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Saturn Is The Biggest Planet On Earth

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“What do you need to sit fully into your seat?” the yoga teacher asks us in an earnest, probing voice. “To sit fully into your pose, into yourself, into your life?” she continues, as we sit on our mats and try to figure out what she’s talking about. Then she instructs us to bow and “dedicate the energy of your practice” to someone. I wonder: is dedicating my practice to someone the same thing as praying for them? I wiggle my butt on the little, round meditation pillow, trying to sit fully into it, and decide to dedicate my practice to my younger brother, who has just been “transitioned” out of his job.

Dedicate, transition: every little corner of our culture has its own dialect, its own way of using words. English is a hard

enough language as it is, with so many exceptions to so many rules. It makes me want to apologize to the immigrants trying to learn it, and also to my brother’s daughters, ages four and six. Though born and raised in California like me, they still get tripped up by the odd conjugations and pronunciations of their native tongue: Why, for instance, we say we *caught* something instead of we *caught* it. And why we pronounce *Ford* one way and *word* another. “I’m sorry,” I want to say to my nieces, to the children I tutor in the San Francisco schools, to the Mexicans I meet in the dressing room at Mervyns, to all students of English, both native and foreign born. This language makes little sense. Even the sound of it is harsh, unlike Spanish, which jangles like oversized earrings.

"I got transitioned out of my job," my brother tells me in a soft, sad voice. He's speaking English, but I don't understand what he means until he explains that "transitioned" is a fancy way of saying "fired." His name, Isaac, means "he who laughs," and he usually lives up to it. His is a sweet giggle that can be endearing coming from a big, sports-loving, meat-eating guy like him. He also cries more than any other man I have ever met. And that, too, in a man his size, is endearing, and also heartbreaking, especially since I'm his older sister and our "family of origin," as the social workers call it, was poor and divorced, we children evicted too early from our one and only childhood. I want to give my brother a severance check and a gold watch — everything that his company, a local television station, did not give him. While I'm at it, I want to give him parents who attended his high-school football games, a car for his sixteenth birthday, and introductions to a couple of sports-media personalities who could, with a phone call, set him up with fifty thousand dollars a year and video equipment to produce his own local sports program.

My brother's six-year-old daughter is named Mille — pronounced "Millie." Her first-grade teacher has taught her about silent *e*'s, but her name, she and I realize one day while she's practicing her reading at the kitchen table, has the opposite of a silent *e*. What would that be? A noisy *e*? A loud-and-proud *e*? Mille's sister, two years younger and always wanting to keep up, tells me she can write her name as well. She just throws down those letters — and she's got a lot of them in Tallulah — onto the paper. She doesn't care what order they're in: that's her name. She is at the age when she does not understand the difference between fact and opinion, between knowing something to be true and wanting it to be so. Like certain politicians and talk-show hosts, she operates under a paradigm of conviction: if she feels strongly enough about something, it must be right.

"Saturn is the biggest planet on Earth," she told me the other day, as if daring me to contradict her.

"I don't know about that," I said, taking her bait.

"Yes, it is," she said, not a trace of doubt in her voice, as if she were saying, *I like strawberry yogurt best*.

I appreciate her boldness, and I respond with a giggle that sounds like her father's, he who laughs. This kind of conviction can be endearing in a four-year-old, though not so endearing in a talk-show host, nor in the president of a country — people who hold the fate of so many lives in that slender gap between their confidence and their ignorance.

The first thing I need in order to sit fully into my seat is a better chair. Everything I own I've scrounged, so none of it necessarily fits the purpose to which I've put it. I grew up poor, and I still don't know which verb tense — past or present — to use between the subject *I* and the adjective *poor*. No matter how much money I'm pulling in, it just doesn't seem right to buy something brand-new and designed for only one function: like, say, a chair to use at a computer.

You don't have to be poor to cultivate this habit of buying secondhand or doubling and tripling up on the uses of things;

you could also be an environmentalist. But those of us who reduce, reuse, and recycle out of necessity can sometimes have trouble spending money on something costly that we really need, even if we could maybe afford it. We live in fear of becoming poor in the future, like we were in the past, and maybe even are in the present. But that doesn't keep us from wanting: Wanting that office chair covered in breathable blue, red, or black nylon with the adjustable seat and padded back. Wanting this thing so badly because we believe that if we get it, it will help us achieve everything we've ever dreamed of doing or having or being.

Truth be told, though, what I really want is that cool Eames-style task chair with the ergonomic design that relieves neck, back, and shoulder pain; the one that comes in muted tones of burnt orange and pale puke green and has levers for shifting back and forth, up and down, and around and around. Then I'd be sitting pretty. Then I'd be sitting fully into my seat. Then I'd be wheeling around my desk, watching my fingers buzz along the keyboard; seeing the words and sentences blossom onto the electronic screen; letting the answering machine take my calls from nine to one every day, because those are my creative hours; and returning those calls only after I did my yoga and had my lunch of crab and avocados (if they were in season) and organic baby spinach dressed in a locally grown Meyer-lemon vinaigrette.

Not everyone who grows up poor is infected by such an audacious imagination. My older brother, for instance, succumbed to cynicism instead of escapism. But when I was a girl, I used to dream of a voice on a loudspeaker picking me out of the crowd on our busy Mission District street corner in San Francisco, and a helicopter sending down a rope ladder and then transporting me to a kind of Paris salon in the clouds, where I really belonged, where everything would finally be perfect. My life would be (conditional tense, describing the future of my past) my art: writing, filmmaking, whatever. My younger brother's conditional life would be sports: first playing them, then reporting them on television, plus a little acting in movies and tv commercials on the side. It would be the O.J. Simpson trajectory. This was before O.J. became a joke about a glove and a white Bronco, back when he was a star athlete who came from an even worse neighborhood in San Francisco than we did.

"There's the way you talk, and there's the way you write," I tell the kids I tutor in the crowded public schools of inner-city San Francisco. (Of course, *crowded*, *public*, and *inner-city* are code for mostly poor and not white.) I don't want them to turn their backs on their way of talking, because they need it to stay tethered to themselves, to maintain an address in their neighborhoods so they'll always have a place to call home. But I also want to teach these kids the language of school, jobs, money, and power; of filling out forms and applications and making reports and statements to the press. They need to learn this breakable and breaking and broken language of English, with its many coded ways to say one thing and mean another: The yoga code, in which we aim to "sit fully into our seats." The business code, in which people

get “transitioned” out of their jobs, and out of their dreams as well. The code of doctors, who have words that allow them to speak of sickness and dying without falling apart. The code of secretaries, who return your question (*Is the boss in?*) with one of their own (*Who’s calling?*).

The organization where I volunteer sometimes sends me into classrooms to tutor, and other times I meet with students at the tutoring center, which happens to be located on a sooty, Spanish-speaking street a few blocks down and over from the one on which I grew up. I attended an editorial meeting at this center with a half dozen volunteer tutors and a dozen high-school students, whom we were helping to produce a book of oral histories. A big topic of discussion — especially among the adults — was how much we should change the wording of these oral histories in order to make them accessible to readers. The students had conducted their interviews in many different languages: in English and Spanish and street English and Spanglish; in rural Southern and urban Northern; in Tagalog pure and Tagalog second-generation; in Samoan, Mandarin, Cantonese, Vietnamese, Khmer, Thai, and Laotian; in the many dialects of islands and wars and cities, of ambition and survival and remembering and forgetting.

Finally one boy pointed out that he and his fellow students had to take classes to understand certain books, because the authors — guys named Twain and Shakespeare — wrote in ways that were inaccessible to many readers. “If we have to study *them* to understand *their* writing,” he wondered, “why shouldn’t people have to study *us* to understand *our* writing?” We, the adults, were silent. It was a brilliant question. No one had an answer.

But there is an answer: You’ve got to write right — i.e., white — in order to get ahead. At the same time, you can’t desert your natural way of speaking and writing, which is also your way of thinking and eating and sleeping, of fighting and kissing and dreaming, because you can’t burn down your own home. You’ve got to learn at least two languages: one to make it out of the neighborhood, and one to keep a foothold in it.

When you volunteer, people assume you are well-off: who else but the rich could afford to work for free? Even the people working with you at the tutoring organization assume you fit into the category of financially *comfortable*, a term that makes it sound as if money were a fluffy bathrobe or a pair of slippers. This assumption is made even if you are (or once were, and maybe one day will again be) poor. Even if you are volunteering because you are lonely and looking for human interactions that go beyond “Next in line” and “Will that be all for you today?” Even if you just want a reason to return to the rowdy streets you knew as a child, streets filled with yelling and yearning, with people making do and making art and making catcalls at you. Even if you just want to help arm these kids — who are your peers, except thirty years younger — with the munitions of language, the native speakers and the English-language learners alike. You know (present) from experience (past) that they will need (future) an arsenal of words and phrases and paragraphs in order to maybe get

somewhere in a world that employs this complicated, breakable English language. You also know, also from experience, how lonely it is to be stranded in that world without a place that feels like home.

In white parlance, *urban* is code for poor and nonwhite, which in San Francisco usually means black or Mexican. *Mexican* itself is really just shorthand for a native of any Central or South American country, and sometimes even of Guam, Samoa, and the Philippines. There are many Chinese students in the city’s urban neighborhoods, but they generally don’t get classified as “urban” unless they’re members of a gang. The newer and less-accomplished Asian immigrants, however, from countries such as Vietnam or Laos, are often called “urban,” though they are generally the most rural of us all, searching for something that feels like soil underneath all this pavement. The rich (white) people in this city live at the tops of hills, while the poor (nonwhites) live at the bottoms. You can be a city dweller all your life, but if you live at the top of an asphalt hill rather than in a valley, you will never be considered “urban.”

Also the hilltops, and even the neighborhoods on the inclines, have a special parking system that works by code. If you speak the language and can afford to live in the neighborhood, you get a permit to prove it and can park wherever you want for however long. In the valleys and urban neighborhoods, however, parking is a free-for-all. This helps facilitate a kind of one-way tourism in which rich white people can travel at will into the lower, louder neighborhoods, buy a burrito and a cheap beer or maybe a bag of drugs, then drive safely back to their comfortable homes and ease into their robes and slippers. But the opposite is not so easily accomplished, thus helping to keep the riffraff sequestered in the valleys. (Most of us would rather be there anyway, because not only is it foggier on those bayside hills, but it’s too damn quiet as well.)

If you’re that rare combination of white *and* urban, you present a classification problem — unless you are a *punk*, which is a person who is poor on purpose; or an *artist*, which is a punk with a purpose; or *white trash*, which is certainly not something anyone is on purpose. But if you are white and educated and dress nicely, people are going to assume you are not urban. Other white people at the organization where you volunteer are going to assume you’re from the heights or the suburbs or a nice two-parent home back east or up north.

The fact is, if you’re going to be white in this type of hip arts organization, you’ve got to dress down and a little geeky in order to be taken seriously. You’ve got to look like you’re part of the group I’ve come to call the *grungerati* — writers and painters and performers who apparently feel it would be selling out to buy clothes that match or a sexy pair of shoes. You’ve got to wear unflattering cat’s-eye or rectangular glasses and dress in oversaturated, disagreeable colors, like burnt orange and pale puke green. Plaids with stripes are appropriate, and thick, colored tights if you are female, or a wrinkled madras shirt if you are male. Very important: do not iron your clothes; even mending is frowned upon.

But let’s say you happen to have dressed in this manner as a child in this very neighborhood in the 1970s, because your



parents could not afford new clothes or keep up with ironing, and when you outgrew your dresses, your mother had you wear them over pants, as if they had suddenly become blouses. You may then have spent a lifetime coveting clothes that fit, that look new and sharp, as opposed to reused and recycled. You may have learned how to look nice without spending a lot of money. You may have adopted a certain urban style: sleek, closefitting, a little flashy. Rich and middle-class white folks might think it's tacky, but at least it's put together — no holes; no wrinkles; no big, fat, ugly shoes.

When I go on a tutoring assignment in the schools — the same schools my brothers and I once attended — the students compliment me on my clothes. “She dress good for a old person,” one girl says, pointing to me. Their mothers understand me, too. We nod almost imperceptibly to each other. We’re single women trying to get ahead and stay ahead. We’ve got to look good, take life seriously, be ready at all times to jump on an opportunity or avoid a rip-off or find someone to watch the kids if a date or a job interview comes up. My co-workers at the tutoring organization, who generally share my skin tone and hair texture, speak to me in polite code, feigning respect while simultaneously dissing me. Mothers who come in dressed like me get the bright, over-the-top smiles of the privileged to the underprivileged, or the advantaged to the disadvantaged, or however the social workers are putting it these days. I confound everybody: light hair, green eyes, tight blouse, big earrings, pants with flair and no

wrinkles, talking about novelist Jamaica Kincaid’s economy of language and also conversing in fluent Spanish about where to get avocados on sale five for a dollar, not too bruised.

“What are you?” a white woman asked me recently. It’s a question I have heard in various forms throughout my life. “Are you black?” a young woman, whose parents were from India, wanted to know after I got off the dance floor. “Are you Brazilian?” a black semipro basketball player asked me after a game. “De dónde eres?” (Where are you from?) the Mexicans ask when I speak to them in their language, which I heard everywhere while growing up, wandering the streets of my neighborhood bored, lonely, and curious. Tantalized by this foreign tongue and wanting to break its secret code, I studied and practiced Spanish for years. And though I speak it with an accent that can fool even native speakers, it is still not anything I can call my own. Which reminds me: what I need besides a chair is a house and a family and a city and a language to which I belong.

I once tutored students at a private college in New England. (It was my job; I wasn’t volunteering for free.) Of course, *private college* and *New England* are code words for white and well-off, or at least comfortable. I’m pretty sure the students all had robes and slippers. But even these kids, whose primary language was English, had trouble transitioning (if I may borrow the term from my brother’s former employer) from speaking English to writing it. I’d have

them read their papers aloud to me so we could hear the words in neutral airspace, as if encountering them for the first time. Their voices would drop into a formal octave to pronounce the long, convoluted sentences fortified by the thesaurus and held together by the authority vested in the passive voice. These students tripped and fell over their own words. After a paragraph or two I came to their rescue, stopping them with a gentle tap on the arm so they didn't have to suffer anymore.

"What I meant was," they'd say to me, falling back into their normal speaking tone and everyday subject-verb-object constructions. And then they'd explain in a few clear words what they had been trying to say in the awkward, formal language of college essays and official documents.

As a tutor in San Francisco's public schools, I have read this same impenetrable language on school assignments handed out by teachers. I have sat next to eleven-, fourteen-, and sixteen-year-olds who wanted to know what this written assignment was asking them to do, and I have frequently been unable to answer them. Reading those sheets is like being lost in France: a few words sound familiar, but I have no idea how they are connected to one another, or to me. When I was a student in these classrooms, I often felt this same bewilderment, but I always assumed it was I who was illiterate, and that the language of academia was correct. Now I feel like a social worker advocating for clarity. I keep wanting to ask the teachers, "But what do you *mean*?" and see if they, like the New England college students I once tutored, can translate their prose into words that make sense.

The students in the city's public schools, meanwhile, may not be fluent in the convoluted English of official written papers, but they sure know how to fly back and forth among several other languages. One teenage girl, half Mexican and half Filipina, glides between Spanish, Tagalog, and English, creating an *idioma* of her own. Snapping her gum, she takes a surreptitious peek at her cellphone, glances at the assignment sheet, and says to me, "Chica, what I'm supposed to do here?"

To get to the volunteer center, you must pass through a storefront that has been turned into a gift shop to help fund the tutoring program. It resembles a museum gift shop, except it's dark and overstuffed, almost as if it were designed to confuse people who come in off the street, blinking their eyes to adjust to the dim light and wondering where they've landed. For some reason the gift shop has a pirate theme, and so, along with books and t-shirts, it also sells eye patches, skull-and-crossbones flags, treasure maps, and other "pirate supplies." And, on the floor at the far end of the counter, perhaps most confounding of all, is a large barrel of lard.

Apparently lard is some kind of pirate thing. And apparently *pirate*, in a language I don't understand, is some kind of writer thing, or maybe a rebel thing, or a grungerati thing. (Like I said, I don't speak this language.) There is a store log — counterpart, I suppose, to a ship's log — and people write in it about the lard: reminiscences; appreciations; facts about lard, or at least beliefs they feel strongly to be true. The lard barrel is a source of many nervous laughs and quizzical looks, and

also knowing smirks from a certain demographic that finds profound irony in that tub. The lard is not actually sold, but you can barter for it. I'm not sure what the store takes in trade for a lump, a lick, a pound of the stuff. How do you measure out lard from a barrel? By the scoop? The handful? The bootful? And what do you keep it in once you get it home? These are the kinds of questions the lard inspires, and perhaps this is its reason for being in a wooden keg in the shop that fronts the room where tutors and students work together on writing sentences and stories: it's there to ignite surprise, to arouse curiosity, to explore the slippery terrain between confusion and understanding.

I think the lard serves another purpose as well: it acts as a litmus test for distinguishing the people who "get" the lard — or act as if they do — from the people who don't. For the Spanish-speaking moms and kids who live in the neighborhood and walk past the keg to get to their tutoring sessions, lard is not an ironic joke; it's food. They use it to make *refritos*, to fry their *rellenas*, to get their calories to fuel their bodies. But in the pirate store, it sits in an open-mouthed wooden keg, collecting grime like a New York City snowbank. Splotches of lard spill out of the keg and smear themselves on nearby shelves, books, cards, and other items. A middle-aged man walks by in a button-up shirt and nice, creased slacks. His pleats flirt with a tuft of lard sticking out of the keg like frosting. Somehow he strolls by without noticing how close he came to getting greased.

My gut feeling is that lard stains do not come out of clothes easily, if at all, though I do not know this to be a fact. I only feel it strongly to be true, the way my four-year-old niece knows that Saturn is the biggest planet on Earth. My gut feeling is that the neighborhood moms who launder and iron the clothes of their sons and daughters do not get the joke of the lard and would prefer their children not stick their hands into the tub and then, as children will do, touch those lard-dipped hands to their shirts, dresses, jackets, hair, and faces.

Perhaps it is because I come from this neighborhood, or perhaps it is because I moved away, but I tend to worry about these children, about all children. How will they ever learn enough to be successful, and how will they ever *unlearn* enough to be happy? Yet they proceed undaunted, or perhaps unaware of the sheer amount of information — both facts and opinions, often conflicting — that lies in wait, ready to ambush them.

"Hey," says my niece with the unsilent *e*, "the word *eye* is pronounced the same as the word *I*, but they don't have any of the same letters." She is delighted with her cleverness at having made this discovery, and with the cleverness of the English language, the way it doesn't make sense but still seems to make sense anyway. We are sitting at the kitchen table doing homework out of a purple folder. And though she is actually on her knees in the chair — her legs folded underneath her, the soles of her bare feet facing up, her bottom resting on her calves — she is sitting fully into her seat. Next to her, perched on the edge of my own chair, I try to figure out if my time has passed, if I have both absorbed and lost too much to ever get my body to unfurl like that again, or if I still might have a chance to settle into my own place in this world. ■