Personal Things

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Vagabond, 1977

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essays and poems

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For Kathy, alive in our hearts

The Deep Pulse of Idiom: Noodles, Blue Teeth, Flesh Eaters, Gustave Flaubert and Kurosawa's Dream

I. Macaroni con Corazone

Around this time I came across a selection of Sephardic proverbs gathered by Michael Castro, a poet and skilled translator. He'd translated these sayings from Ladino (the Judeo-Spanish of the Sephardic Jews) mostly from family sources with the aid of a cousin and the memories of older relatives. Most of the proverbs were clear, while still managing to retain an aura of place and culture:

He who runs, falls.
Do, but don't brag.
Grain by grain, the chicken fills its intestines.
Moses may be dead, but God endures…

But there was one fascinating old saying that didn't seem at all clear to me. *Comimos macarones, alambicos corazones. We ate macaroni and licked our hearts.* The image seemed so jolly, a plate of buttery pasta and something intimate, maybe even erotic? A meal reminiscent of the *Tom Jones* movie scene? I had no idea, but the image sang to me.

Finally, I asked the editor of the journal in which they appeared if he could put me in touch with Michael Castro.

Michael's reply was revelatory. He said his sense of the saying's meaning was "somewhat conjectural, but that it tended to be applied in conversations about surviving periods of poverty." "Licked our hearts" in this context would mean something like 'consoled ourselves and each other', 'got by on love,' etc."

We ended up agreeing that an American equivalent might be something like: "We made do with beans and dreams". But while "beans and dreams" might be a workable substitute, it draws its energy from another culture and loses the unique images of the Ladino. It transcribes, say, a delicate minor key riff for the guitar, to a hardscrabble banjo.

On the other hand, a Sephardic Ladino-speaker probably wouldn't draw anything out of the commonplace from the expression. And, from a translation standpoint, if you retain the exotic aspects, aren't you just adding embellishments that aren't really there in the original? Ladino, like

Yiddish, is a fading language, spoken mainly among the dwindling old. Should an English translation of an old Ladino saying, be automatically archaic and foreign? Or is cultural *equivalence* even what a translator should aim for here? The dichotomy between the approaches is a core question in translation theory. And there's probably no one right answer. Consider the following:

Das ist mir Wurscht is a commonplace Austrian colloquial phrase, equivalent more or less to "I don't give a hoot". When an Austrian friend saw it translated literally in a *New Yorker* article as "It's all sausage to me", she was incensed at the implication that Austrians spoke in quaint, cute imagery. To the American journalist interviewing an Austrian politician, this was the point of quoting the literal phrase. To my friend, the direct translation seemed designed to infer Austrians were bumpkins. Still, how could any foreign reporter pass up such local color?

II. Yankee Doodle's Macaroni

Then there's that other macaroni. The refrain that ends: "…stuck a feather in his cap and called it macaroni." It's a song we all know, a refrain taught to six-year-old schoolkids. But how many of those kids, or even their teachers, know what the line means? "Macaroni" has become simply a nonsense word to rhyme with "pony". Albeit one that's easy to research, and when you do, you find that "macaroni" was 18th century English slang for a dandy, a Beau Brummell. And the original meaning, from a British standpoint mocking the colonists, was that Yankee Doodle stuck a feather in his yahoo cap and decreed it the height of fashion. But the music was too good for Americans not to sing. And in winning their rebellion, that macaroni feather became a decoration of honor – a finger in the face of the Crown.

Now, we've lost all that because macaroni/dandy has slipped so far out of our language. Should we update the lyrics when we sing to something like "…stuck a feather in his cap and called it high style?" This clearly doesn't work. Nor can any modern synonym of high style replace "macaroni" for us. Even if we're not conscious of its meaning, "macaroni" seems burrowed root deep in our national genes.

III. So what's an idiom, really?

The dictionary on my computer gives the primary definition of "idiom" as "a distinctive and often colorful expression whose meaning cannot be understood from the combined meanings of the individual words." But secondary definitions are: "the way of using a particular language that comes naturally to its native speakers," or "the style or expression of a specific individual group" and/or "the characteristic style of an artist or artistic group."

So "idiomatic" can cover a wide range – from "conversational usage" to something akin to the black holes of language – expressions that began as bright images but have since imploded into a mute energy; indecipherable passwords shared by initiates. The one commonality, I think, is that idiom is language that taps an internal energy apart from the speaker's intent or control. Is this very dissimilar to writing poetry? Or, as G.K. Chesterton put it (at the beginning and near the end of a 1901 essay): "The one stream of poetry which is continually flowing is slang…" And later: "All slang is metaphor and all metaphor is poetry."

Because almost every idiom begins with an image, even though that image often becomes so blurred through use, like a worn coin whose image is no longer essential to the currency.

IV. King Harald's Blue Tooth

Idioms live on slippery slopes of languages that defy conscious logic. Their say something other than what they mean. A secret code in which all native speakers are surreptitiously implicit. To expand on the "coinage" comparison – maybe idioms thrive because their deep ancestral roots remain fertile and enrich speech at a pre-conscious level?

But in our world, everything is accelerated and the blurring process can happen quickly. Just as an exercise let's look a novel "trademark" word that may yet become idiom. Most everyone knows, at least in passing, what Bluetooth *does*. It allows wireless connection of various electronic devices.

As a bit of background, the electronic protocol was negotiated by a consortium of major manufacturers to enable any Bluetooth device to "talk to" any other without regard to different individual software or competitive formats.

But why the name Bluetooth? Because the consortium of competitors named it after the tenth-century Danish King Harald "Bluetooth," who

"united warring factions." Interestingly enough, no one really knows what the king's nickname referred to. Some speculate he had a prominent decayed tooth. But King Harald reigned for 28 years and over that time bad teeth become gap teeth. And who now connects any of this to King Harald when they use a Bluetooth device? Not even the most nerdish among us, I'd guess.

In the nature of things, Bluetooth, like VHS and Beta, will, sooner probably than later, pass into the graveyard of old technology. But let's say that before that happens, one of us became inspired to use Bluetooth in a poem. Maybe a love poem, that might be entitled, say, 'Electricity'

> "…our fingers didn't need to touch,
> when we glanced, our eyelashes were already entangled.
> Your whisper was Bluetooth tickling my tongue."

Well, I pulled those lines out of my butt. But say they were better and that something came of the poem, that it got good enough to be anthologized; and some hundred or two hundred years from now, someone wanted to translate it into German or Chinese. Let's say five hundred years from now, long after the minutiae of today's high tech is as obscure as the highly engineered parts of ancient racing chariots. Think what fun a 26th century translator might have with Bluetooth.

Think how impossible it would be for someone in another culture and separated by a half millennium to get it right. The average 21st century educated reader knows more about the minutiae of the Classical world than the seventeenth or eighteenth century, mainly because up until that time our ancestors had longer cultural eras and time to write all this stuff down. If change keeps accelerating, how could someone five hundred years from now hope to research a technology that probably will last less than thirty years?

So, think how many ways there might be in 2620 to get the Bluetooth whisper wrong. Was Bluetooth a drink? Obviously. Some sort of vodka, no doubt. No, a type of oyster, ergo a late twentieth-century euphemism for a forbidden sexual practice. An intuitive poet-translator might simply finally choose to ignore Bluetooth and, taking a cue from the title, emend the line to "your whisper was *electricity* tickling my tongue."

In fact, saying that, I'm thinking that 'Bluetooth' might make a better title for the poem than 'Electricity' and electricity is better than Bluetooth in the line. But then translators could argue about the title. Is Bluetooth a woman's name, perchance? A disease? Some sort of dental tattoo?

But what if, five hundred years from now, a would-be translator did stumble on not only the definition but the etymology of Bluetooth? And what if that translator decided to utilize the image implicit in Bluetooth: King Harald uniting the warring factions.

Then, we'd have something like: "your whisper was a *truce* tickling my tongue." On the one hand, maybe a more complex poem, a better poem? But if so, isn't the translator mining something that wasn't there. Adding an embellishment that wouldn't have occurred to the twenty-first century reader. *But why not, if it adds to the 26th century translation?* If it produces a real poem that resonates with 26th century readers, what harm's done to the long since worm-eaten original poet?

To the competitors who coined the word, Bluetooth was, above all, *a* productive detente. A format that avoided expensive, needless product wars. But to its users, Bluetooth, with its strange alliterative name, evokes a sort of magic, an electronic ESP. A glowing bite. Cool electricity. These are the kind of resonances that will be hopelessly lost five hundred years from now. If the hypothetical Bluetooth poem is somehow resurrected in that hypothetical future, other, as yet unimagined resonances will have to replace them.

V. The Way of All Flesh

Bluetooth is an artificial example. An advertising agency's inspiration. Natural idioms are richer. Especially when it comes to sex, death or disaster.

A surf of the internet will yield several guesses at the origin of the phrase "bought it," as in "He bought the farm." But all seem to agree it originated among wartime pilots. The first time I heard it was from auto racers. With the connotation that this was the way you "retired" from a dangerous occupation. Like the way "he graduated" is used to describe someone fired from a corporation. Or the way old women talk about their friends in the nursing home: "she's in the finishing school."

On a more ancient level, there's *sarcophagus.* Literally, in Greek, "flesh eater." A word taken into Latin that apparently began as an idiom and that we now use in English without much awareness of its ghoulish image. What funeral director would suggest consigning a loved one to a "flesh eater"? This was something I should have known but didn't know some thirty years ago when I was translating a Luxorius poem about a sarcophagus. I say "should have known," because Luxorius, a grammarian writing around 525 A.D., would have almost certainly been aware of the Greek etymology.

Rilke in his 1907 poem *Roman Sarcophagi*, certainly seems aware of the etymology when he says "inside slowly self-consuming garments / a slowly loosened something lay – / *till it was swallowed by the unknown mouths/that never speak*… (Edward Snow's translation). And again in the Sonnet to Orpheus I, 10 – about, now vacant, ancient sarcophagi – "*I greet those gaping re-opened mouths* / torn away from any doubts / who know now, what silence means." (my translation)

But Luxorius puts a somewhat different spin on the image-rich word:

De sarcophago ubi turpia sculpta fuerant

Turpis tot tumulo defixit crimina Balbus,
Post superos spurco Tartara more premens.
Pro facinus! Finita nihil modo vita retraxit!
Luxuriam ad Manes moecha sepulcra gerunt.

Sarcophagus

The notorious Balbus, who furiously chiseled
all the filth he could on his own coffin –
as if he could pump and bugger the underworld
into some kind of submission… If he'd had time
to think, would he be ashamed of himself?

His recent death had no effect
on the continuing flow of that raucous life,
that coffin, like one of his erections
carried in solemn funeral procession
to a pale, insatiable tomb.

Before getting into the hungry tomb in this poem, I should mention that my re-creation is both loose and verbose. A conversation with as much as a translation of the poem. An impertinent duet, as it were. This approach, I think, befits conjuring a poet whose work for the most part survived in only one early medieval manuscript with no way to check copyist's mistakes. And with titles believed added by monks as a way of cataloguing artifacts of a no longer relevant, pagan world.

Luxorius is fraught with obscurity, a voice lost for a thousand years until the manuscript containing his poems resurfaced in the 1600s. So,

any attention is better than the attention he's gotten. The only real harm a translator can do with a poet like Luxorius is to be boring.

So, like my Bluetooth musings, I embellished as the spirit took me. One of the things Luxorius didn't exactly say was "insatiable tomb." What he said was *moecha sepulcra*, "adulteress tomb." (If in fact that's even what he said, since "*moecha*" represents a 19th century scholar's best guess emendation of an otherwise indecipherable word.)

What's interesting though is the way the insatiable flesh-eating idiom/image found its way into my translation. Without my even thinking about what may have prompted Luxorius to describe the same kind of Roman sarcophagus that Rilke characterized as a mouth, to a man eating, desperate housewife. In retrospect, maybe it's a better translation for my not being conscious of the idiomatic etymology pulsing through the poem like a primordial nightmare.

VI. Akira Kurosowa's Idiomatic Dream

Flaubert, in an 1853 letter to Louise Colet, writes: "What seems to me the highest and most difficult achievement of art, is not to make us laugh or cry, nor to arouse our lust or rage, but to do what nature does – to set us dreaming…"

In his 1990 film, *Dreams*, Akira Kurosowa explores this aesthetic. The movie is a sequence of eight dreams presented in what might be characterized as magical realist mode. It's a highly personal work in that each episode is purported to depict an actual dream of the director, who turned 80 in the year the film was released.

The first episode is titled 'Sunshine Through the Rain' and has at its heart an idiom, "the foxes are getting married" or "the foxes' wedding." This is an expression used in Japan and Korea for a sun-shower. And, with some animal-celebrant variations (monkey, jackal, wolf, rat, bear) it also appears in many Asian, African and European languages. But the animal wedding image is as hermetic as it is universal. An idiom that seems to exist at a core of language so deep and ancient that no matter how deeply we reach, it no longer makes explainable sense. Coinage so worn that it's reverted to ore.

It's not hard to imagine the expression as pre-dating written language. From a time when, possibly, our ancestors communed with magical animals who were guardians of the sun-shower, the way ancient demigods were said to guard sacred groves and streams. The idiom not so much a name for the sun-shower phenomenon, as an arcane description of an imagined

dynamic. An ejaculation uttered like a protective charm in response to a numinous occurrence. The *foxes' wedding* could be any, or all of these.

Kurosawa's 'Sunshine Through the Rain' episode is that kind of enigmatic journey, as short, haunting and ephemeral as a sun-shower. A description that might also apply to lyric poetry, a territory into which Kurosawa's *Dreams* implicitly enters.

'Sunshine through the Rain' begins with a boy of around six running into the courtyard of a large, but traditional Japanese home on a sunny morning. The time might be today or hundreds of years ago. He's dressed in an old-fashioned Japanese robe. But because of his age and knowing this is a dream, the robe also has the feel of night clothes.

Then, suddenly it's raining, and the boy stands sheltering under a lintel from rain falling both in front of where he wants to go, and behind him in the open courtyard.

Responding to the sudden shower a woman runs out of the house holding a yellow umbrella, gathering cushions and pulling them inside. The woman, presumably his mother, tells the boy. "You're not going outside today. The sun is shining, but it's raining. Foxes hold their wedding processions in this weather. And they don't like anyone to see them. If you do, they'll be very angry."

As in any worthwhile fairy tale, he disobeys. After peering inside to make sure his mother is no longer watching, the boy sets out through the sun-shower into a primeval redwood forest whose ferns reach as high as his shoulders. The sky through the tall old trees is blue, but the rain keeps falling. Strangely (or is it just the off quality of the pirated YouTube clip I'm watching), his night robe seems to stay dry.

The little boy wanders aimlessly, almost sniffing his way, looking this direction and that. Until, in a gap between the Tolkienesque trees, he sees a blue glowing mist, a ground hugging cloud that radiates gold sunlight on the forest floor. And from this cloud, at first slow, solemn Japanese music. And then, little by little the quiet, measured wedding procession of the foxes. They walk in studied upright steps as if engaged in some deep bittersweet ritual. Light syncopated drum taps guide their unhurried feet.

Every few steps, their knees slightly bend, half- genuflecting. The male foxes are dressed in blue coats and trousers. The vixens in traditional gowns. They're all masked, as if they were Noh players, their faces wooden, unreadable.

From time to time, the eerie procession stops, as if startled, and the Noh-foxes turn their heads in unison, from side to side, testing the air. The

little boy hides behind a large trunked tree. The third time the creatures stop, they spot him and he runs.

And then, the dreaming child is running back to his grand house, his sandals flopping through puddles drying in the sun, the rain suddenly stopped. His mother sternly meets him outside the front gate. "You went and saw something you shouldn't have. I can't let you in now. An angry fox came looking for you. He left this…" From her sleeve, she hands him a short scabbard, which the child opens to find a *tanto* sword, the traditional weapon of ritual suicide.

In Samurai culture, compulsory suicide was a traditional form of capital punishment, the *tanto* knife presented like a gun with one bullet in the chamber. A chance for an honorable death, otherwise…

So, the knife is serious, akin to showing the child the gallows or the instruments of torture. The boy, with his rash exploration of the idiomatic image, has bumbled into a sacrilege as unforgiveable as eating the cattle of the sun. But this is a shaken, lonely six-year-old, not wily Odysseus with his battle-wizened cohort.

"You're supposed to kill yourself." His mother's face is stern, but her voice holds out a slim ray of hope. "Go quickly and ask their forgiveness. Give the knife back and tell them how sorry you are." But then, turning away. "They don't usually forgive. You must be ready to die." She closes one side of the gate, then moves to the other. "Get going. Unless they forgive you, I can't let you in." She begins to close the other gate.

"But I don't know where they live," the shunned little boy desperately begs. Just as she closes the gate, his mother, tells him, "You'll find out. On days like this, there are always rainbows. Foxes live under the rainbows." Then shuts the door to their home in his face.

If we accept this episode – as Kurosawa asks us to, as his own dream, did he dream this as a six-year-old, or as an old man? Because for me, what makes the dream so painfully personal, not just a filmmaker's fantasy, is the *tanto* knife and the admonition to suicide.

Kurosowa did, after all, undergo a deep depression in his 60s, and attempted suicide, slashing himself almost fatally some thirty times, with a razor. So, is this a dream of childhood foretelling, or of late life healing? And why was it triggered by the hermetic idiom of the foxes' wedding?

But really, if this is an old man's healing dream, could it be the miraculous but tentative sun-shower itself, surfacing as an oasis beckoning Kurosawa's art? And with the assent of the artist, do the sacred animals at the heart of the idiom give quiet voice to scarred personal depths?

As the auteur-poet's dream continues, the condemned boy stands forlorn in front of a home that's suddenly expelled him. He explores an also locked side door, holds the grim knife and broods. Then sets off shuffling with the uncertain steps of a helpless child preparing himself for the unimaginable.

But dreaming on, we see the little boy walking in the sun through a meadow of wildflowers as tall as the ferns in the fox-forest, the horrid knife still held in both hands. He's no longer shuffling. His step is quizzical now, wandering, and there's the slightest trace of jauntiness, of "what the hell" as he walks through the multi-colored meadow toward a blue misty gap in the hills and the edge of a barely discernible rainbow.

In the dream, the six-year-old who's trespassed on an arcane rite walks toward a rainbow razor's edge that will bring either death or absolution. But stepping back from the dream to the dreaming Kurosawa: does the 80-year-old necromancer of light and shadow also sense he's moving somewhere? Towards death of course, but maybe beyond, towards some sort of journey to another childhood? As with so much mythical marriage, is the sly sun-and-rain showered wedding of the foxes just a prelude to a blessed birth?

With this unresolved scene, Kurosawa's dream enigmatically ends on a mood that Flaubert, later in that same letter to his lover and muse Louise, describes better than I can. "Through small apertures, we glimpse abysses whose somber depths turn us faint. And yet, over the whole there hovers an extraordinary tenderness. It is like the brilliance of light, the smile of the sun, and it is calm, calm and strong."

Flaubert was talking about the experience of writing and communing with language at a level few ever attain. Even so, it helps to be reminded that language and imagery not only live in us, but that we are in turn exist in a living tongue older than any human memory. And that its vagaries and strange twists can be as inscrutable, haunting and fertile as dreams.