

Etymology

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In her tiny basement, Nerissa spoke the remains of words and plastered them on painted walls.

Nerissa: from *Nereis*, Greek, sea nymph (she joyed at the splashing sounds her name made as she painted it). Travis (her brother): from *traverser*, Norman French, the traveler (Nerissa thought of all the times he used to curl up in bed with her). Carolyn (her mother): from *Karl*, German, man (Nerissa giggled as she painted the guts of her mother's name picturing her as a man). And Paul (her father): from *Paulus*, Latin, humble (which also made Nerissa laugh, but for different reasons all together). Each word felt important and safe lodged in her mind. Then they slipped down her throat tasted like heat slipped into her stomach made her feel warm inside as if they were hundreds of tiny suns.

Neither of her parents went down to the basement where Nerissa spent most of her time ever since she was seven, for both of them seemed to have bigger and more important things to do. Dinner was the only time that they broke this unspoken rule and tried to take interest in their children's day-to-day lives. Even then, on some days when her father comes home drenched in triumph, dinner will be spent in raucous celebration of whatever her father had managed to accomplish in the practice of tunnel construction. Days like this didn't bother Nerissa, she preferred the company of words to her parents anyway.

Dinner at the Moore's (from *Maurus*, Latin, dark complexion) was no pleasant thing. Nerissa's mother put on a show of trying to engage both her and her older brother, Travis, in conversation.

- Nyssa, her mother said, how was school today?
- Y-y-you, Nerissa started to say, but the words suddenly squeezed her throat and it became too narrow. Y-you na-named me, Nerissa. She looked down at her plate, spelled out words with her peas.

Out of the corner of her eye, Nerissa looked up at Travis, who refused to return her gaze.

- What about you Travis? Her father said, half his attention on his son, half on his tomato soup.

Travis didn't respond, only stared at his plate of carrots and beans.

Later that night, when the last sliver of light had slipped through the open cracks of the window, Nerissa lay there with her polar bears and leopard tortoises and whitetip sharks thought about the last time Travis had really talked to her seven years ago, curled up in her bed, whispering secrets, and suddenly the bears seemed lonely without pubs and the tortoises without seaweed and the sharks without fish. The heat of her room spread into a blanket and Nerissa felt suffocated like she was drowning. She got up, walked to the opposite side of her room and knocked three times on Travis' door. No one responded for a minute or two, but when Nerissa raised her hand to knock again, it swung open and Travis appeared at the other end.

- It's midnight. He said. Go back to sleep with your lonely animals.
- Ca-c-can I t-t-ta-talk t-to y-you?

In the darkness, Nerissa could barely make out her brother's face, but she had seen what her parents had missed. A black eye that could just be hidden with a combination of the dim light and makeup he'd probably stolen from their mother. Finally, Travis stepped aside and allowed Nerissa in. They both sat on his bed, silent until Nerissa felt quite small like a bear without fish and asked w-wh-why d-do you h-have a b-bla-black ey-eye? and Travis didn't respond at first but eventually his face drained into the color of a boiling sunset. He started talking about how his friend Z found him after school that day and he could almost taste his dripping anger; talked about how Z's knuckles crackled when it crushed into his eye and then his nose and then his stomach all because of a small row the day before; talked until his eyes bled blue and Nerissa (still sitting there, still listening) put her against on his cold cheek.

- I w-wa-want t-to sh-show y-you s-s-som-something.

Nerissa took Travis' hand, led him out of his room, and down the flight of stairs. Shaky with excitement, Nerissa pictured Travis in front of her wall, looking at her words, and his eyes would no longer be blue but full of galaxies.

Once they reached the small kitchen, Nerissa took out two flashlights from the middle drawer, marveled at the sound each one made as it turned on. They waded through the wooden chairs and the wooden tables, and Nerissa thought them explorers searching for new species of beetles in the forest before it had been cut down and made into furniture. Cockroaches skidded in and out from under the kitchen sink as Nerissa pushed open the basement door and waited for Travis to go in.

- Why are we going down there? Travis said.

- Y-y-yo-you'll s-s-see.

Making no noise, the two stepped down the stairs and into the basement. Travis shined his light on the wall, on each and every word Nerissa had written since she was seven. His fingers slid through claustrophobia (from *claustrum*, Latin, enclosed) and agoraphobia (from *agora*, Greek, market place) as Nerissa shivered with anticipation.

- What is this?

Nerissa laughed and bounced on the balls of her feet.

- Really, Nyssa, what is this?

- It-it's wh-wh-where I-

- Oh, for God's sake, spit it out. Travis laughed, shined the flashlight on etymology (from *etumon*, Greek, true sense).

Nerissa stopped spinning and the basement seemed to shrink. Staring at the words on the wall she suddenly felt too warm wanted to shed her skin fold her body into the cracks of the wall.

Without saying another word, Nerissa started handing words to Travis: ephemera (from *ephemera*, Latin, the dayfly) and eternal (from *aevum*, Latin, age); ventriloquism (from *venter*, *ventris*, Latin, belly) and taciturn (from *taceo*, Latin, to be silent); companion (from *com* & *panis*, Latin, together & bread) and solitary (from *solus*, Latin, alone). Travis cupped all of Nerissa's words and held them up to his lips as Nerissa sat cross-legged and wondered what each word tasted like to him.

- Wh-why don't y-you-you see me? Nerissa suddenly said.

- What? Of course I see you. Travis laughed.

Nerissa heard the words but they didn't match the shape of Travis' mouth; they tore into the light of the two flashlights like moths and Nerissa didn't try to catch them. They sat there in silence until the flashlights died. They sat in the darkness (without the laughter) until Nerissa finally stuck all her fingers into her jar of blue and wrote malignant (from *malus*, Greek, bad, evil) and egregious (from *grex*, *gregis*, Latin, herd) and dichotomy (from *dicha*, *tome*, Greek, a splitting in two) and

dichotomy dichotomy dichotomy dichotomy dichotomy one for each and every year she became invisible to Travis until the guts of the words covered the walls and drenched Nerissa in a pool of dark blue.

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