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Cover Page Footnote

Davis is a recent graduate of the Muskie School of Public Service, where his research focused on topics related to education policy, including parent-teacher relationships and the public's perceptions of teachers. He is a long-time resident of South Portland and can often be found musing on life at Cia Café.

Stringing the Words

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Note: This work describes a moment in the author's life before he transitioned. He has chosen to use his former name throughout.

“When do you plan to string those words together?”

It’s one of her mother’s needle-like questions. One of those questions that injects a secret drug into the conversation that forces you, the dubiously consenting participant, to confess the truth. It might be described as a very Catholic variety of question if her mother wasn’t Protestant.

What prompted the question? In this memory, there is a much younger Cara sitting with a much older hardcover dictionary. She is settled on the dingy floor of their apartment. Her slumped back is uncomfortable against the wall, but even at this age she refuses to adjust her posture or find a more physically forgiving place to sit. It’s likely that no one knows how long she has sat with this dictionary. When did she wake up? Did she have breakfast? Did she have *enough* for breakfast? This much younger Cara has learned, from somewhere outside the home, that personal growth takes precedence over personal comfort.

The dictionary depends on her tiny knees for support as her fingers draw invisible lines under the most interesting words and then, with some hesitation, turn the page. This Cara finds English, when committed to writing, far more lovely than the spoken thing (which she hardly speaks). On the page the words somehow gleam like little lighthouses. Inwardly, their light

attracts and guides her tossing mind to safety. Outwardly, she will have the clinical face of a little girl who is “difficult to read.” Her mother — who will remain the more voracious reader and the more conventional thinker — doesn’t know what to make of her daughter’s devotion to this old, sallow-paged dictionary, one with ugly stains acquired from decades of more casual handling. She wonders, as she will eventually admit to wondering, whether it is the sort of quirk a mother can expect when she has her fifth child at 46. Because what use are words if they aren’t marching in sentences? Why won’t Cara talk more, read a few more books, write a few more of her own stories, and come to the old dictionary for reference rather than out of reverence?

This Cara is much younger, but as someone who hardly speaks, she is already sensitive to these unspoken concerns. Though she doesn’t guess at the questions, she suspects from the critical look in her mother’s eyes that something has burdened her mother’s mind. Cara answers with a vague but sincere promise, to ease some of the burden from that other mind:

“One day,” she says.

Memories are often unstable and discursive. They are, at times, defiant of the chains of daily calm and order. As the much younger Cara makes her promise, the memory becomes something like a dog, hating the chokehold of a leash, that discovers its owner has underestimated its strength. It becomes newly free and bounding. It pursues something that is strange to us but attractive to one of our shy instincts. So we must chase after the memory before it’s lost to something that grows altogether natural but neglected in a deeper forest. So we are drawn farther inward and find ourselves, once again, down the well-worn path.

We have stopped. The memory is panting asthmatically. *Finally*, we think, *the memory has exhausted itself*. But this thought is wrong — we have underestimated its strength and are now underestimating its motivation. We have stopped not because of its fatigue but because we are wanted here by something in the darkness.

There is a sudden, an eerie command, “Look up!” We comply.

An owl-like memory is perched on the naked branch of a tree that is faintly existent. As if our gaze blows cold air in its direction, the memory shivers reflexively. A few loose feathers radiate like dust from its body. We call to this memory with a voice that, as a voice must be when calling to something in the darkness, abandons every consideration of politeness. The memory stretches its large wings and, using our cool gaze as a guide, flies to us. It settles on our wrist. Like the tree, its owl-like form is faintly existent, but we still feel a slight pain from the grasp of its talons. Its feathers are feather-like enough. We can scratch its ear tufts and see the vague contentment in the smiles of its closed eyes. When the eyes open, we peer into them as if they are crystal balls, and instead of future fortunes, we are shown another moment in our past.

There is a younger Cara here. Older than the much younger Cara, taller and thinner, with round eyes confined behind wiry glasses frames. Ignoring her height, it’s apparent that puberty has decided that her physique at 10 should be her physique at 16: blocky, small chested, a little severe in the mouth and sharp in the chin. On the whole, she is angular, and even at their most joyful her eyes have an axe-like expression. This is a girl who will never need to utter a word to strike at the heart of a matter.

She is alone, wearing her baggiest t-shirt, and climbing the stairs from the empty cafeteria to the first floor of her suburban high school. (This is a suburban high school by Maine standards. She would graduate as one of 200 in her class.) It is some forgotten date in September and well into the school day. Since the beginning of last year, her sophomore year, Cara has been chronically ill. She thought it would be brief, the illness she had contracted from a girl who — allowed to attend school before her mononucleosis symptoms had fully resolved — innocently ate lunch next to Cara. But mono’s intentions with Cara were different. It wasn’t a sadistic submicroscopic tourist. It hadn’t come to take part in just a brutal bout of illness. No, mono had enjoyed that fun with Cara’s lunchmate and, with a settler’s purpose, took advantage of the air these two young girls shared. Mono had come looking for a home and grew attached to the real estate of Cara’s body. While her immune system taught mono the customs of her body (the spleen must remain a certain uninflated size, the climate is ideally temperate rather than equatorial), it didn’t have the heart to evict mono outright. The virus learned the customs and lost its potency but lingered still in a tired body that preferred no lingering visitors.

Although she had never been very athletic before her illness, Cara has never looked so unathletic as she does climbing these stairs. She clings to the Cold War red banister with her right hand. The strain alters the geography of the hand. What was once flat, with a few hints of subterranean veins and sparse black hairs that always look as if they had been bent by tiny winds, has been disturbed. The strain forces the tendons upwards, so they form tense ridges under the skin. The veins threaten to burst and flood the hand’s surface with a less radioactive red. Every step is a desperate effort. But the strain does not alter her face. It is so dignified.

Despite the struggle, we can see in that face her powerful commitment to something. It is a thing she must accomplish, stairs or no stairs.

In more generous terms, Cara is like a widow touring a mansion that has simply become all too big for her to navigate. A desolate mansion that life and its more casual fun have departed from. Coming to school at the wrong time means everyone else is in class. Everyone else is following the schedule she seems intent on disrupting. Even though Cara's teachers are aware of her situation, that is how she feels: like a disruption, like a stack of lunch trays that suddenly crashes to the floor. There is a formula for learning that Cara feels, not knowing who or what taught her to believe this feeling is like a truth, her presence is violating.

It is a success. She has made it to the first floor. Yet there is now the long and lifeless hall to travel. She stands there, waiting for something like a rogue cough to remind her she is not truly alone in this estranged place. Cara doesn't know that, although her illness has isolated her, she is a pioneer. The formula will radically change. This lifeless hall will in a decade become the norm, because Maine would take a virus and its consequences seriously. Students will have to learn from home, as she has had to learn from home. But for Cara, in this year and in this school, she is outside the norm. On the days when her energy has ebbed considerably, she still sometimes comes to school. It is always a risk that rarely pays off. Cara has become too self-conscious to attend her classes, to walk in at the wrong time and see the other honors students fixed in their seats, hungry for a distraction — even if that distraction takes the form of a gawky girl with holes in her socks and two copies of *The Great Gatsby*, one for each hand. Cara becomes the actor who has forgotten the rehearsal. She might as well just pace in the hall and read alone.

Yet she would become startled whenever the bell happened to ring and, under the clanging command of the schedule, hordes of students invaded the hall. As she walks, there are a few sights, sounds, and smells that she can remember from previous invasions, and that haunt the currently lifeless hall: the hindsight scandal of bad color choices, the stalling chatter of other students' newly supplied voices, the stench of cheap deodorant that is outgunned in the fight against adolescent sweat. Cara stops walking and places an ear against the door of the girls' bathroom. No whispering voices to tempt the compulsive eavesdropper today. Worse for Cara, as she looks around in disbelief, there are no fights to watch. It's something she never discusses, but she is attracted to those fights. The show of muscle becoming overwhelmed in the furious defense of machismo. The growling mouths that have no desire to dress up the language — those mouths speak obscenities as they should be spoken. Those obscenities, when spoken so authentically, are familiar and so curiously cozy. She envies those bodies engaged in their physical struggles, those fighters with their muscles and mouths. Shame will follow its own formula and, after making its calculations, order this envy to the loneliest corner of Cara's heart.

It's anticlimactic, the thing Cara must accomplish in this memory. She has come to school at the wrong time to pick up a history textbook. Her teacher is Ms. T, who is as thin as Cara but has pale Irish red hair like Cara's mother. For someone so young, at least compared to Cara's mother, Ms. T seems unusually attached to the cliché of pencil skirts and blouses. But that is her subliminal dress code. The tailored skirts, the fitted blouses, make cosmetic Ms. T's approach to teaching. This is a school where the many male, and even a few female, teachers habitually toe the line of suggestion. They honor the schedule like loyalists, and yet they still

somehow find the vacant minute for overfamiliar advice-giving (like Cara's literature teacher, a bald Bowdoin alumnus who will tell her that becoming fluent in a language requires taking a lover who speaks it, or perhaps taking a few, perhaps all at once). Ms. T sticks to the curriculum. When she stands before her students, within sight of the clock that torments her by always being a few minutes off, she marshals minds as much as she marshals her desires. Not an inch of her deviates from a constrained form, in body or otherwise.

Yet she, like anyone else, is bound to be occasionally caught off guard. Cara's mother had emailed Ms. T to let her know about the textbook and when Cara would come for it. It must have been forgotten in a sea of prep and other more urgent announcements, because when Cara enters her classroom, Ms. T is spooked. The vase of mental composure is nearly tipped off its table. But it quickly regains its position, and unruffled, she stares at Cara. A knowing smile twists her freckled lips.

"Give me a second," Ms. T says.

Cara says nothing. Ms. T puts the cap back on her pen and stands up from her desk. She walks to the back of her classroom and briefly examines a wooden bookshelf. In this memory, the classroom furniture and other décor faintly exist. Cara sees the flanking rows of tan desks with the usual pencil graffiti, the usual bookshelves with the usual flaking paint, and two blackboards covered in chalk residue and the hazy lettering of old lessons that may go as far back as the 1990s. Ms. T grabs the textbook and brings it to Cara, but it's as if Ms. T would prefer for the textbook to not leave her hands.

The knowing smile has disappeared. The freckled lips are flat. There is a severe look in her eyes that Cara recognizes. Ms. T had been Cara's honors history teacher sophomore year as

well, the first class of a two-class sequence to prepare for the AP Test she would take this year, and yet they remain strangers. Ms. T knows little about Cara besides that she has an assigned seat which is rarely occupied and somehow, despite the fact Cara rarely sits in that seat, her work does not suffer. An effort was being made somewhere. It was just not an effort to be present. Something passionate inside Cara aches in response to the unspoken criticism. Cara knows the criticism is there, existing deep within Ms. T., and she wants desperately to refute it. To disinter it and reveal how the criticism is a worthless inheritance, to explain that Ms. T deserves better than what she has been given. But Cara stumbles when she attempts to rouse the unspoken into speech. Her mouth is open but the words desert her. This isn't the mouth of a fighter. So the mouth shuts, and the lips are pulled in and crushed to a colorless line of defeat.

As the owl eyes of the memory blink, we can't help but consider what this Cara needs. We think then of her mother's old pearl necklace. Cara had once marveled at the necklace resting in a display case, with a pebbled slate exterior and black velvet-lined interior, that had been discovered in her mother's cluttered closet. But she had never witnessed her mother wearing them. The necklace had been sentenced to a long retirement that predates Cara's existence. The social isolation of suburban poverty made the necklace obsolete. However, in our imagination, we could revitalize the necklace. We could persuade the necklace that its pearls could again serve its original purpose: to elevate a woman beyond meaningful reproach. Ms. T was no doubt someone who responded well to pearls and their elegantly constrained form. Their language of sexless formality was her language.

That solution is too neat. The necklace is too traditional for this Cara, and it does nothing to jostle the vase within Ms. T. There is a string of more suitable things than pearls

somewhere here, in the darkness, and with our free hand we reach for what seems empty. Yet our hand returns full. In it is a necklace, retired much like the pearl necklace, but there are no close-set pearls brought together by the guide of elastic string. The necklace is made of clay beads, each one a putrid mix of yellow and purple. Each one an imperfect sphere. Cara was responsible for this necklace's clumsy birthing. The memory remains a blurry apparition, inexact, but we can guess at its dimensions. The necklace was an art project that, for some unknown period, preoccupied Cara's mind when she was very young and *time* was some distant concept. Time seemed to live an ocean away. No one had given her its address, or more likely, someone had tried, and she conveniently forgot it. So time, as some distant thing without an address, was not spent on the necklace. Cara had merely stayed put somewhere, like she had stayed put with the dictionary, as if she were in love with the ugly clay. She knew when to stop, and she stopped when her fingers became sore.

There are questions that may not be worth asking, but we ask them anyway. What if this necklace had been placed in its own velvet-lined case? What if it had been kept as a precious thing, rather than forced to retire to some crevice between two dusty paperbacks in her mother's bookshelf? This necklace was a different tradition. The usual concept of time hadn't been spent on it. The usual concept of time didn't define it. And here was this Cara, a girl who is out of time, with no tradition she could gather a few words from to defend herself.

We do something a little dangerous. We play with the owl memory until it becomes less faint. It begins to trust us, and trust makes it bolder as well as more receptive. When the memory seems to be at its most receptive, we offer suggestions like we might offer mice: This Cara, standing in her baggiest t-shirt before Ms. T, is wearing the hideous clay necklace. She is

fumbling with it and, through this fumbling, thinks of a few simple words to match the fighter in her axe-like eyes.

So the memory devours the suggestions. The memory is revised.

“I know I’m a stranger,” she says, “but I’m hurting just as much as you.”