

I've made a life of words. Making up words, delighting in words: their sound, their meaning, their beauty. "Belly button," for example. As a baby boy, I loved that sound. It made me laugh. It taught me to point to my own belly button. "Belly button." That trochee: a long short, long short beat with two explosive consonants: "**Belly Button.**" I couldn't say it without giggling. And because I knew what it looked like and where it was on my body, I could identify it if you asked me, "What is a belly button?"

Because that much knowledge was accurate, I was able to learn later, as I grew up, where the belly button came from. A whole human physiology could be built on my growing understanding of the funny two words I learned as a child. And no matter how deep or broad my understanding of "belly button" became, there was always a touch of humor in it. It was the perfect word: it named what it sounded and sounded what it named in utter childlike simplicity. The simple word is often the right word, the later complexity growing out of our own complexity as we evade, fear, temporize, equivocate, and lie about the meaning of words and therefore of what they name.

Words can be beautiful, like "lavender," or funny like "ish kabibble," as in "that's all ish kabibble," meaning it doesn't mean anything; or "Cucamonga," a place in California that sounds funny to me because of the Jack Benny radio show with its announcement that the train would be leaving "on Track Five for Anaheim, Azusa, and Cuuuuucamonga!" That sound me laugh in delight when I was a young boy.

Funny words, beautiful words, scary words, serious words, persuasive words, ominous words like, "infamy," as in President Franklin Roosevelt's proclamation that the attack on Pearl Harbor was "a day that will live in

infamy.” Words. They are stuff of our lives. We must care for them, about them, and preserve their integrity.

And that is what I keep doing, even now in my eighth decade, and it all began when I was a boy with a penchant for talking to myself in nonsense words and syllables that sounded grand and important when I declaimed them to the empty air. And sometimes, when I was alone, which was often, I would actually sing the nonsense to a melody I knew or one I would make up on the spot. Even today, when I am in the car alone on a long journey and find myself wanting to doze off, I begin to sing, my own voice entertaining me and delighting me with the stories I’m making up to fit the lyrics -- something my dad would also do on trips we took together, just the two of us and he entertaining me by telling me stories and singing.

I’m not sure exactly when the nonsense talking and singing started to make sense, but I know it began with discovering poetry that made the same kind of “noise” I was making but also told an interesting story. I think my first experience of this making-sense verse was when I was in the seventh grade and had to read Longfellow’s “Evangeline.”

We took turns reading the poem in George H. Gregory’s English class in what was then called “Junior High,” and now is usually known as “Middle School.” I was overwhelmed with the sounds and could hardly wait my turn to read. John Greenleaf Whittier’s, “Snowbound,” had the same effect on me. But that kind of music faded once I began to discover short lyrics like Oliver Mary Plunkett’s, “I See His Blood Upon the Rose,” in sophomore English at the high school seminary in Cincinnati. That kind of short lyric drew me deeply into its geography, and I felt comfortable there; and I wondered if I, too, could make a little structured thing that would stand for the experience of its making.

What helped me see I could was my realization at some point that the word, “stanza,” in Italian means “room.” I imagined a room that the poem furnishes with words that make each room of the poem its own beautiful space. Every piece of furniture mattered and had to fit into the other pieces in the room. All of that came in the end to what Beckett has Molloy say in his novel of the same name, “Not to want to say, not to know what you want to say, not to be able to say what you think you want to say, and never stop saying, or hardly ever, that is the thing to keep in mind, even in the heat of composition.”

That is what I feel facing a blank piece of paper and wondering what empty space is this that is once again moving me to talk to myself but although more hesitantly than I did as a child. Though I don’t quote Beckett aloud, I do experience at times the equivalent as I start to make the room its own unique space, even when I’m not quite sure what I’m doing and wonder if I want to do it one more time. Then as soon as I start working on the room and see words falling onto the page, I know I do want to keep working, and do, despite the doubts that assail me as the empty space begins to look like a room.