

The daily body ritual performed by everyone includes a mouth-rite. Despite the fact that the Nacirema people are so punctilious about care of the mouth, this rite involves a practice which strikes the uninitiated stranger as revolting. It was reported to me that the ritual consists of inserting a small bundle of hog hairs into the mouth, along with certain magical powders, and then moving the bundle in a highly formalized series of gestures.

In addition to the private mouth-rite, the people seek out a holy-mouth-man once or twice a year. These practitioners have an impressive set of paraphernalia, consisting of a variety of augers, awls, probes, and prods. The use of these objects in the exorcism of the evils of the mouth involves almost unbelievable ritual torture of the client. The holy-mouth-man opens the client's mouth and, using the above mentioned tools, enlarges any holes which decay may have created in the teeth. Magical materials are put into these holes. If there are no naturally occurring holes in the teeth, large sections of one or more teeth are gouged out so that the supernatural substance can be applied. In the client's view, the purpose of these ministrations is to arrest decay and to draw friends. The extremely sacred and traditional character of the rite is evident in the fact that the natives return to the holy-mouth-men year after year, despite the fact that their teeth continue to decay.

From "Body Ritual among the  
Nacirema," *American  
Anthropologist*, 58 (1956), by Horace  
Miner

Legibility depends on the tone of

dumb email:

Aoccdrnig to a rscheearch at Cmabrigde Uinervtisy, it deosn't mttar in waht oredr the ltteers in a wrod are, the olny iprmoetnt tihng is taht the frist and lsat ltteer be at the rghit pclae. The rset can be a total mses and you can sitll raed it wouthit a porbelm. Tihs is bcuseae the huamn mnid deos not raed ervey lteter by istlef, but the wrod as a wlohe. Amzanig huh?

(a letter to the magazine New Scientist vol 162 issue 2188 - 29 May 1999, page 55)

You report that reversing 50-millisecond segments of recorded sound does not greatly affect listeners' ability to understand speech (In Brief, 1 May, p 27).

This reminds me of my PhD at Nottingham University (1976), which showed that randomising letters in the middle of words had little or no effect on the ability of skilled readers to understand the text. Indeed one rapid reader noticed only four or five errors in an A4 page of muddled text.

This is easy to demonstrate. In a publication of New Scientist you could randomise all the letters, keeping the first two and last two the same, and readability would hardly be affected. My analysis did not come to much because the theory at the time was for shape and sentence recognition. Saberi's work suggests we may have some parallel processes at work.

The reason for this is surely that identifying content by parallel processing speeds up recognition. We only need the first and last two letters to spot changes in meaning.

This was not easy to type!

Graham Rawlinson  
Aldershot, Hampshire

Finished files are the  
result of years of scientific  
study combined with the  
experience of years.

“We are creatures of habit; given a blank we can't help trying to fill it in along lines of customary seeing or saying. But the best poetic lines undermine those habits, break the pre-ordained, unsettle the suburbs of your routine sentiments, and rattle the tracks of your trains of thoughts.”

-Heather McHugh, from Peter Turchi's *Maps of The Imagination*.

**R**enowned curator Jacques Saunière staggered through the vaulted archway of the museum's Grand Gallery. He lunged for the nearest painting he could see, a Caravaggio. Grabbing the gilded frame, the seventy-six-year-old man heaved the masterpiece toward himself until it tore from the wall and Saunière collapsed backward in a heap beneath the canvas.

As he had anticipated, a thundering iron gate fell nearby, barricading the entrance to the suite. The parquet floor shook. Far off, an alarm began to ring.

The curator lay a moment, gasping for breath, taking stock. *I am still alive.* He crawled out from under the canvas and scanned the cavernous space for someplace to hide.

A voice spoke, chillingly close. "Do not move."

On his hands and knees, the curator froze, turning his head slowly.

Only fifteen feet away, outside the sealed gate, the mountainous silhouette of his attacker stared through the iron bars. He was broad and tall, with ghost-pale skin and thinning white hair. His irises were pink with dark red pupils. The albino drew a pistol from his coat and aimed the barrel through the bars, directly at the curator. "You should not have run." His accent was not easy to place. "Now tell me where it is."

"I told you already," the curator stammered, kneeling defenseless on the floor of the gallery. "I have no idea what you are talking about!"

"You are lying." The man stared at him, perfectly immobile except for the glint in his ghostly eyes. "You and your brethren possess something that is not yours."

The curator felt a surge of adrenaline. *How could he possibly know this?*

Season's \_\_\_\_\_! It was suddenly crystal \_\_\_\_\_ to her. They fought an uphill \_\_\_\_\_. The kid has ants in his \_\_\_\_\_. Get back in the \_\_\_\_\_, cowboy. We woke at the crack of \_\_\_\_\_. That corpse is as \_\_\_\_\_ as a doornail. The sun glinted and made me happy as a \_\_\_\_\_.

Well, he's got \_\_\_\_\_ like a hawk. And she's as \_\_\_\_\_ as a cucumber. They live in the \_\_\_\_\_ of luxury, you know.

This was a huge stumbling \_\_\_\_\_ for my project.

Side\_\_\_\_\_ glance, glinting \_\_\_\_\_, a \_\_\_\_\_ ran up my spine, within \_\_\_\_\_ shot, etc., etc...

“With a cliché you have pandered to a shared understanding, you have taken a short-cut, you have re-presented what was pleasing and familiar rather than risked what was true and strange. It is an aesthetic and an ethical failure: to put it very simply, you have not told the truth. When writers admit to failures they like to admit to the smallest ones - for example, in each of my novels somebody “rummages in their purse” for something because I was too lazy and thoughtless and unawake to separate “purse” from its old, persistent friend “rummage”. To rummage through a purse is to sleepwalk through a sentence - a small enough betrayal of self, but a betrayal all the same. To speak personally, the very reason I write is so that I might not sleepwalk through my entire life. But it is easy to admit that a sentence makes you wince; less easy to confront the fact that for many writers there will be paragraphs, whole characters, whole books through which one sleepwalks and for which “inauthentic” is truly the correct term.”

-zadie smith, from “Fail Better”

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a couple excerpts from Victor Shklovsky's, "Art as Technique"

(from David Lodge, ed., *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader* (London: Longmans, 1988), pp. 16-30.) (translated by Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis in 1965)

☉ After we see an object several times, we begin to recognize it. The object is in front of us and we know about it, but we do not see it - hence, we cannot say anything significant about it. Art removes objects from the automatism of perception.

☉ If we start to examine the general laws of perception, we see that as perception becomes habitual, it becomes automatic. Thus, for example, all of our habits retreat into the area of the unconsciously automatic; if one remembers the sensations of holding a pen or of speaking in a foreign language for the first time and compares that with his feeling at performing the action for the ten thousandth time, he will agree with us. Such habituation explains the principles by which, in ordinary speech, we leave phrases unfinished and words half expressed. In this process, ideally realized in algebra, things are replaced by symbols. Complex words are not expressed in rapid speech; their initial sounds are barely perceived.

☉ Habitualization devours works, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war. "If the whole complex lives of many people go on unconsciously, then such lives are as if they had never been." And art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar,' to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged.

I have never seen anything like it: two little discs of glass suspended in front of his eyes in loops of wire. Is he blind? I could understand it if he wanted to hide blind eyes. But he is not blind. The discs are dark, they look opaque from the outside, but he can see through them. He tells me they are a new invention. "They protect one's eyes against the glare of the sun," he says. "You would find them useful out here in the desert. They save one from squinting all the time. One has fewer headaches. Look." He touches the corners of his eyes lightly. "No wrinkles." He replaces the glasses. It is true. He has the skin of a younger man. "At home everyone wears them."

J.M. Coetzee, opening line of *Waiting for the Barbarians*--

What could be worse than having to be seen resorting to your own life? In my case, there was a fixed sum of experiences, of people, to or from which I could not yet add or subtract, but which I was skilled at coming to grief over, crucially, in broad daylight. For instance, not too long ago I concerned one of the local women, a fruitful botch of a girl. We worked side by side--did data-entry and look-up, first shift, in an uncarpeted, unair-conditioned recess of the ground floor of a bricky low-rise. I was forever taking her in over the partition of bindered reference directories that bisected our workstation. I would keep a sidelong watch over her as she ordered her daily allowance of cough drops in echelon on a square of paper towel. May the arms of other people be said to have an atmosphere? At the very least, may they be construed as aromatic systems of bone and down? Hers enjoyed, for my sake alone, an intimate publicity above the little dove-gray squares of her keyboard.

Gary Lutz, first paragraph of “*Sororally*” from *Stories in the Worst Way* (Knopf, 1996)

“To inhabit a place means literally to have made it a habit, to have learned how to wear a place like a familiar garment, like the garments of sanctity that nuns once wore. The word *habit*, in its now-dim original form, means “to own.” We own places not because we possess the deeds to them, but because they have entered the continuum of our lives. What is strange to us, unfamiliar, can never be home.”

-Paul Gruchow, *Grass Roots*

“There is always something anarchic about the imagination. It likes to find details that don’t belong, that don’t fit. On the way to divorce court, we stop at the Dairy Queen. Your mean-spirited neighbor plays the violin and weeps while performing “Humoresque.” Street gangs sometimes act like families, and families sometimes act like street gangs.”

-Charlie Baxter, *Burning Down the House*, 44

I was cleaning a room and, meandering about, approached the sofa and couldn't remember whether or not I had dusted it. Since these movements are habitual and unconscious, I could not remember and felt that it was impossible to remember - so that if I had dusted it and forgot - that is, had acted unconsciously, then it was the same as if I had not. If some conscious person had been watching, then the fact could be established. If, however, no one was looking, or looking on unconsciously, if the whole complex lives of many people go on unconsciously, then such lives are as if they had never been.

Leo Tolstoy, from his diary (1897)