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You are not an angel (a letter to my students)

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ABSTRACT

This critical/creative essay takes the form of an imagined letter to my students. It suggests that in the online age we have come to see writing as angelic communion: intuitive, instantaneous, unmediated. Words hang briefly in the air as a discardable conveyance for shifting thought from one brain to another. Reading is a matter of swiping, skimming and scrolling, on touchscreens tailor-made for the smooth ingestion of *content*, which is what words have become in the age of big data. I urge my students to think instead of writing as embodied – something inseparable from that granular, glitch-ridden singularity, a human being. Because we are not angels, who are already word perfect, the right words only come to us at the end of long, unexciting work. Words fail us, or we fail them, but the failure is salutary and, in the end, a blessing. It teaches us to accept the otherness and unreadability of others. The letter form, a relic of the analogue age, concedes this inevitable distance between writer and reader, and the failure of writing to entirely bridge it. The letter writer must communicate imperfectly like a human being, not perfectly like an angel.

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Have you noticed that, when someone in a film or TV drama gets a message on their phone, the same thing always happens? The words pop up onscreen and hover around them, floating in their own private thought space. I first saw this trick in 2010, in the first episode of the BBC TV series *Sherlock*. Now it's everywhere, part of the unnoticed grammar of filmmaking. Directors use it partly to avoid having to do awkward over-the-shoulder close-ups of phones as someone composes or reads a message. But it's also a way of thinking about the written word in our hyper-connected times – as the weightless carrier of disembodied thought. These words, it suggests, have magically migrated from one brain to another, without the intervening labour of tapping them out with thumbs and scanning them with eyes. Our sluggish, stuck-in-one-place bodies no longer need impede the communion of souls. One mind meets another mind, instantly.

Human beings have long dreamed of the possibility of perfect communion with one another. In his book *Speaking into the Air*, John Durham Peters traces this dream back to Augustine of Hippo, one of the intellectual architects of Western Christianity. For

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Augustine, the model of perfect communion was an angel, which in both Hebrew (*malach*) and Greek (*angelos*) means 'messenger'. Angels, he believed, could commune intuitively, without the impediment of physical distance or the opacities and imperfections of language.

For Durham Peters, the electric media of the late nineteenth century gave new life to this old dream of angelic communion. They promised to erase the two things that tragically separated human beings from each other: physical distance and death. A powerful mystique surrounded inventions like the telegraph, the telephone and the gramophone. They were a means of magical connection with the absent or the no longer living. Angels, Durham Peters writes, 'haunt modern media, with their common ability to spirit voice, image, and word across vast distances without death or decay' (Durham Peters 1999, 75).

Speaking into the Air was published in 1999, and barely mentions the internet. I am old enough to remember those early, dial-up days of the World Wide Web, when you could boil a kettle in the time it took a page to upload. Even then, people were imagining the online world as the endgame in the dream of angelic communion. The activist-entrepreneur Stewart Brand argued that 'when you communicate through a computer, you communicate like an angel … you communicate as these disembodied intelligences of great intimacy' (Dery 1996, 56). The philosopher Michel Serres wrote that 'the angels are unceasingly drawing up the maps of our new universe' (Serres 1995, 293). Serres, who taught at Stanford in Silicon Valley, got the idea for his book *Angels: A Modern Myth* while being shown around a computer firm (McClellan 1996).

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I am writing this letter to you, the students I teach. I know that you are unlikely to read it, and whoever does read it will work out soon enough that putting these thoughts in letter form is partly just a literary device to frame an argument about the status of writing in the digital era. In an age that puts its faith in angelic communion, a letter usefully complicates the question of address. It is not quite a monologue and not quite a dialogue. The letter writer has taken time to gather up and collate their thoughts, and they know that they must not expect an instant reply, if they get one at all. 'The letter, written in absorbed solitude, is an act of faith; it assumes the presence of humanity', Vivian Gornick writes. '[W]orld and self are generated from within; loneliness is courted not feared' (Gornick 1996, 162). A letter concedes the inevitable distance between writer and reader, and the failure of writing to entirely bridge it. The letter writer must communicate imperfectly like a human, not perfectly like an angel.

Let me begin by admitting my prejudices. I assume that, as a member of Generation Z, you have been brought up to think you are an angel. You have no memory of a world before broadband or smartphones. You use the written word more than any other generation in history. You carry the equivalent of the contents of the Library of Alexandria on your phone. You watch TV shows and films on your devices with the subtitles on, so it's easier to pay attention to what's going on while intermittently looking down at your phone. You look at the scrolling lyrics on Spotify while listening to songs. You deftly cut and paste other people's online words into copypasta on social media. You converse with your friends in an endless back and forth, checking your messages from morning till night. You look at your phone before you hit the pillow, and reach for it when you wake. But you think about the words themselves hardly at all. They hang briefly in the air as a discardable conveyance for shifting thought from your head into someone else's.

You never pause to wonder at the weirdness of it all – the turning of your frantically pressing thumbs into electricity, then strings of binary ones and zeros, then radio waves whizzing through the air at the speed of thought, from one beating heart to another. You message impatiently, heedlessly, as if your thumbs were an extension of your tongue. You treat writing as silent, slightly slowed-down speech. You surround your words with approximations of face-to-face encounters: tildes for scare quotes, asterisks for stress, emojis for mood. You shun the full stop because it suggests that a message might be complete in itself and not need an answer. After pressing send, you eagerly await the reply so you can scarf it down and reply to that. The time before the words arrive is dead time. To be left 'on read' – or 'blue-ticked' on WhatsApp, where two ticks confirm your message has been opened and looked at – is to feel abandoned and forgotten. You undervalue words to the extent that you overvalue empathy, the solve-all feeling of our age. You think that problems will be solved by talking to each other, and that more words equals more understanding. You see words as a delivery system for your thoughts and feelings.

Of course, I'm being provokingly presumptuous. Many of you *will* think these things, but not without caveats and not all the time. I am sure you have seen enough social media pile-ons, soul-depleting group chats and below-the-line spats to know that words do not always add to the sum of human empathy. Often they just entrench people further in their rival versions of reality or add to their feelings of unease and inadequacy. And often they are just white noise – not harmful in themselves, but so trite and needless as to drown out the words that are helpful, honest and true. I suspect you also know that writing can be not just a means of communication but a distancing device, a semi-porous membrane between you and your reader. That is, after all, why you prefer messaging to speaking on the phone, even though typing is far more cumbersome and time-consuming than talking. And the fact that you have chosen to spend three years thinking about words suggests that you are open to teasing out these more complicated thoughts about them. Hence this letter, a relic of the analogue age.

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I could sum up what I want to teach you in five words: *you are not an angel*. Words are not an empty vessel through which meaning pours, clear and cold as water. Talking to an absent reader via mute arrangements of letters is a weird thing to do. In the long sweep of human history, it is a new technology, devised around 3400 BCE, roughly 10,000 years after we started making pots. And like most technologies, from flint knapping to the smartphone, it addresses an unsolvable human problem and doesn't quite solve it.

The problem that words don't quite solve is this: we want to read someone else's thoughts, and we can't. We want to transport ourselves across space and time into another person's head, but we are trapped in the here and now, in the allotted cubic feet of space our bodies take up in the world. Yet how nearly the magic trick works! The words on Mesopotamian clay tablets, even when they are just a recipe for goat meat stew or a Sumerian farmer's IOU for six cattle, can almost feel like a hand touching ours across the millennia. Almost, but not quite.

In my classes, we look at words as carefully and unhurriedly as we can – even to the point where it bores you. We take a word in a sentence, or a line of poetry, and ask ourselves why the writer chose that one, precise, irreplaceable word. We think about syntax as a dynamic unravelling, a reshaping of the reader's perceptions with each successive

word. We notice how, when words are joined with other words, they make sonic patterns out of the mix of stressed and unstressed syllables, vowels and consonants, rising and falling cadences. The Iranian poet Kaveh Akbar says that, in the face of the 'raw overwhelm of meaningless language', poetry's task is 'to slow down our metabolization of language, to become aware of it entering us' (Akbar 2022, xvi–xvii). I want you to savour words like that, noticing them as something different from yourselves.

*

Digital technology amplifies a convenient feature of writing: the reader decides the pace at which it is consumed. Unlike many other cultural forms, such as music, dance, theatre or film, it can be quickly scanned. You can speed-read it for the takehome lesson and skip the boring bits. Reading becomes, just because it can, a matter of swiping, skimming and scrolling, on touchscreens tailor-made for the smooth ingestion of *content*. *Content* is what words have become in the age of big data. Big data understands the world, and human lives, as a computational process, and words as one part of that process. It doesn't matter who wrote the words, because everyone is now a content provider. Whenever you post a below-the-line comment or update your Twitter feed, you consent to be part of this vast computational machine and its insatiable appetite for data. The tech giants can use that data to monitor and manipulate you and sell you things.

The web is full of content farms, websites that pay freelancers a pittance to churn out low-grade articles, their sole purpose being to satisfy the algorithms that retrieve results from search engines. The content is bait to hook people on to targeted ads. It doesn't even matter if the content is written by a real person. Many news websites now publish stories written by artificial intelligence. Why bother with labour-intensive and costly reporting when you can create website traffic, and revenue, without the reporters? In *Keywords: The New Language of Capitalism*, John Patrick Leary defines content as 'any quantifiable artistic or intellectual substance that can be measured, repeated, and reliably delivered, at the lowest cost to the owners of capital' (Leary 2018, 52).

Content exists to be found. People find it by typing words into search engines. The dark art of 'keyword stuffing' involves embedding lots of keywords into the visible text and metadata of a web page, so as to climb up the search engine rankings and increase the number of page views. It doesn't matter what form the content takes. Content can mean words but also images, videos, data, or any combination of these things. If the content is words, then the words themselves – their shape, sound, rhythm, texture, tone – don't matter either. In a world of content, words are just holdalls for thoughts. *Content* is an uncountable noun, which means that any quantity of it is treated as an undifferentiated unit, to be swallowed in one go. Reading is all about consuming content, made easier by helpful estimates of the time it will take you to consume it ('10-minute read') or a 'too long; didn't read' summary. Reading like this is like an astronaut sucking a meal out of a pouch with a straw just to stock up on calories.

Content breeds more content. The online world is a gigantic, ravenous beast, fuelled on the nervous energy of the human need to notice and be noticed. It turns all this energy into words, then gulps them down and belches out some more. It always prefers content to its absence, always wants to scatter words as widely and indiscriminately as possible. Online, there is no page count, no word limit, no downtime.

A key idea in economics is that the scarcest resources are the most valuable. Words, by these lights, are no longer a valuable resource. They are limitlessly available and most of them can be read for free. I want us to do our tiny bit to correct this market glut. Within the microclimate of the classroom, at least, we will make words rise in value, by giving a small number of them the attention they deserve.

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In *Gravity and Grace*, the French thinker and mystic Simone Weil imagines two prisoners in adjoining cells who communicate by banging messages on the wall. 'The wall', she writes, 'is the thing which separates them but it is also their means of communication. Every separation is a link' (Weil 1997, 200). For Weil, perfect communication between humans is impossible and we are forever searching for some third thing that will let us connect at one remove. Words are like the wall of that prison cell. They are the third thing that is neither the writer nor the reader. Words are not our obedient servants, our faithful emissaries on the page, ever-ready to snap into action and do our bidding. They are a barrier and a bridge, a separation and a link.

Words are a third thing. When we use them, we enter an alternative world – familiar-seeming and adjoining our physical, non-wordy world, but as inescapably other as a dream. The Palestinian writer Mahmoud Darwish called this place 'the country of words' (Darwish 2013, 11). When Darwish was seven, in 1948, the Israeli army invaded his Galilean village and he fled with his family to Lebanon. On their return the following year they found an Israeli settlement where they used to live. They became 'present–absent aliens'. Darwish lived in exile for many years, in Beirut, London, Cairo, Paris and elsewhere, finally settling in the West Bank. His itinerant, nationless life intensified his sense that words did not quite lock on to the world. When your 'homeland is a suitcase', in Darwish's words, it deprives you of any easy confidence that the world is clear and describable. To him, 'words are beings' and letters are 'a mute appeal in pebbles scattered on the open path of meaning' (Darwish 2011, 83, 31, 28).

Seeing words like this is both unsettling and liberating. It teaches you that words give birth to thought as much as thought gives birth to words. Words tell you what to think, or what you already thought without being aware of it, or what you only half-understood before they explained it to you. They loosen habit-bound beliefs and correct the distorting lens of the ego. 'I think I am ready to learn how to write', Susan Sontag wrote in her diary on 3 May 1970. 'Think with words, not with ideas' (Sontag 2012).

Online discussion often descends into snark, insult and abuse. This is usually blamed on the distancing effect of the technology, on a virtual world that has made us forget we are conversing with real, woundable human beings. I think this is true but that the opposite is also true: we attach words too tightly to their authors. Words online are often written hamfistedly and distractedly, only to be seized on as if they were defensible manifestos. We think these words have said something they haven't, and that the writer has been put on the Earth to annoy us. The truth is that we are not annoyed with a person at all. We are annoyed with some tiny dots on an LED screen, arranged into straight, curving and looping black lines on a white background. The words, and not their absented authors, did the damage.

Since words are a third thing, they don't always seek or need a reply. In a late work, *Beyond*, written in his eighties, the great literary critic I. A. Richards offers a reading of the Psalms. Richards focuses on them as *apostrophe* – a figure of speech where the

writer addresses someone or something that can't respond, such as an abstract notion, an inanimate thing, or a dead or absent person. The Psalms call out to an unlistening and unmoved maker. *How long wilt thou hide thy face from me? Why art thou so far from helping me, and from the words of my roaring? O my God, I cry in the daytime, but thou hearest not.* Richards argues that poetry began with this cry in the Psalms to a silent, distant God, made in defiance of its futility (Richards 1974, 94–96).

In an age of interactivity, we forget that words have no obligation to be reciprocal. They can be a sort of articulate crying, a murmuring to ourselves, a scream into the void, a prayer that the supplicant knows will never be answered but that helps them just by being voiced. 'It's boring to be whispering to a neighbor', wrote the Russian poet Osip Mandelstam in one of his essays. 'It's infinitely tedious to pressure-drill one's own soul … But to exchange signals with the planet Mars … that is a task worthy of a lyric poet' (Mandelstam 1977, 63).

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Angelology was a huge and flourishing branch of mediaeval theology. Given how unforthcoming the Bible is on the topic, it is a miracle how much Augustine and his fellow angelologists find to say about the nature of angels. On one thing they agree: angels don't have bodies. In his book *The City of God*, Augustine decides, without much help from Genesis, that angels were made on the first day, when God said 'let there be light', and are themselves made of light. God's will and intelligence thus shine transparently through them. Thomas Aquinas thought angels could assume a body if absolutely necessary, but it was made of condensed air. That is how, in the Old Testament, three angels can visit Abraham and share a meal with him – although, since they have no digestive system, they are only pretending to eat.

Angels can't have bodies because bodies are mortal and opportunities for mortal sin. The human soul, as immaterial and immortal as an angel, is our true self, imprisoned for a few short years in a body, the worthless corporeal husk that is our temporary home. This Christian debasement of the body forms part of a long tradition in Western thought, from Plato to Descartes. It sees the human intellect as sovereign and eternal, pre-existing and surviving our animal selves.

Our touchless online lives seem to corroborate this long-held belief: the body is just the prison house of the soul. On our smartphones, we communicate with each other like angels, without the impediment of physical distance and almost without the encumbrance of a body. Scrolling and swiping a glass screen is barely an embodied act: no more than a push of the thumb, with as little mechanical energy as fidgeting.

As with Augustine's angels, this world of instant connection is made of light. By an accident of evolution, the human eye can't see the whole of the electromagnetic spectrum, so our messages can zing invisibly through the air from one phone to another, encoded in wavelengths. The contents of the internet are carried underground along optical fibres the width of a human hair. For pulses of light to travel along these fibres at the fastest speed in the universe, they must be made of glass so pure that, if the oceans were made of it, you could see the seabed. We now greet this daily miracle with a shrug – except when the guest WiFi is down on a train or in a hotel, and it becomes a minor nuisance on a par with the buffet car running out of sandwiches or the guy in the next room snoring too loudly.

Writing is no longer a slow, inky, physical affair. When did you last handwrite a message longer than a post-it note – a love letter, a postcard, a shopping list on the back of an envelope? When did you last sign your name with a real pen? Only world leaders do that now, for the flashing cameras. Technology has disembodied writing, detached it from ourselves. When I invigilate exams, I see students shaking out their wrists in pain, unaccustomed to using them for so long. The touchscreen has hyper-evolved your thumbs and atrophied your handwriting muscles. The keyboards you use have spring-loaded action, wrist rests and ergonomic keys with soft, concave centre grooves to house your fingertips. Your typing autocorrects as soon as you hit the space bar. Your words appear on backlit screens as soothingly opaque as paper, not the eye-straining green-on-black of the monitors I learned to word-process on over thirty years ago. Nothing hinders the effortless transition of your thoughts from brain to screen.

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Even so, you are still not an angel. Angels are immaculate messengers who never get in the way of the message. You are a human being, and always get in the way. Unlike angels, you take up physical space in the world. You must lug your body around with you, through every day of your earthly life.

Words emerge from and belong to our bodies, whether we notice it or not. A word begins its life as embodied sound, a shape we make with our mouths and send into the world with air from our lungs. We hear these embodied sounds in our heads even when reading silently. Blood flow and neural activity in Broca's Area, that part of the cerebral cortex previously thought to be dedicated just to processing and forming spoken words, is about the same whether we are reading silently or aloud. Our brain voices the words even if we don't. We tune in not just to the sound of words but to the kernels inside words, the alliterative and assonantal patterns made when the unobstructed breaths of vowels and the obstructed breaths of consonants collide. We sense, if only unconsciously, that a word like *cobweb* is shut off at both ends by consonants and that *arena* is opened out at both ends by vowels. We catch, faintly, the exhaled air in *gasp*, the puckering contact hinted at in *kiss*, the hard, clustered consonants of *split*.

The human body evolved through a series of trade-offs and make-dos. Thanks to natural selection, it can perform acts of extraordinary agility and dexterity, but its design flaws are legion: dandruff, hiccups, flatulence, weak ankles, lower back pain, varicose veins. You may be lucky enough to be young, able-bodied and healthy, and not have to think about your body much, but the moment will come. Even a perfect body gets sick and falls apart, and eventually packs up on its owner. If the human body were a car, the makers would have ordered a major product recall long ago. The ability to form words is likewise a makeshift, best-of-a-bad-job affair. The voice is made up of the orchestrated actions of body parts – lungs, vocal folds, palate, tongue, lips – that evolved for other purposes. To form words, the larynx moved lower down the throat, making the pathways to the stomach and lungs almost meet. Evolution decided that the ability to speak was worth the risk of choking to death.

Because the voice emerges from the body, it can't be separated from that granular, glitch-ridden singularity, ourselves. Every voice – a combination of personality, postural and breathing habits, and the special shape of the cavities in the echo chamber of our insides – is as unique as the patterns in our irises. Angels have no such inimitable, unreproducible presence in the world. How could you even tell two angels apart? Aquinas's

answer – every angel belongs to its own separate species of angel – was ingenious but a bit desperate.

Aquinas must have known that angels were a hard sell – that, being perfect, they were also perfectly dull. An angel is just a functionary, a middle manager between God and us. Angels lack the two things that make humans fascinating to each other: we are all unique and we are all alike. Words are what we use to form the flimsiest of bridges between us.

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In Wim Wenders's film *Wings of Desire*, two angels, Damiel and Cassiel, watch over the people of Berlin and eavesdrop on their thoughts. Invisible to everyone but small children, they roam the city, leaning tenderly over women giving birth, weary commuters on the U-Bahn silently cursing their lot, and suicidal men about to throw themselves off rooftops. They are overwhelmed with pity for these people, with their brief, frustrating, mixed-up lives. To an angel, humans seem so isolated and yet so desperate for connection, even when all that separates them is the width of an armrest on a subway train. But the angels also experience a more surprising emotion: envy. Human lives are so intensely sensual, so stuck in the moment, so indivisibly bound up with the material stuff of the world and the lives of their fellow mortals. Their days are filled, touchingly, with fumbled efforts to reach out to each other.

All the city's angels hang out in the main reading room of the *Staatsbibliothek*, the beautiful Berlin State Library. They look over and touch the shoulders of people reading and taking notes, or browsing in the stacks. While these scholars sit in industrious silence, pretending those around them don't exist, the angels hear all their silent reading as a symphony of overlapping whispers and murmurs, layered on top of Jürgen Knieper's haunting, requiem-like choral work, 'The Cathedral of Books'. The whole scene is a hymn to the wonders of the written word. Writing comes from our bodies but is the nearest we come to escaping them. It belongs to everyone and no one. It can thrive in our absence, even outlive us, and sound in a stranger's head, across vast distances, and tell them in a voiceless voice that they are not alone. No wonder the angels are jealous.

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A spectre haunts the academy: the large language model. No doubt you have already dabbled with ChatGPT and its competitors – the AI bots that can write text to order, by deep-learning patterns in massive amounts of existing written material. In universities, people are already suggesting that we should replace all coursework with exams to combat AI plagiarism, or that we should just accept that writing in the future will be driven by AI and train students to master it. Some writers fear that these bots will ultimately outperform and replace them. Theirs is part of a more generally defeatist take on the rise of artificial intelligence, which suggests that it will soon surpass us at complex human tasks, and perhaps even decide to destroy the gods who created it (us). When hyper-intelligent conscious machines arrive on the scene, a political philosopher recently wrote, 'humans will be as obsolescent and useless as sundials and quill pens' (Gray 2023).

I am not so sure. We have got used to the idea of algorithms ruling our lives, standing in for us and mediating our interactions with each other – turning us into moving pixels on a screen, recognising our faces and voices, trading on the stock market. But writing could never be entirely algorithmic like this. All ChatGPT can do at the moment is write a perfectly grammatical, reassuringly bland, intellectually vacuous undergraduate essay,

like a super-fluent mansplainer. We only think of it as a competitor because writing, and our expectations for it, have become so impoverished. We have been softened up by the proliferation of search-engine-optimising 'content', the cut-and-paste phrasing of management speak, and the rubric-driven and professionally voiceless essays that students are taught to write in school and at university. We think that algorithms can take over writing because much human writing might as well have been produced by algorithm. It betrays no sense of a human being behind it who has laboured to find and shape the best words to gift to their reader.

Our anxieties about these AI tools derive from this pervasive misunderstanding about writing. We see it as a near-instantaneous, computational process, instead of a creative, imperfect, time-consuming human act. Algorithms reduce words to numbers, but words are nothing like numbers. To a mathematician, numbers have a pure, crystalline beauty that speaks the intrinsic logic of reality. Maths is brilliant at explaining natural phenomena – the elliptical orbits of planets, the parabola of a thrown object, the ripples of radio waves – elegantly and economically. Maths allows us to calculate that three-quarters of the universe is made of dark matter, even though we don't really know what dark matter is. It can tell us how black holes work even though we will never see one. Music, the art form most resembling mathematics, has that same quality of right-seeming inevitability. Like maths, it seems to have some deep connection with natural laws – even though the basic elements of western music, such as scales, chords and intervals, are barely a millennium old. Like maths, music is a human invention that feels like a discovery, something that belongs not to us but to the universe and to eternity.

Words are different. They don't contain some clear, sparkling truth that pertains throughout the cosmos and for all time. They grow out of the muddle and mutability of human lives. They are inadequate entities made by inadequate beings. People give words to the things they can't live without or feel kinship with, or that loom large or cut ice in the world they inhabit. For the things they care about most of all, they over-lexicalise. Welsh has lots of words for every type and intensity of rain (*brasfrwrw* – big spaced drops; *hegar law* – fierce rain; *lluwchlaw* – sheets of rain; *pistyllio* – fountain rain) (Clifford and King 1993, 19). The Sami, the nomadic people of Europe's far North, have lots of words for reindeer, sorting them by age, size, hair colour, fur texture or antler spread. Somali has lots of words for camels, because Somalia has, by most estimates, the largest camel population in the world and they are laced into a Somali's daily life as sources of milk, meat, song and folklore. Hawaiians, who get most of their food from the Pacific, have lots of words for different kinds of fishing net. Wherever words multiply, separating broadly similar things with fine-grained distinctions, you will find what people love and the life that they share.

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In April 1937, Virginia Woolf gave a talk on BBC radio titled 'Craftsmanship'. '[Words] do not live in dictionaries, they live in the mind', she said. 'And how do they live in the mind? Variously and strangely, much as human beings live, by ranging hither and thither, by falling in love, and mating together'. Woolf loved how words quietly defied taxonomies and refused to stand on ceremony, there being 'no ranks and titles in their society' (Woolf 2008, 89–90). They had none of the human talent for making invidious distinctions. They lived in a state of gentle anarchy, ignoring hierarchies and welcoming misfits and interlopers.

You can find a recording on YouTube of Woolf reading the last part of this essay. It is the only surviving trace of her voice. With her clipped consonants and stretched vowels – words are *wareds* and often is *awfen* – she sounds like what she was, a member of the English upper middle classes at a time when accents spoke social status unapologetically. But get beyond this and you can hear that Woolf is actually tasting the words. She holds them in her mouth for a moment, relishing them before letting them go, as things she can never quite own. To Woolf, words are living things, fickle allies, irredeemable renegades.

The meanings of words evolve in our improvised encounters with each other and the world. These meanings are decided not by committee meeting or authoritative definition, but by unspoken, shifting consensus. Words give off a just-audible rustle of the human story behind their birth. *Culminate* means to reach the top of a hill. *Escape* means to lose one's cape while fleeing. *Eliminate* means to kick someone out of the door. *Embarrass* means to put behind bars. *Prevaricate* means to walk crookedly. *Forget* means to lose one's grip. *Sombre* means under a shadow, as does *umbrage*. *Rhapsody* means a song sewn together.

Since you are not an angel, I advise you to learn the derivations of words. If you know a word's origin, you're more likely to use that word well, to be aware of the penumbra of shadings and associations that surround it. But don't be one of those people who call others out for using *decimate* or *plethora* wrongly, because *decimate* actually means to reduce by a tenth rather than to destroy a large part of, and *plethora* actually means an excess of rather than a lot of. These hair-splitters think that the meanings of words evolve by some smooth lineage, rather as proponents of intelligent design ascribe a willed direction to the beautiful mess of evolution. There is no willed direction, either to evolution in nature or the evolution of words. Words are as wayward and recalcitrant as the people who use them. They are an evolutionary bodge because people are too. 'Etymology', the poet Jack Underwood writes, 'is the fossil record or DNA code, not the living creature … the story of a word it has already outgrown' (Underwood 2021). We can't police words, or be their prison warders. If we pin them down to one meaning they 'fold their wings and die', as Woolf put it (Woolf 2008, 90). We can only care about them, and know that they flourish and become beautiful, just as people do, in the light of our care.

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Angels see the whole truth, about themselves and everything else, all at once. They don't suffer hesitation or doubt. They never lie, distort or get things wrong. They don't even 'think', in the way that we understand it; they just know. As for humans, we are stuck with thinking – and thinking of the conceptual and discursive kind that Aquinas thought the lowest form of intellect. We fumble for meaning by trying out combinations of subjects and predicates, and reasoning from premises to conclusions. Our hard-won, inchmeal insights can always be replaced by better arguments, better evidence and better words. We go through life correcting ourselves. And how could words always convey what we think and feel, when we think and feel so many different things? We are conflicted, muddled, mercurial beings – undiscovered countries to ourselves, never mind anyone else. Words can't solve that problem; they can only reveal it or work round it.

We do have one underrated quality that angels don't have: curiosity. Augustine, castigating himself for being waylaid from prayer by the sight of a lizard catching flies, was

very down on curiosity. He called it, after St. John's First Epistle, 'the lust of the eyes' (Augustine 1992, 211). Curiosity *is* a kind of lust, if by lust we mean the state of suspenseful anticipation that is, as unfinished, desiring animals, our lot. We are lustful not just for each other but for life. Words are formed in that desire that feeds on incompleteness, the eager encounter with the unknown that ends with us wanting to name it and make it cohere.

The hardest thing to teach you, I have found, is that writing is meant to be hard. You are so used to frictionless reading and writing that, when you struggle with words, you think you are doing something wrong. Since writing often comes easily to you, you think it always should. Slow down. There is plenty of time. The world doesn't need any more lazily-made, shop-bought or computer-generated sentences. If writing makes you feel dull-witted, then good. You should write out of ignorance and dissatisfaction, rootling around in the dark for the best words, which only exist at the edge of what you feel able to say.

Simon Armitage says in one of his Oxford lectures on poetry that ownership of the page is the poet's birthright. Prose fills a page; the font, typeface, line spacings and margin sizes are decided by editors and designers. But poetry 'stakes out a position on a page: it takes a shape, occupies territory, becomes its own autonomous region' (Armitage 2021, 31). Be like a poet, even when writing prose. By using words sparingly, stake a special claim to the space that island of words inhabits in a sea of white. Write in a way which suggests that things are being implied in the clear daylight between the full stops. Treat the ink of your words as a precious resource. This is true anyway, the ink in printer's cartridges being dearer, at about £6000 per gallon, than the finest champagne – although that point would work better if students still owned printers, which you don't.

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In *Practicing: A Musician's Return to Music*, Glenn Kurtz describes his failed attempt to master the classical guitar. Every artist, he writes, must believe that 'art is the doorway to the divine'. But practising is always mundane: a musician sitting alone in a room with an instrument, watching their fat fingers falter through the same passage yet again, failing to keep time with a metronome. Practising forces you to confront the limits of your endurance, your motor skills and your moods. It is an attempt, Kurtz writes, 'to bring growth to repetition'. You must imagine yourself into a super-competent future, having 'passed through a limbo of work that changes you' (Kurtz 2007). Non-combatants cheerily remind you that 'practice makes perfect'. But the journey is never towards perfection, only towards an excellence constrained and made more admirable by human deficiencies. Practising combines the two human qualities – weakness and wilfulness – that make us, as a species, so exasperating and so loveable.

Writing tries similarly to bring growth to repetition. Because we are not angels, who are already word perfect, the right words only come to us at the end of long, unexciting work. That work can feel like treading water. We move words around a screen futilely, cutting and pasting to no effect, trying ten versions of the same sentence and deleting them all. But that is why writing could never be wholly outsourced to an artificial intelligence. A computer is too clever to do it, too much like an angel. Writing means winging it. You make a blind bargain with yourself that at the end of this tortuous process you will succeed in passing something on to a stranger. Writing can't evade the human condition: we're all just making it up as we go along.

No words, people say on social media. They mean that someone has said or done something so shocking that it has defeated the capacities of language. They don't mean *I have no words*; they mean *there are no words*. The words just aren't there, even if you happened to be Cicero. How odd that, in an age overprovisioned with words, at the first sign of difficulty we throw up our hands and say that we have run out of them and that nothing can be said except that nothing can be said. We are angels struck dumb. *No words?* There are always words, and you can always come up with better ones. And when we take pains to compose words that aren't just platitudes or evasions, then they cut through like nothing else. When words land, they land hard.

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I once went to a talk by the writer Tim Dee about herring gulls. It took place in the maritime city where I live and work, and we could hear and see the city's gulls through the window as he talked. Dee had come, he said, to rescue these birds from our condescension, from their status as urban pests, the teenage hoodies of the avian world. At one point in his talk, he noted how they soared with so little effort as their huge wings caught the thermals. 'Gulls are gorgeous flyers', he said.

This throwaway comment struck me with the force of something both obvious and overlooked. I had blithely assumed that birds could either fly or, more rarely, couldn't. What I learned to notice from then on is that, while most birds can fly, some are far more proficient at it than others. Swifts are, true to their name, fleet and lithe – mating, eating and even sleeping on the wing. Pigeons flap about gracelessly, as if every time they fly they must learn how to do it all over again. Corncrakes fly as if blind, often colliding with powerlines and telegraph poles. Puffins beat their stubby wings like fury to support their pot-bellied bodies. Herons fly beautifully once airborne but take off as if they can't be bothered – as if they are saying, as the poet Paul Farley has it, 'fucking hell, all right, all right, / I'll go to the garage for your flaming fags' (Farley 2006, 46).

All this began to seem like a good analogy for the human facility with words. Education has become about acquiring skills that fill gaps in the labour market – skills that you can demonstrate a student didn't have and now does. But being hyper-receptive to words is not a skillset that can be measured, tested and certified. It can only be pursued, ongoingly and endlessly. We can't fly like birds, or angels – not even badly. We are groundlings trapped in our weak-chested, thin-armed, gravity-obeying bodies. But we can still use words, an equally miraculous skill, to fly from one impenetrable human mind to another. And just as birds are mixed-ability flyers, so people use words with hugely varying degrees of virtuosity. Anyone can use words passably, as passably as most birds fly. But learning to use them with vigilance and reverence – that takes a lifetime. And the first lesson to learn is that you are not an angel.

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Why have I used up so many words to tell you that you are not an angel? Because the people who run our lives would prefer it if you carried on thinking that you were. It makes you more biddable, a better-behaved and less critically-minded worker and consumer, a pliant contributor to the data flow. Angels don't need to think about words, or anything else; they are a mere conduit through which information passes, like light through a pane of glass. When we stop noticing words, we stop noticing the world. In Marilynne Robinson's words, 'we live on a little island of the articulable, which we tend to mistake for

reality itself' (Robinson 2012, 21). The tapestry of human meaning is an untidy, ad hoc affair, just like the humans who made it. We are complicated, many-sided beings, continually inventing and reinventing ourselves. Words remind us that the world is mostly a tapestry of meaning that we have stitched, and that we can unstitch and redo if we wish.

Caring about words means caring about being fully human, in the face of a system that tries to reduce us to something less than that. This kind of care has become, in Naomi Klein's words, a 'radical idea' (Penny 2017). Care is not tangible or measurable. So we take it for granted, and forget that we need to nurture and replenish it. When we don't care enough about words, it has the same effect as a dearth of care in other areas of our lives. We feel that our lives lack meaning and love. And worst of all, we don't have the words to understand what's happening to us.

Misery comes, mostly, from feeling stuck and not in control of our lives. Caring about words makes us feel more in control and less stuck. It opens us up to other realities, made with other words. 'The world is a fabric we weave daily on the great looms of information … ', Olga Tokarczuk wrote in her Nobel lecture. 'When this story changes, so does the world. In this sense, the world is made of words' (Tokarczuk 2019). Once we realise that the world is made of words, it feels less depressingly uniform, its future less monodirectional and non-negotiable. Life, we see, can be tweaked, reworded, put another way. We can write over it, or strike it all out and start again. Everything changes and everything ends – even the most deep-set, taken-as-read systems, even the most brutal and untouchable tyrannies. The status quo always feels unassailable, right up until the moment it falls apart. It turned out to be mostly made of words.

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Angelic communion sounds appealing, doesn't it? Most of us feel, at least some of the time, a sort of nagging, low-level loneliness at not being quite on the same page as other people. We feel misread, or that we are misreading others, or both. If only we could commune with them flawlessly, we would never again endure the frustration of being ignored or misunderstood. We could be like one of *Star Trek*'s Vulcans, those modern versions of Augustine's angels who can meld their minds with other Vulcans just by placing their fingertips on their temples. Instead of agonising over the choice of every word we write, and the order in which we arrange them, we could simply tip the contents of our brain into someone else's.

And yet there is something control-freakish about that desire. As Durham Peters says, the search for angelic communion is 'a pogrom against the distinctness of human beings' (1999, 21). Words fail us, or we fail them, but the failure is salutary and, in the end, a blessing. It teaches us the humility to accept the impregnable otherness and ultimate unreadability of the people with whom we share the Earth. A world of perfect, intuitive understanding would be a tyranny of earnestness. It would rid the human conversation of tact, wit, irony, sarcasm, poetic ambiguity and all the other tonal layerings that make our interactions with each other so rich. Language works, like any democracy, through unresolved struggles between half-truths. And like any democracy, the whole thing is a shambles, but it's still better than any alternative. We will never be angels, so we can only be democrats. We must roll up our sleeves and get to work – the work of making meaning together with language, one word at a time.

'Is man an ape or an angel?' asked Benjamin Disraeli in a speech at Oxford in 1864, refuting Darwin's theory of evolution. 'My Lord, I am on the side of the angels', he said

(Dennett 1995, 335). Ever since, to be on the side of the angels has meant to be on the right side: the side of the beautiful and true. But it was Darwin who was right, and Disraeli who was wrong. We are apes, not angels – apes with smartphones, WhatsApp accounts and superfast opposable thumbs, perhaps, but still apes. And when you give words the loving attention that their beautiful shortcomings, and ours, demand, you are saying: no, I am not on the side of the angels. I am a sack of meat and bone with a primate brain, who can't read someone else's mind or be in two places at once. So I will have to use these flimsy, defective things, words, to bridge the unbridgeable chasm between us. I am on the side of the apes. Are you with me?

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