

## WHAT A BEAUTIFUL VOICE – FROM LISTENING TO THE UNANSWERED QUESTIONS OF THE FYNBOS TO FINDING COMFORT IN A FOSTER TONGUE

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I *could* speak with you about how it feels to be comforted, reassured, and encouraged.

Hoe voel dit om getroos, gerusgestel, en aangemoedig te word?

تري كيف يكون ذاك الشعور بالإحتواء والركون للأمان؟!

Cìamar a tha e a' faireachdainn nuair a gheibh thu cobhair 's cuimhne 's do mhisneachadh?

Kunjani ukuthuthuzelwa, ukuxhaswa noku khuthazwa?

I could tell you just this in these languages, languages which I feel drawn to for various reasons, languages which are all a part of me, and yet not really me.

Can we be gifted with the ability to speak many languages, and yet find we have nothing to say? I do have something to say about comfort and reassurance. But not just yet.

### An Exercise

Listen to me. Please stop for a moment.

Stop going. Please wait for just a moment.

Listen to the sound that surrounds you.

(silence)

What can you hear?

Please wait another moment and try to listen to what you can't hear.

(silence)

Thank you for listening.

Frahm (2005: 4)

Comfort. Reassurance. Encouragement. I can't tell you, I don't want to; not now. Allow me to begin instead, by telling you about my friend, Friday.

Friday-of-the-Fynbos:

Hammering against the door because the bell was broken, as usual, and wondering whether it

wasn't the hammering she heard still louder in her breast, she caught sight of him approaching her. Just minutes into their interplay: "Do you really mean to tell me you don't know what fynbos is", she called out incomprehensibly. He shrugged, looking at her blankly: "Feign hoarse?" "Absolutely nothing connects us", she responded impatiently. "All we have ever shared is *Inside Out*".

Yes, whatever it was that connected them seemed inside out at the best of times. It was as if they had different scripts, as do Hindi and Urdu, but that the latter share at least mutual intelligibility. Her dreams of one day managing to unravel this cryptic inconnu were long since neutered.

He can speak a variety of languages, my Friday, but speak, he does not.

Can one be multilingually mute? How to connect with the other; how to allow others to recognize themselves in your voice, when you feel you have lost your own voice? And what does it help to know how to describe what fynbos is in 20 odd languages, when you seem unable to connect, as one human being to another? *Je jette ma langue au chat* – I literally throw my tongue to the cat, I can't guess the riddle. The English language has a similar saying: when the cat has got your tongue, you are at a loss for words. Sailors, so it is said, became silent at the mere threat of a flogging with the cat o' nine tails. The thrashing was usually so relentless that it kept them quiet for a long time. I am reminded of Coetzee's Friday in his novel, *Foe* – Friday, whose tongue was cut out. "Friday has no command of words and therefore no defense against being reshaped day by day in conformity with the desires of others" (1986: 121); while Susan, the narrator in *Foe*, refers to Friday's muteness and lack of language as a "puzzle or hole in the narrative" (Ibid.). Coetzee seems to be pushing for a realm beyond language.

A castaway, cast away on a desert island

A castaway without his daily bread

Cast (away) (no) ration(s) - castration – mute

It's where language

Starts to break

Down

That poetry comes

Comes running

(all out of breath)

Into play

How to address the challenge of attuning oneself to the language of the other? To opening oneself to perhaps yet unknown symbols and metaphors?

And: no defense against being reshaped, as described in *Foe*, is this what it could mean to be multilingual? To have had the reins stolen from you? Or could it mean having a choice? Phipps, a linguist, a poet, an anthropologist, invites the reader in her paper *Unmoored: Language Pain, Porosity, and Poisonwood* to look at concepts of being moored and unmoored, and relates this to language and multilingualism. She argues that “the nature of multilingualism is becoming increasingly unmoored” (2013: 97). She associates being moored with safety, certainty, being anchored; while being unmoored means to her a move to the unknown, a loss of control, potential pain. She describes how poets unmoor themselves in playing with words; she continues by drawing our attention to “those who have little choice about words (...) with the bureaucratic and state powers” (Ibid: 101). For Phipps, the asylum seekers are among the unmoored, and she opens her home to those “whose status is often determined in languages they do not speak” (Ibid: 102).

#### Another Exercise

Please listen.

I have a question I cannot answer myself.

What difference does it make if I am talking or if I'm silent.

(silence)

I repeat: What difference does it make if I am talking or if I'm silent.

(silence)

I repeat: What difference does it make if I am talking or if I'm silent.

Frahm (2005: 8)

Phipps takes on a foster child, a girl from Eritrea, a girl who has two mother tongues, and who speaks six languages consisting of four different scripts. Mentioning her “mother tongue pain (...) couldn't speak, as a mother, the languages of her daughter”, she starts to learn one of these languages, calling it her “daughter tongue, and a tongue to foster” (Ibid: 105).

Reading this excerpt, my thoughts travelled to a funeral I had attended two years before. I had gone to pay my respects, to say goodbye, to my foster mother. Back then, when I was a child, she had joined our family home to bring us up. The sun just rising above the houses, I arrived at the home she had returned to, her original home, with my brother, to join a group of people which quickly grew. We had gathered in her front garden under a marquee for the ceremony. It was the hymns, the lifting up of voices that touched us most keenly. Every so often, someone stood up to relate a story which connected them to Liz, uMamu Jack. Then it was my turn. I stood up, not knowing what I would say. Feeling awkward and rather inept due to my sketchy knowledge of her home language, I soon remembered how she had scolded us for not making our beds, how she had held me in her arms, me whom she called her child. How she had taught us respect. These were the memories I spoke of to the audience present. Despite my barely being able to speak her *ulwimi lwenkobe*, I found I was able to speak her tongue after all. Standing there at her graveside, I was comforted and reminded of the wider community surrounding me, which, through her person, Liz had connected me to.

A sense of belonging, a sense of home, in another language which is, which can become, one's own.

This is the beginning of the story.

(And whatever became of Friday? My mute friend in the fynbos?

Oh, I won't forget *him*. Don't be silly!)