

## ALCHEMY Mabi David

### I

Lately I have had to think about difficulty. Is there a certain logic that governs it? What are the manageable parts of its unwieldy sum? Is there a way to transform it into something facile, the way some solid matter, under the right condition, will transmute into liquid or gas? Is there a method that will unhinge it from its self, can we turn it against its nature? After all we have a knack sometimes for making things more difficult than they are. I am hoping its reversal might also be true.

Lately people I love, my once-immortal parents for instance, have been getting sick, and I am again thrust into the task of raising the money for all hospital expenses. It is a shame to admit that faced with disease or even death, money is the first thing I think about. That year when my father was in a coma, I realized that raising the hospital money was a task to which the eldest child was elected. The bills arrived promptly and the numbers grew exponentially. These notices, which my mother passed on to me unread, stated that failure to settle the amount would prohibit the hospital from providing patients with costlier but critical services or medicine. Half the time my mother spent praying at my father's bedside, half she spent at the chapel. She believed that her faith would save him; I feared he would die the moment I failed to make a payment.

Those days I could not get myself out of bed, as if the moment I step out of the sheets, the day—my father in it—would grind to its finish. I would stay in bed and wait an hour or two for the pall to lift. Because this happened several times, I learned to wait.

Ask me what I consider the most difficult period in my life and I will tell you it is that. All my life I rejected the notion that money was the great enabler. How did it come to a point when my father's life depended on it?

Now I find myself again in the thick and heavy of the same difficulty and I want to escape it. Desperate and without money, the only thing I can resort to is analysis. I turn the questions over and over; this errand feels like a fool's enterprise. One can't simply think one's self out of a real predicament. You need to get out of bed to leave the house to earn the money to solve the problem. In cases such as these, isn't it action that is necessary?

But what if through inquiry a way to defeat or undo the difficult will reveal itself? What if through grammatical inquiry we can alter this dark matter and transform it into a thing that radiates?

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According to the dictionary, the word difficulty is the most widely applicable of terms. That pretty much assures us of unlimited encounters with it.

A book, an idea, a recipe, a dance step, a person and one's relationship with that person, a terrain, may all be considered difficult. Even recess for the most unpopular kids. We find it difficult to believe in ourselves and not to take ourselves too seriously, to commit to someone and to live a solitary life—sometimes such polarities exist in a single person.

When my mother watched my father deteriorate in his coma and spent the nights at the hospital for a whole month, two weeks of which were spent in the cold corridor, on a narrow bench, hardly sleeping, who is to say that my mother hardly suffered the latter?

The word comes from the Latin *dis*, a prefix that means a negation, a reversal or a separation; and *facultas* or faculty, which is an aptitude for any particular activity.

I find it difficult to sing, another to dance and yet another to draw a straight line. The body considers any activity difficult when it comes face to face with an enterprise that it is untrained for. Without a map, a hint, an outline or instruction, we are lost.

I did not have a difficult childhood, not to say that our family was rich, only that my siblings and I grew up knowing what was expected of us and were equipped with instructions and the implements necessary to meet those expectations. I grew up with only the best grades expected of me and was given a fairly straightforward instruction: apply yourself to the task at hand.

The body also considers any activity difficult when further physical exertion is no longer possible, the sheer exhausting strain of the last extra mile. In the meantime, the soul has its own difficulties: to love, to forgive and not to forgive, to understand, to consider carefully or not to consider at all. There are people who cannot openly express their affection, as if the vocabulary for it has been ripped from their mouths. There are those who find it difficult to fall in love, to trust an old erring friend, and when asked to explain often simply say that they have lost the capacity, *dis facultas*.

Harking back to its etymology, another definition of difficulty then is of the self's expulsion from its inherent ability. While the first definition is a simple proposition that encompasses what we cannot do, the second definition proposes a Platonic premise: that what we cannot do we cannot do only because we have been expelled from our foreknowledge of it.

This inquiry into difficulty's etymology and the fact that the word may be applied to just about anything seem to reveal that what is difficult is relative. We know that what is difficult for one may not be so for another who beholds it.

On the other hand it may also be a quality that is inherent to every thing. "Let the first motion be that of the resistance of matter, which exists in every particle, and completely prevents its annihilation," wrote Sir Francis Bacon in *Novum Organum*, his 17th century treatise that inquires into the nature of things.

The difficult is a beast that overwhelms and seems bigger than the courage our small selves can muster. Perhaps this is why it attracts people who like lifting imaginary weights. We grunt and groan at the struggle, we hide behind dark glasses to attract attention, and we fake perplexity to call attention to our "rigor." It easily allows us strut around with our smart pants on, only to abandon the pose when it loses its premium.

A true encounter with difficulty however reveals, within its capacious self, both the quality of the resistance and the thing possessing that resistance. Think about a truly difficult thing and the sensation descends upon you. Capacious also because it embodies and encompasses both what the person needs to achieve and that which he needs to overcome. When I say what is difficult: "I find it difficult to write this essay," or "Being

kind is difficult,” it becomes obvious that I cannot separate what I need to negotiate my way through from the goal at the end of it. A difficult thing is both the hurdle and the finish line, both the obstruction and its site of completion. Given that its structure straddles transitive verb and object, the former must act on the latter—*finish this essay, be kind*—and move towards fulfillment.

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My only instruction had been to write down everything I consider difficult. I find myself hesitating before each item. I want to write down only those that I find truly difficult, that is to say only those that made me feel the familiar bristling sensation of resistance I first felt it when I was barely nine years old. My mother, a *Newsweek* and *TIME* subscriber, allowed us to flip through magazine pages only after she had managed to black out, using a felt tip pen, images which she felt were not suitable for young children but were typical in news magazines—mostly images of extreme violence and human degradation: children dying of starvation, POWs, the singer Madonna. That pretty much left only the editorial cartoon with their funny pictures, the wristwatch ads (which we cut out to wear around our wrists), and some harmless pictures in the lifestyle section of art, books, famous people, food, cars.

Normally I would not have paid attention to the picture but there it was, one of the few images that was harmless enough and I was permitted to look at. It was a colored drawing of what seemed to me, a collapsed human face. I could not tell if it was a man or a woman but I did recognize the eyes, nose, the mouth and its sad frown (or was it a grimace?), the forehead, the long thick neck. The face was divided into uneven polygons and looked badly disfigured. My mother told me it was done by one of the world’s greatest painters, Pablo Picasso.

*Greatest?* The information was an affront to my overachieving self’s sense of just reward. I thought, arrogantly enough, it was equivalent to the class clown buffooning his way out of a graded recitation with his charm and razzmatazz and then getting approving looks from the teacher. It was equivalent to Martha of Bethany doing all the dirty work and then Jesus Christ setting her sister Mary as the better example.

It occurred to me then, albeit vaguely, that the world was not going to work out according to terms I could figure out. There were motions and instances that would never align themselves to my procedures.

Nothing bridles us more or puts us on a defensive faster than our own recognition of our limitations, of the fact that we do not and cannot know, might not or won’t ever overcome our personal difficulties. In the face of difficulty one might become stubbornly defiant and refuse to engage one’s self in its challenge. One might, like myself, turn against the difficult and hate it. “Truly men hate the truth,” poet Robinson Jeffers wrote, “they’d liefer/ Meet a tiger in the road.”

But out of difficulty we mine, according to 18th century writer Edmund Burke, opportunities for greatness. According to Burke, in his book *A Philosophical Enquiry*, “When any work seems to have required immense force and labour to effect it, the idea is grand.” He set as an example the Stonehenge, huge masses of stone that, if one were to take them plainly for what they were, possess nothing admirable in either “disposition

or ornament.” But they “turn the mind on the immense force necessary for such a work...increase this cause of grandeur.”

At the top of my list of difficulties are writing (most especially poetry), reading poetry, abstract art, watching my father deteriorate while running out of money, and faith.

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In my early twenties, just out college, I had a strange dream. The world and most of mankind had just been destroyed by a legion of grotesque half-formed creatures. They resembled the gargoyles that sat atop roof spouts of buildings. The span of their webbed wings was the breadth of several men, and they stank of vinegar, brine and rot.

Only a few hundred people, including myself, survived and we confined ourselves inside a glass fortification that reminded me of a greenhouse. Outside no living thing survived. Inside the dome were cuttings and full-grown plants and trees.

We all felt tremendous fear. The creatures crashed themselves repeatedly against the glass dome and we were desperate to believe that it would hold. We could not hear any of the terrifying goings-on outside the dome, inside it was quiet. We dared not look up or outward. We bent our heads low, pretending we were cupped inside a safe hollow.

An old man who shone like the sun stood in the middle of our assembly. In my dream I knew immediately that the man was God.

Then the dome started to rattle as the creatures kept ramming their colossal bodies against the dome repeatedly. Then came the point when we heard a hissing—air let in. I remember feeling terrified and wishing I had not survived. We hardly looked up, stricken with fear and doubt, and sought to be near God, to touch his hem.

We were told to gather closer. We were told that the dome would soon collapse and helplessness engulfed us. He then said that a battle must take place, and I could not understand what for. But the sequence that followed unfolded without instruction. We lined up and prepared to receive our weapons against the shrieking bloodthirsty beasts. I half expected to be given some consecrated spear. Several times I tried to catch a glimpse of what was handed over but failed.

When my time came, I was asked to cup both hands. Was it an amulet to wear? A talisman I needed to swallow? I lifted my cupped hands ready to receive what I was hoping would save me. God leaned forward, opened his mouth.

Out came a word.

I woke up. I tried to remember what the word was. The dream had ended abruptly—as soon as the word tumbled out—because I was startled out of sleep by its strangeness. I was certain, the way we are certain in dreams, that the word was a six-letter word. I could remember only the letters F, Y, J, and K, no vowels. I obsessed over that word for weeks. I wanted the word to be an actual word with a straightforward meaning I could look up and hold on to. I did not want a word I dreamed up, as if fact were salvation.

Of what use are words that will not reward us with certainty? If the doctrine of names, more than the notion of terminology, is the doctrine of essence, then what good is a word that refuses us sense?

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Two poems I remember from third grade: Joyce Kilmer's "I think I shall never see/ a poem as lovely as a tree" and Emily Dickinson's "I'm Nobody! Who are you?" both of which we had to memorize for a school program. Kilmer's poem bored me. I was studying in an all-girl Catholic school ran by nuns and everyday we read Psalms. Kilmer's poem was old hat. *See-tree-me-tree. Eee eee eee eee*, the bicycle squeaks.

Oh, but Dickinson's!

She spoke to me like an intimate, her poem whispered directly to my aching loser heart and it leapt! I had just transferred from a small parochial school near our house to a private Catholic school for girls. I was eight and without friends. That same year our house burned down and the teachers kept reminding my classmates for donations. Come Christmas, I wore a warm red fuzzy jacket that I found in one of the donation boxes. It had the big white letter K on it. My classmates wouldn't stop asking me why my jacket had the letter K when my name started with an M. I felt my world darken. I didn't want to tell them that it wasn't mine and I didn't want to be called a liar. Later, Sister Jean, the principal, told me that there was no shame in being poor, after I had told her I had given her my Gospel Comics subscription fee while she insisted that, out of my shame of "now being less fortunate," I was lying about the payment.

I grew up in a household where speech, when necessary, must be polite. This I accepted wholeheartedly. When Sister Jean spoke to me, I remember being dismissed from the room with hardly a scolding because I finally had enough sense not to challenge her and stopped protesting. To an extent I thought it was a triumph for she had a reputation for not sparing the rod. Inside I was angry and frustrated—furious at what lay implicit in her tolerance of me and frustrated that I could not counter her. At the heart of the kind of speech I thought was correct was its susceptibility to deceit and complicity.

I did not have the words for the misery I was sentenced to that year. When I read Dickinson's poem, I felt I had been given reprieve. To me the poem sounded like my sister was suddenly right there, whispering into my ear, "Are you Nobody, too? Then there's a pair of us? Don't tell!" The poem was a conspiratorial wink, it was a secret hiding place. But rather than simply retreating into it, I felt like I had been shaken awake. I realize now that the poem allowed me to appreciate another kind of speech, one that allowed the self to manifest and to respond as authentically as possible to experience. I loved the rush of that encounter.

And her words were much more exciting—advertise, dreary, admiring! I remember looking up the word bog. How public like a frog—yes, it was detestable!

I ran right smack into Dickinson and fell back, overcome.

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To welcome the difficult into our lives is not natural. The ‘fight or flight’ syndrome speaks of both instincts to counter and to escape the encounter. To strive with none is a state to which we aspire. Always, when facing a difficult thing, nobody I know rejoices. Does anybody? I think one of the greatest injustices is when an ordinary person is given such an extraordinary burden—with what do we confront something bigger than our capacity? What is inherent is our impulse to deliver ourselves from it and “to restore [ourselves] to the dimensions suited to [our] mass.” This to Bacon is the motion of liberty. When the weight of the lumbering beast lifts, we feel release.

My father’s deterioration bore down heavily on us all. Several times his condition took a turn for the worse. His blood pressure shot up while he lay comatose and we were afraid he would have cardiac arrest. I tried to understand everything about his complications, downloading medical journals whenever I could and talking to his doctors afterwards as if to countercheck. Mine was a relentless pursuit of facts and charts and complicated medical terms—tethers I could pin so I could mount and examine the problem.

The hospital called us watchers and I abhorred the impudence of the word. It seemed harmless when truly it was an affront to what I believed could still be done. It put us, me, in our place; it was a word against which I could not assert whatever will I had. There I was, a fiercely dutiful 9-year-old student, clutching tightly at her finished homework, and outraged that when confronted by the painting, her answers were all wrong.

Finally, my mother sat us down to talk to us about performing extreme unction. The words sounded like some renegade TV sport for the foolish. It did not have the debilitating force of its synonym: last rites. She told us that extreme unction was instead akin to the anointing of the sick and often performed as part of Christian healing rituals. How could this have come from the same woman who, when my father had a stroke and the ambulance had yet to arrive and he was falling into a stupor and could not speak or hold himself up, proceeded to mop the floors?

My siblings looked at me and waited for an answer.

I refused. She regarded the sacrament as a supreme act of faith but for me it was surrender; I did not have the courage to confront such an ambiguity with my father’s life at stake. When two diametrically opposite meanings reside in a single honest act, which one do we trust?

One night my mother entered my father’s room in the hospital after her 6<sup>o</sup> clock p.m. visit to the chapel and announced that this coming Friday, my father would move out of intensive care. He did. Several days later she mentioned offhandedly that the duration of our stay in the hospital was already close to a month. She believed and told us we would leave at the end of thirty days despite the fact that my father was still due for an operation the next day and we were near month’s end. In the end, we were there for only one month. She would say we were there for exactly one month.

Between her act of mopping the floors and her counsel on extreme unction, something transformed within my mother. Asked poet Fanny Howe, “How does a change in vocabulary save one’s life?”

It does when we believe it is possible to arrive at faith through the difficult. Perhaps the operative idea in Burke’s definition/description of difficulty (“turn the mind on the

immense force necessary for such a work... increase this cause of grandeur”) is not so much the necessary immensity of the force or grandeur, but that turning of the mind. According to Howe, within each of us co-exist the two fundamental and oppositional life views: the materialist-skeptical and the invisible-faithful. Martha and Mary of Bethany are allusions of these two life views. We can choose to reside happily in the former and its preoccupations or we can turn our mind to the latter.

Perhaps with difficulty, what is expected of us, initially and most importantly, is a turning or a shift in how our mind will apprehend the experience or the encounter—not deliverance of the self *from* but a deliverance of the self *through* the difficult. Out of this comes a shift in our rhetoric or vocabulary, a renaming therefore a transformation of its essence.

## INTERLUDE

*WOMAN WITH PEARS* is a portrait by Picasso of his then-companion Fernande Olivier. I found out, after some reluctant researching on my part, that the painting was done during the early days of Cubism when Picasso, together with Georges Braque, made experiments with their artworks by reversing the normal process of painting—painting the background first and the foremost planes last. This resulted in the reversal of normal perspective, wherein a picture receded into distance. A Cubist picture instead advanced toward its viewer. Concerned about how the viewer or its painter “moved around” in the painting, the two men followed the lead of Cezanne, and eventually developed techniques that allowed one plain (or cube) of color to relate to other color planes (cubes) by their placement or by similar color. In the earlier paintings, such as *Woman with Pears*, the planes were fairly separate.

## II

Three years ago I made friends with two men who introduced me to poets I now greatly admire. They sang praises that were profuse and lofty, they sang of ambition.

Needless to say, I became attracted to these poets despite my profound ignorance of their works. I started reading their poems and could not understand a thing they were saying. I read each poem slowly, advancing patiently within it, moving onward to the next word only after I was certain I understood the last one. Often at the end of each sentence—which I clung to fiercely because sentences obeyed rules and should therefore make sense—I also found myself also at the end of my wits.

A poem fragment—Until they made, all of an instant, a bird, a blue / enchantment of properties no longer / knowable. What is it to understand, she let fly, / leaning outward from the edge now that the others had gone down./

The fragment (and the entire poem), all made up of words I knew, eluded sense. It was again like seeing Fernande Olivier’s face stripped of typical facial features and in their place only numerous planes of color. The poem, like the painting, went against long-held beliefs. It was as if it had sealed itself from me. I reviewed each word, each preceding stanza as if retracing my steps, hoping I would stumble into a clearing I might have missed earlier. None. I started to feel uneasy. I wanted to be absorbed by the poem, by the task of understanding its meaning, but its resistance was so palpable, I only ended up

overtaken by a feeling of infuriation. What are you saying? I didn't want to reread the poem again. I wanted to push the book off my desk. If it did not want to have anything to do with me, then I did not want to have anything to do with it. Of what use is language when it will not reward us with meaning? What good are words that refuse us sense?

Contrary to Bacon's third motion, that of liberty wherein a body will abhor, reject, or avoid the transformation ("a new size or volume, or any new expansion or contraction"), and will strive with all its power to rebound and resume its former density, the fourth motion is the body's anxiousness "to acquire a new volume or dimension, and which it acquires willingly and rapidly, and occasionally by a most vigorous effort."

Why didn't I put the book back to its shelf and swear never to look at it again? Why did I insist on understanding the poem? The bristling sensation of resistance came immediately. What I chose to resist however was not the poem but the feeling of self-loathing that would arise when confronted with a thing beyond the self. We feel dull when the truth is that a confrontation with or inquiry into the unknown sharpens our perception. This negative feeling is essential to the experience. Disoriented and terrified, we attend to every detail, the smallest change. Things come into focus.

That night, I made repeated attempts to articulate what I thought the poem was about. I had a vague notion of what was going on but a graspable idea—and one I could articulate—stayed beyond my reach. Its configuration remained in the province of almost-knowable.

I reread the poem. I reread it silently then aloud then slowly and then slower. Why was it so important to *get* it?

Because I remembered Dickinson's poem and its power to speak faithfully about my experience. It did not matter that she was a 30-year-old woman from Amherst, Massachusetts—that was my experience she was talking about. Hers was a vocabulary that was willing and could confront what she found difficult. I once read about a writer who, when told by her daughter that she felt bad, promptly gave her daughter a thesaurus and told her to identify exactly what she felt, to look it up. Maybe what we need to help us hold on to what is difficult, apart from courage or bravado are words that will allow us to make sense of what's most alien. Her poem afforded a glimpse into a new dimension of anonymity. She had turned it from a miserable sentence into a state of being that I could welcome, into a zone of freedom.

This impenetrable poem in front of me reminded me of my strange dream and the task to remain faithful to that which I could not understand but I was told would save me.

To me it is poetry that is the necessary shift in rhetoric, that change in vocabulary that can save one's life.

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In the beginning was the word, the creation story began thus—what set existence in motion was language. With naming, things became manifest.

Used to be that people were superstitious around words. We refuse to utter a certain word or phrase out of our belief that the utterance was a step towards actualization. Now we live in a time when language is consistently being stripped of its original power. Countries are being bombed, homes and hospitals razed to the ground and children die, and we call it shock and awe. On this side is friendly fire, on that side are weapons of mass destruction.

I do not know English, wrote poet Michael Palmer as part of the protest to how language is being manipulated to justify acts of aggression towards fellow human beings brought on by our paranoia and fear. George Oppen, whose poems are spare as they are powerful, stopped writing for 25 years as a political act. He said once, I want to be able to restore the original power of words. Poetry does that.

Poetry, like difficulty and like alchemy, is transformation. It is the accurate transmutation of our experience—which astounds, bewilders, brings us grief—to sensation to making sense, of feeling to radiant knowledge, and this is done through language.

The difficulty I encounter while reading poetry, some may still argue, is devoid of true stakes—I am never endangered. I can leave the poem anytime I want and at the end of the day, my understanding of it will go practically unrewarded.

Save for the meaningfulness with which poetry has allowed me to imbue this world. Save for a deeper understanding, a way of making sense. When I exit this essay, I am sure things will still be the same. I still have to get out of bed to leave the house to earn the money to solve my problem.

But I will get out of bed despite knowing that there isn't a way to transform our difficulties into something facile. Mastering such a huge beast in order to turn it against itself is not possible. What is necessary is our own turning: to seek not so much one's mastery over it but one's apprenticeship.