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When we sat down to the venison stew, the stew you had made that morning before we drove up to MASS MoCA, which had sat in the refrigerator getting better during the course of the day as stew does, Laurie Anderson's strange mellifluous voice roved around in my brain like a repetitive element from a dream, nonsensical words she had chanted in my ears a couple of hours before, back at MASS MoCA, while I hovered over a makeshift pond, and drifted down among falling paper leaves along a paper tree that didn't stop and then did—at a mirror that was supposed to be a pond that reflected back everything but me—and flew over a gray landscape of two rivers joining and twisting away in a way that made me think of Berlin (though I have never been to Berlin) while objects such as flowers and blackbirds and typewriters floated toward me, and if I grabbed them they said things or took me places, and one glass globe took me to a blue pond with a gold Buddha at one side, and the Buddha sat contemplating me, as I contemplated him, for quite a while before the MASS MoCA person said, okay now it's time to take your headsets off: and it was Laurie Anderson who started us four off talking, as we dug

into our bowls of stew, about the mind's duplicity, and how you can be in a plane breaking apart over the earth with typewriters flying at you, while at the same time you sit in a hall in a museum wearing a headset.

But how does it actually work with the headsets, Willie wanted to know, how is it that you can orient yourself in that virtual space where you are flying through a maze-like structure of high walls, platforms, alluring openings, and dizzying drops into space, and your orientation, confused at first, nauseous, coping with vertigo and a loss of normal boundaries, very much as if in a dream, begins to stabilize in the new space, and new boundaries begin to take shape around you and your mind begins to focus on exploring—just how, technically, Willie persisted, do the headsets allow you to become oriented in this way in two places at once, so that if you push your arms out in front of you in actuality, you move forward in the virtual world, and if you pull them back you stop. If you move them down, you begin to fly down, and up, up. You turn them to the left, you go to the left, and to the right, right. How can a computer strapped to your head understand what your arms are doing?

Almost simultaneously Nicky and I, though we had only the vaguest idea what we were talking about, said, "gyroscopes," and then—because his preoccupations in graduate school have exposed him to recent scholarship in linguistics—Nicky began talking about an Aboriginal community in Australia whose language has no words for left and right, only for the points of the compass. The thing about the people from this place, Nicky said, is that you can put them down anywhere and ask them to point north, and they will do so instantly. Their entire orientation is around the compass. They will say about this wine glass, it is northeast of the knife, or about that salt shaker, it's due west of my plate, but I am south of both. Because their language has no words for left and right, Nicky said, they have no concept of left and right. Without the language the concept doesn't exist.

But isn't everything about language, you said, isn't that how we think?

But no, said Willie, language isn't how we think, or at least not according to Stephen Pinker (because Willie had been reading a lot of Stephen Pinker in his freshman year), there's something deeper than language that forms into words and images, so that when we say "stew" we all know what is meant by "stew," but different stews pop up in our minds; the word has different applications for different people.

But then, you asked, if you all think of different stews when I say stew, why is it still always the word "stew" that makes you think them?

—which question made *me* think, as I sat there listening to you and our sons in the candlelight, of the stewpot in my grandmother's kitchen, a huge light blue enamelled casserole dish with a dark blue flower on it, which would be bubbling on the stove on Saturday afternoons in Goldens Bridge while, still in her apron, my grandmother sat in the living room with my grandfather listening to WQXR's *Saturday Afternoon at the Opera*; and I realized that of course it was from her *Joy of Cooking*, which my mother had saved for us eighteen years before, that you had improvised the recipe for this stew, substituting venison for veal and adding peas and carrots left over from Christmas; and then—because this is how my mind works—I remembered that my grandmother had died, at ninety, in Goldens Bridge, around the same time Willie was born, and I thought how strange it was that she should still be so present for me, even to joining us at this meal, yet in Willie's mind she existed barely at all; and, rather abruptly, I think, because these thoughts made me think of something else, I stood up and left the room.

That's just the word in our language, Willie was saying when I came back. But in Spanish it's estofado and what is it in French.

Ragoût, you said.

Exactly, ragoût, Willie said, yet for us a ragoût is different from a stew, it's more—spicy? I don't know. If I were to say, Mom, this is a delicious ragoût, you might think differently about it than if I said, it's a delicious stew.

Either way, you said, I'd be happy to know you liked it!

But the words come from the thing, Willie said, not the other way around. It's like the Aboriginal community Nicky was talking about. Couldn't it be said that they needed to know the compass directions so they evolved a language for them first, and ended up solving all their needs for description? In other words, who's to say that their language caused their thinking, and not the other way around?

Speaking of compass directions, I interrupted, and gyroscopes, and I held up the water-stained legal-sized binder of my grandfather's memoirs as recorded on cassettes by his oldest friend before he died, and, miraculously, it seemed, and luckily, because I was imposing something new on the conversation, I opened the browning sheaf to the very page I was looking for and began reading—because why not?—my grandfather's account of how, as a teenager at the St. Mark's School, he had become fascinated by a gyroscope that had been given to him for Christmas, had developed a theory of how gyroscopes could be used to help Zeppelins to

navigate, had written a paper on the subject for school, and, encouraged by his father, who was a lawyer in New York City, had applied for a patent at the US Patent Office. But the patent application was turned down because, as my grandfather put it, a man named Elmer A. Sperry, in Brooklyn, had come up with the same idea and sent in a patent application first, only there was a flaw in it. My grandfather had gone out to Brooklyn to speak to Mr. Sperry at the Sperry Gyroscope Company and learn of the flaw, which, my grandfather said, turned out to be the rather obvious one that gyroscopes always point to magnetic north, and in a fast-moving vehicle far above the earth, such as a Zeppelin or, as had just come into being, an airplane, the gyroscopic direction would have to be continuously adjusted to true north if the vehicle was to keep flying in the intended direction. How to keep that constant adjustment going while flying at high speed over the land was the problem that Elmer A. Sperry was trying to solve at his headquarters in Brooklyn. My grandfather, finally taking in, as he gazed around at Sperry's enormous factory in Brooklyn, that Elmer A. Sperry was a famous inventor and already the manufacturer of a gyrocompass that worked in ships, concluded that the problem was not one that he was prepared to tackle. And it was then that my great-grandfather, who must have been a kind man, and who had been so encouraging of my grandfather's interest in science, said, perhaps now you'll come back to my original suggestion and study law.

You see, you said to Nicky and Willie when I had finished reading the passage, where your grandmother got her math brains from.

Nicky looked up from his phone and gave a vague yes, and Willie said, but there you go, Nicky, those Aboriginal community members who are so compass-oriented, do you think they're pointing to true north or magnetic north?

I think it doesn't matter, Nicky said, now without looking up from his phone. The point is that it is not left and right, it is three hundred and sixty degrees. If you plunk them down anywhere they know where they are. It's like perfect pitch. He started typing rapidly.

Speaking of perfect pitch, you said, I wonder what the weather is in Iceland right now? Nicky looked up from his phone with a smile.

It's raining, he said.

It's always raining in Iceland, Willie said.

It does rain there a lot, Nicky said.

And you said, why don't you just get Geirthrudur on the phone and we can all talk to her?

And a moment later Geirthrudur's voice came jutting out of Nicky's iPhone propped against a candlestick: hello everyone! and we all shouted, hello! at the candlestick, causing the flame to waver; and because you understand that the answer is inclusiveness, and the point is to join together realities whether virtual or not, you started asking Geirthrudur about her concert, how it had gone for the group and how she had played; and Geirthrudur said it had gone very well actually, this year it was in a less drafty hall—was in a really fine hall in fact—and they didn't have to wear sweaters and coats while they played; and Willie asked what they had played, and Geirthrudur named the pieces (I now forget what they were), and Willie said how much he liked one of them, and you commented on how hard another of them must have been; and then I asked after Geirthrudur's parents and asked her to say hello to them from us, and she said she would, and how she knew they would want her to say hello to us from them, and then you said, it's been great talking to you, we should probably let you go, and Geirthrudur said, okay, I'll see you back in New York, and she added, enjoy the venison stew! Wish I could have some! and then Nicky took the phone and said goodbye and signed off, and Willie said, anybody else want more stew? And you said, you might as well bring in the pot.

And so Willie carried the pot around and we each ladled ourselves out some, and you said, but I still don't understand what this thing is that you say is underneath language, because—

There is something that comes before language, Willie said, structures in the brain. That's what Pinker says. When I say uncle, we each know what is meant by uncle, but the quality of uncle is different for both of us. You might be thinking of Uncle Alton, for example, and he has all kinds of associations for you, he gave you that down jacket and he gave Dad those studs, but I never met Uncle Alton, he died before I was born, so I might be thinking of Uncle Irving, and all he means to me, with his painting and Julie and everything, which would not be possible for you, because he's your brother. When I say brother, I think of Nicky, but you think of Irving; I say sister and I think of Rachel and you might think of Mary Ellin or Elizabeth. Or you might think of Rachel because I'm saying it, but then you're thinking of Rachel as your daughter and my sister, and all that happened to her in relation to us… Willie stopped.

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That may be so, Nicky said. But that doesn't change the fact that the way you use language in a given culture affects the way you think. Here—he held up his iPhone with a triumphant smile—is the article I was talking about by Lera Boroditsky comparing how speakers of English, speakers of Hebrew, and speakers of Kuuk Thaayorre, the language of that community in Australia, represent time. They were given randomly ordered photographs of someone at five different times in his life and told to place them in a sequence. Invariably the English-speakers organized the sequence from left to right and the Hebrew speakers from right to left. That's the direction the people who speak those languages write in. The speakers of Kuuk Thaayorre arranged the cards from east to west. No matter which direction the experimenters faced them to do the test, they arranged the cards from east to west. The left-to-right scenario never occurred to them. They arranged the cards toward themselves if they happened to be facing west, or away from themselves if they were facing east. Always the photograph of the person when he was youngest was in the east and the oldest in the west. Not having words for left or right made them extremely good navigators, so they always actually knew the compass directions, no matter where they were. Even five-year-olds, Lera Boroditsky found, could invariably point north, whereas professors and graduate students at Stanford and Harvard weren't able to point north, or very few of them could, and none with any accuracy.

But might that Aboriginal child—

Pormpuraawan.

What?

That's the name of the community, Pormpuraaw.

Might that Pormpuraawan child, you asked, be dependent on being in Australia to be so sure of the points of the compass? What if you planted her down in Palo Alto or Cambridge?

I think she would be the same. That's why I say it's like perfect pitch. You've just got it because you've been thinking in compass directions all your life.

I wonder, you said, how Pormpuraawans would approach directions within a virtual world, like Laurie Anderson's, where you navigate using your two hands, left and right. Would they construct a compass for that world?

Probably, Nicky said—and we all fell silent for a moment, thinking of the arbitrariness of any of our constructed realities, and how easily, just by donning a headset or answering the phone or reading an email, you can

find yourself involved in an entirely other set of concerns than the ones you had been confronting a moment before, and into my mind came an image of an airplane, and an ocean, and a jagged snow-covered mountain, and my daughter in a hospital bed strapped to tubes and a heart monitor; and then I was back with the faces of you three in the candlelight, and the whir and rattle of the pellet stove beside us, and I was thinking of Don, our neighbour who had shot the buck somewhere back behind our house and hung the buck in his barn and cut it up when it was ready and sliced us out the loin; Don who had brought the venison by on Christmas Eve and stood in our kitchen with his rosy cheeks and white beard exchanging Christmas news like some Santa Claus in a camouflage jacket: Don who said, standing there with his merry blue eyes and his black watch cap, you can make a stew with it if you want, but if it were me, I'd grill it with just a little salt and pepper. And then I noticed Lulu stirring on your sweater, which had fallen from the back of your chair to the floor, and the glitter of your amethyst earrings, and I tasted the warm brown stew in my mouth and the sharp wine—and why was this, in particular, in the context of all that was and might have been, so dear to me? You say I am so silent, you wonder what I am thinking, and it is true that through experience I have learned to cut myself off, there are things in my heart I would hide, because they would scare you. They scare me sometimes, even though I keep them well locked up. I am not an evil beast, just a very selfish and self-destructive and stupid and sometimes sad one, given to thoughts that stray far from the conversation, against which, perhaps, this—well—crazy talk—is the only safeguard I know. And as you refill everyone's glasses with some more of your mother's wine, and Willie ladles the last of the stew into everyone's dish, I think of the distance we have travelled since New Zealand, how far we have come, in this our "new reality," to be so full of Laurie Anderson and Stephen Pinker and Lera Boroditsky, and Geirthrudur, and Don our neighbour, and your mother with her wine, yet at the same time, in my mind at least, and I know in yours, and I'm pretty sure in those of our sons, how we still have not come all that far at all; how this sense of relief and pleasure we four take in being together over a bottle of wine and venison stew, indulging in wild talk, our minds going in all directions, still always has in it, never gone now, fuelling it, even, the shared memory of the impossible becoming real, and part of the conversation gone missing, so that the one we all want to text to say, hey, just to let you know, we're here, thinking of you, that one can no longer be reached, her message box is full and will not be emptied.