts but as an opaque, often capricious system with rules that seemed designed to confound.

One student, a woman from Colombia named Maria, became frustrated one evening trying to explain a concept that apparently existed in Spanish but had no direct English equivalent. The word was "sobremesa"—the time spent lingering at the table after a meal, talking and enjoying each other's company. English, she pointed out, had hundreds of words for types of work but needed multiple words to describe this simple, universal pleasure. "In English," she said, "you are always moving to the next thing. There is no word for staying."

She was right, of course. Language doesn't just reflect cultural values; it shapes them. The words available to us influence what we notice, what we prioritize, and what we can easily discuss. Living as a resident within English means inhabiting a linguistic architecture that emphasizes productivity, individual achievement, and forward momentum—sometimes at the expense of presence, community, and the art of staying still.

The Verse We Speak Without Knowing

But here's the paradox: even as we wrestle with language's limitations, we're constantly creating poetry without realizing it. Not poetry in the formal sense—sonnets and villanelles, carefully crafted verse—but rather the everyday poetry of metaphor, rhythm, and unconscious artistry that permeates ordinary speech.

Listen carefully to how people talk when they're not performing, when they're simply trying to communicate something that matters. A mechanic describing why your car's making that noise ("it's like a wheezing, right at the ridge of third gear"). A parent explaining why they can't attend a work event ("I need to be there when he crosses that ridge from little kid to whatever comes next"). A friend describing their relationship ("we've been climbing the same mountain from different sides"). These aren't professional poets speaking, but they're using the tools of poetry—metaphor, imagery, musicality—to bridge the gap between inner experience and shared understanding.

The scholar George Lakoff spent decades demonstrating how thoroughly metaphorical our ordinary thinking is. We don't just occasionally use metaphors for decoration; we think in metaphors constantly. Time is money, we say (and believe, and live by). Arguments are wars

(with positions to defend, strategies to deploy, victories to win). Life is a journey (with paths to choose, obstacles to overcome, destinations to reach). These aren't mere figures of speech but foundational conceptual structures that organize how we understand reality.

Embracing the Chill of Not-Knowing

Perhaps what bothers us most about language's limitations isn't the limits themselves but what they reveal about the human condition more broadly. If we can't even perfectly express our thoughts and feelings—the things most immediately available to us—what hope do we have of truly understanding each other? This is the existential chill that lurks beneath every miscommunication, every conversation where we realize the other person heard something completely different from what we thought we said.

But maybe that chill, that gap, that ridge between my experience and your understanding, is precisely what makes communication meaningful. If we could transmit thoughts directly from mind to mind, without the messy mediation of language, would connection feel more or less profound? I suspect less. It's the very effort required—the reaching toward each other across the space that separates us, the creative work of finding and making meaning together—that transforms information exchange into genuine communion.

The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote, "The limits of my language mean the limits of my world." This is often interpreted pessimistically, as suggesting we're imprisoned by our vocabulary. But I prefer to read it optimistically: every time we stretch language, push against its edges, coin new terms or revive old ones, find fresh metaphors or unexpected juxtapositions, we're literally expanding the world—not just our description of it but the reality we can inhabit.

Living on the Ridge

So we live on the ridge between expression and experience, between what we feel and what we can say, between ourselves and each other. It's an uncomfortable place sometimes, this high exposure where the wind of meaning blows cold and communication feels precarious. But it's also where we're most alive to language's possibilities.

The next time you feel that chill of searching for the right word, that sense of being a resident in a foreign land even when speaking your native tongue, try leaning into the discomfort. Notice the gap. Feel the ridge beneath your feet. Let yourself dwell in that space where meaning hasn't quite crystallized, where expression still trembles with possibility.

Because it's there, in that uncertain space, that we remember what language really is: not a fixed system of signs and referents but a living, breathing, constantly evolving collaboration between human minds and hearts. We're all poets whether we know it or not, all of us engaged in the fundamental creative act of making meaning together, one imperfect, beautiful word at a time.

And sometimes, just sometimes, we find exactly the right verse—the perfect combination of sounds and meanings that captures precisely what we couldn't quite say before. Those moments feel like grace, like suddenly being fluent in a language we've been struggling with all along. They remind us why we keep trying, why we keep reaching across the ridge toward each other, why we remain devoted residents of this impossible, essential, endlessly fascinating realm called language.

Contrarian Viewpoint (in 750 words)

Against the Mystification of Language: Why Clear Communication Beats Pretty Words

Let's be honest: most writing about language is pretentious nonsense designed to make simple things sound profound. The previous article exemplifies this perfectly—1,500 words of flowery meditation on the "gaps" and "ridges" of expression, as if struggling to find the right word represents some deep existential crisis rather than what it actually is: a momentary inconvenience quickly resolved by consulting a thesaurus or simply moving on.

The romanticization of linguistic limitation has become its own cottage industry. Poets, philosophers, and cultural critics build entire careers on the premise that language is mysteriously inadequate, that words can never quite capture experience, that we're all trapped in some tragic prison-house of meaning. It's an attractive narrative—it makes ordinary communication sound heroic and elevates the people who talk about communication into sage-like figures. But it's fundamentally misleading.

Language Works Fine, Actually

Here's the uncomfortable truth: language works remarkably well for the vast majority of human purposes. We successfully coordinate complex activities, transmit detailed technical information, share emotions, tell jokes, negotiate conflicts, and build entire civilizations—all using the supposedly "limited" and "inadequate" tools of human language. If words were truly as insufficient as the romantics claim, none of this would be possible.

When someone says they "can't find the right words," what they usually mean is one of three things: they haven't thought clearly about what they actually want to communicate, they're experiencing an emotion so intense that any description feels inadequate, or they're being performatively inarticulate to signal depth of feeling. None of these represents a fundamental failure of language itself.

Consider the example from the article about explaining feeling "unsettled." The writer cycles through "anxious," "worried," and "uneasy," rejecting each as insufficient. But this isn't a language problem—it's a thinking problem. What exactly was the feeling? When did it occur? What triggered it? What physical sensations accompanied it? Answer these questions specifically, and suddenly you have plenty of words to work with. "I felt a tightness in my chest every morning this week when thinking about the upcoming presentation, but it wasn't fear exactly—more like anticipatory stress mixed with uncertainty about whether I'd prepared enough."

See? Language works fine when you're willing to use more of it and think more clearly.

The Poetry Trap

The celebration of everyday metaphor and "unconscious poetry" in ordinary speech sounds lovely but ignores something crucial: most of the time, metaphorical language makes communication worse, not better. Saying "we've been climbing the same mountain from different sides" about a relationship sounds poetic, but what does it actually mean? That you're working toward a common goal? That you're taking different approaches? That the journey is difficult? That you'll meet at the summit eventually?

Good communication—the kind that actually works in relationships, business, education, and daily life—tends to be clear, specific, and literal. "We want the same things long-term but disagree about how to get there" conveys far more useful information than any mountaineering metaphor.

The veneration of poetry in everyday speech is really a veneration of vagueness. When precision matters—in contracts, medical instructions, safety warnings, or serious negotiations—we abandon poetic language entirely because we recognize it doesn't actually serve communication's primary purpose: transferring accurate information from one mind to another.

The Sobremesa Myth

The anecdote about the Spanish word "sobremesa" is a perfect example of how we mystify linguistic difference. Yes, Spanish has a single word for something English requires multiple words to describe. So what? English has single words for things that other languages need phrases to express. This isn't evidence of cultural depth or linguistic superiority—it's just how languages develop different lexical patterns.

And frankly, the claim that English has "no word for staying" is absurd. We have: lingering, remaining, dwelling, abiding, residing (there's that word from the randomizer list!), staying put, hanging around, and dozens more. We have an entire vocabulary of staying. The notion that English-speakers are linguistically incapable of appreciating post-meal relaxation because we lack a single word for it is the kind of Whorfian nonsense that linguists debunked decades ago.

The Real Problem

The actual problem isn't that language is inadequate—it's that we've become worse at using it well. We've replaced precision with poetry, clarity with creativity, and straightforward expression with performative complexity. We write 1,500-word essays about the mysterious gaps in language when we could solve most communication problems with five minutes of clearer thinking.

The "chill" of not finding the right word isn't profound—it's a sign you need to think harder or care less. The "ridge between expression and experience" isn't a poetic dwelling place—it's a problem to be solved through better vocabulary and clearer thought.

Language is a tool. Good tools work well when used properly. Stop mystifying the hammer and just drive the nail.