

"Oh," he says, "they all came in the basket." In fact, his name is *on* the basket, so he and his sisters would know which one was theirs. This blows our minds.

"Let me get this straight. The Easter Bunny left an intact basket with your name on it?"

"Yeah, it does that every year."

"And you didn't have to slit a couch cushion or pry up paneling? It was just there?"

Clearly, the Easter Bunny isn't above favoritism.

We are on best behavior for dinner, but it is still fun. My brother finds a high voice that excites the cocker spaniel, causing Mrs. Edelman to quickly pick up the dog and move her into the kitchen where there is linoleum.

Their daughters put on a Beatles record and scream so you can't hear it. I am proud of my sister when she stares at them. I feel honored that she saves her screaming for my brother and me.

On the way home I think about the Edelmanns and their Easter Bunny. I like our Easter Bunny. There is something better tasting about an egg that took a bit of work to find, even if it tastes a little like couch cushion. To be honest, I prefer matching wits with the Bunny. It keeps me sharp and prepared for shifting sands in my relationship with my brother.

I am curious about their Tooth Fairy, however. Something tells me the going price for a molar is higher in the city. I decide I'll wait for one of my brother's teeth to loosen and arrange a sleepover.

Rhetoric

MY NEIGHBOR, THREE-YEAR-OLD Johnny Greiling, is running back and forth in front of my house. He stretches his arms out in front of himself, he has a towel wrapped around his neck, and he's yelling, "I'm Batman, the animated version!"

Johnny comes into the house and heads straight for the dining room table. It's our ritual. I get him some water and a sheet of paper and crayons, and he makes me a drawing. Then he tells me what it is, and it replaces yesterday's drawing on the refrigerator. This time Johnny picks up a crayon and, with a look of concentration, works it all the way around, until he's drawn a circle. He pauses. I have just watched Johnny Greiling draw his first circle. He grabs the paper and runs out the door toward home. The next day he comes back with the paper. He sets it on the table. It's very wrinkled, and I'm pretty sure he slept on it. I ask if he

wants a new sheet. No, he wants this one. Then John takes another crayon, and he puts in the eyes, puts in the mouth. And now I realize why this is so important to him. Johnny has drawn his first face. This picture is someone he knows, or someone he doesn't know, but now it is someone he can tell what to do. And things are going to be different in the world of John Greiling.

STORIES WORK THAT WAY FOR ME. When I can tell a story about something, it doesn't control me anymore. When I tell about something, it's from my perspective, in my terms, so I don't fear those things in life that are larger than I am. That's what stories do—tackle the big questions: where we come from before life, where we go after life, what's funny, what's sacred. And then, even if the question isn't answered, by asking it, we know we're not alone.

Stories, most importantly, show us that we belong.

AS A KID, I WAS BLESSED with the gift of fabrication, the ability to weave. My "fabric" was made from invisible threads of speech and my early yarns were colorful if a little crude.

My Grandma Kling, a pragmatist, would reproach me. "Kevin, are you telling stories?"

I could tell there was a negativity in her tone but I proudly proclaimed, "Yes," and awaited my reward.

What I usually got, depending on the severity and fallout caused by the tale, was the soap in the mouth. As if that could clean the stories away. To the contrary, it seemed to only serve as a palate cleanser for the next course. Finally

I wore Grandma down. The soap was left undisturbed, she would just shake her head and, in time, laugh. The sound of my grandma laughing still might reign as the most beautiful thing I've ever heard.

I was blessed with a life spent with laughers and fabricators. My family, experts all. In fact, I had to stop having intermissions in my shows because I could hear people laughing harder in the lobby than during my performance. My brother was out there, expanding on my stories.

I HAVE ALWAYS LOVED WORDS, especially the spoken word, whether used properly or regionalized, twanged or altogether altered. The Minnesota accent revolves around the long "O" sound, derived from the combination of Scandinavian, Irish, German, and Native American influences. Every region has its idiosyncrasies. People talk about a southern accent, but the South has a different set of rules for every county. It's the same in the North. I love how they say "youins guys" when referring to a group in Pittsburgh. It's the cousin of the southern "y'all," or "all y'all." One time a buddy said, "Us youins guys can beat youins guys in ping-pong." An invisible line runs across the U.S. It's especially distinct through Indiana; I call it the "Hon Line" because below it the waitresses all call you "Hon." I'm a big fan of the double negative, found in regions throughout the country. I'm elated when treated to a triple. The driver of a Minneapolis city bus once exclaimed, "Yeah, there ain't a day goes by I don't say, *shoot*, I never seen that before." He hit those Minnesota Os like a walleye after leeches. How do you beat that?

The son of my friend Steve Alter came home from first grade one day. Steve asks, "Aaron, what did you learn today?" Aaron says, "Ask with our words, not with our teeth." Again, words to the rescue.

I learned early in life that calling out the word "Mom" got swift and immediate action, and that sometimes just saying "Mom" could make me smile, even when she wasn't in the same room. I learned the elasticity of words like "no."

Later I found that I could tell by the words people chose to refer to my smaller left arm whether they blamed me, my parents, God, or themselves for my condition. And with that information I could get what I needed from them. Word choice tells a lot about a person.

In junior high I learned about the humor in words: the laughter elicited when a teacher would say *homo erectus*, *bastard file*, *hoar frost*, *penal colony*, *sperm whale*, or *tufted titmouse*. When my mouth got me in trouble, I was fortunate to have teachers who discouraged me with a wink. How wonderful was that? Outright encouragement has not near the effect of those winks, because what use is a story if it doesn't contain a bit of subversion? In college I found that last night was only as good as your ability to tell about it.

Even to this day, I try to choose my words carefully. I have a relatively weak command of the English language, so to get an idea across, each word must be a hero.

This is why I get upset when words I love are used roughly and carelessly. Like the phrase *theater of war*. This bothers me. War has a horror that seems lessened, made unreal, by associating it with the artifice of theater.

Two words I love, *fool* and *clown*, are used interchangeably, but they are two separate beings. Shakespeare has both fools and clowns in his plays, and they are very different in nature. Fools have a foot in two worlds, an ethereal as well as an earthly quality, while clowns are firmly planted in a world parallel to our own. King Lear's fool gives good counsel because he connects the absurdities of two worlds. The clowns in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* demonstrate great examples of what not to do by doing it, but they would make horrible advisors, because clowns can't understand another's world. In many native cultures, clowns are a vital part of society. Living on the fringes, "contraries," they provide laughter at times when needed. They also present absurdities of a situation by showing their version. However, if the clowns are making more sense than the leaders, you knew there is a problem.

My friend Al, an Anishinaabe medicine man and wise fool, says that we have to be careful in selecting our leaders. He argues effectively that many of our past leaders have been clowns. Not good. He advises, "Always go with the fool."

THE GREEKS BELIEVED in two forms of truth: *logos* and *mythos*. *Logos* deals with logic, syllogisms, and theorems, whereas *mythos* finds the truths that live inside of story, the truths within. It took me a long time to learn that a story doesn't have to be factual to be true. Art is often called "truth told through a lie." How truthful are the depictions in the paintings of the Impressionists? Does van Gogh's work

reflect a representation of the sunflower field or instill the serenity of a summer day in southern France?

WHEN ARISTOTLE SPOKE of rhetoric, he cited three forms of persuasion. We persuade through logic, through morals, and through emotions. Logic presents the arguments through the facts, morals show them through our beliefs about what is right and wrong, and emotional persuasion affects our hearts.

When most people are asked why they vote for someone or believe something, they point to a logical answer, relying on facts. In truth, logic is the least likely to succeed in persuasion. My fishing friends always kiss the minnow before putting it on a hook. I asked if it's superstitious. "No," they say. "Common sense, I don't want to jinx it."

It turns out, emotions get us to act faster than anything else. Fear especially. Fear of the unknown, of death, of the other, of losing what you have.

Rhetoric is trying to get us to perform an action, and its success is only determined by whether not we perform the desired action. Rhetoric doesn't care how it wins, it just wants to win. The purpose and use of rhetoric is the responsibility of the speaker.

THE ANCIENTS ALSO BELIEVED "the spirit" was found in breath. We "inspire" and we "expire."

"I am the Word," announced the Holy Spirit. The breath. Story lives in breath, in spirit.

The prophets spoke the first messages from the beyond

in forms of story. Religions transformed in later years as the word was taken from the breath, from the spirit, at times manipulated to serve a person or cause.

Even as a kid I was fascinated by literature that arrived from the oral tradition: Beowulf, Gilgamesh, Roland, the Bible. In *The Arabian Nights*, Scheherazade saves her own life for a thousand nights through the power of her stories. Others have stretched the language: Shakespeare and Pushkin creating words as they go; writers who provoked society, like Cervantes, Swift, and Voltaire; those who wrote with a voice, like Twain, Dickens, and Flannery O'Connor. I felt I could hear their words jump from the page.

THE STORY OF THE ODYSSEY was told for many years before Homer wrote it down. When I've tried to read the *Odyssey*, it has seemed disjointed. The story begins somewhere in its middle, there are a series of digressions and geographic leaps, narrators change from third person to Odysseus's first-person account, there are scenes with gods, then humans, then demi-gods—the plot is literally all over the map.

But when I've *heard* it told, it's another story. One night, in Utah, a storyteller began at sunset, and by sunrise the next day, Odysseus was reaching the shores of his beloved Ithaca. It was beautiful and chilling and obvious that the narrative was created to be told. The brilliant way the story unfolds holds the listener rapt. This, like all great works honed by telling and retelling, is held together by invisible threads.

In Celtic tradition, the bards of the ancient kings were

as revered as the top generals. The kings knew that history would know of them through the words that were passed down. Make those words soar, weave your cloak of immortality of the finest invisible thread.

The shanachies, Celtic storytellers, were the keepers of history in a tradition that began in the days of the druids and continued on long after Christianity arrived. They traveled around rural areas, administering a sense of belonging to the isolated inhabitants of the Irish countryside. A shanachie was welcomed into a home with a meal, and then the family and neighbors would gather around the sod fire. If there was news it was shared: a war, a bit of gossip about the king, a joke, a fable, history, sometimes all at once. If the shanachie was asked the question, "Who is king now?" the response might well start with, "Once there was a man called Adam and a woman called Eve," because the answer required a lineage and an understanding of past, present, and future.

I'M IN AUSTRALIA, the Outback, in 2006, staying with some of the Adnyamathanha at a place called Iga Warta. Adnyamathanha means "people of the rocks." Their culture goes back thousands of years. I'm walking with Cliff Coulthard, and he is explaining how virtually every plant has a use as food or a medicine. Suddenly what had seemed like a barren desert is a land rich in life. Cliff points to the landscape and says, "This is our Bible, our encyclopedia, and our supermarket. The land holds a story and we are part of that story."

An emu, a huge flightless bird, runs past. Cliff smiles and says, "Fast food."

He then points to a small rock formation shaped like a resting eagle. He tells me the story of the eagle and his nephews, magpie and crow. By story's end, the reason for that formation is clear. Depending on how it's told, inside that story are many lessons. It not only tells how the land was formed, it also provides a map where one might find a cave for protection. The story also describes the relationship between nephews and uncles, as well as other family bonds. Depending on your needs, age, gender, or family, there are layers and layers to this tale, layers I will never understand.

Cliff points again. He says through this valley, the rainbow serpent traveled and ate something that made him sick. His people have avoided that area for thousands of years, because where the rainbow serpent vomited, you will become sick.

And now geologists have discovered uranium on that land, in exactly the areas where the serpent became sick. Uranium mines have sprung up, replacing sacred sites. Cliff is worried soon they will take Eagle Mountain. He says, "If that mountain goes, we will lose that story." With the story will go the knowledge it contains. It's like the loss of a plant or an animal. Gone is its medicine, its nutrition, its gift. Stories are life.

I know things change and we live in a different time now, but these folks sustained this environment for over *forty thousand years*.

. . .

I THINK ABOUT MINNESOTA. I love my home, but often I feel more like a renter than part of the Earth. We all know how we treat things we rent. A buddy of mine says, "Yeah, a rented car will drive over anything." I want to learn those stories of our land, from the Dakota and the Ojibwe. I want to hear stories from our ancestors, my friends, and our kids. The Dakota say we need to listen to the children because they are closer in time to the Creator and remember more.

This gives me hope for the future. It gives me hope for the Earth. Maybe, in time, we will give her a good story. Until then, listen to your fools and watch those clowns.

Train

THE FIRST TIME I WENT to Seattle was on a bet.

My buddy, Easy Bob, and I are at the Terminal Bar early in May having a couple of beers and indulging in a pickled repast.

All of a sudden, Easy Bob announces that he recently enjoyed a delicious seafood dinner at a restaurant in Minneapolis.

I say, "There's no way, Bob, we're three thousand miles from the nearest ocean."

Bob says emphatically, "It was good."

"Impossible."

"Seriously, probably the best seafood dinner I ever ate."

"Now that could be true, on account of you've never been out of the state."

"Neither have you."

"We're not talking about me. Besides, I have, too. I've