

## I Says

By Jeffrey Howard

After I graduated with a bachelor's degree in English, my father, an ex-dairy farmer in his mid-50s, commented with his usual zeal that he had wanted to study English since high school. He'd had an English teacher enamored with Edgar Allan Poe, and that was the part of her class he remembered liking.

Pardon me, but I was skeptical.

I do not think that my father is uneducated. He has a high school diploma and an associate's degree in Applied Science from a community college in Washington State. I will also add, because it was a point of some frustration for me, that I never beat him in Scrabble until my late teenage years, and even then it was close. Growing up, however, I thought he sounded uneducated at times, so given what I knew about him—or thought I knew—it felt like he was revising his personal history just to relate to me.

~

“she / twisted her ankles and re- / crossed her legs with those / black high-heeled shoes and /  
spoke of Hawthorne and / Melville and Poe and others. / we boys didn't hear a word / but  
English was our favorite subject...

Charles Bukowski, “Classical”

~

Where I grew up in the Pacific Northwest, we had a saying: dairy farmers are bilingual. Outside of the barn, they speak one language. In the barn, they speak another more explicit one. In my experience, some farmers might fit that mold, but for years I lived with one—my father—and I heard him use the word *bitch* no more than once. He deployed *son of a bugger* frequently at

milking times (from the back porch I could hear him yelling), but not so frequently that he wore out the phrase, the way he wore out his jeans tossing hay bales into the bed of a truck. My mother saw *son of a bugger* as coarse. She hated such language, even borderline swears, but it bothered me less than another common phrase of his: *I says*.

~

My dad has always been a great teller of stories. Most of them had to do with high school sports or the religious mission he served in the Philippines during the 1970s. Additionally, most of his stories are true. Some entertained, some inspired, others did neither. When he directly quoted someone else, he used the present tense, “she says” or “he says.” When quoting himself, he said, “I says.”

“And then I says...I says...”

And then he would pause and squint and lean back and chuckle because he was about to deliver the best punchline the world has ever known.

~

I read the following joke when I was eight years old. My father loved it.

“The village schoolteacher went to the house of one of her students. She knocked on the door, and her student answered.

“‘Are your father and mother in?’ the teacher asked.

“‘They was in,’ the young boy said, ‘but now they is out.’

“‘“They was in? Now they is out?” Where is your grammar, young man?’ the teacher asked.

“‘My grammar’s went upstairs to took a nap,’ the boy replied.”

*Boys’ Life*, Jan. 1983

~

*I says*. I knew verbs and nouns ought to agree. But Dad's didn't. I says this. I says that. My Grandpa Howard also used “I says” a lot, as well as “ain’t,” “he don’t,” and “you wasn’t.” Then he would tickle my ribs so hard I felt like crying.

~

“The two families from whence I spring were as different in temperament as in origin.”

C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*

~

The Howard dialect symbolized their farming heritage like a coat of arms. “I says” captures the differences between my dad’s upbringing and my mom’s. My Grandma Brady, my mom’s mom, a proper city girl from D.C., was Aristotle’s canons embodied, stressing memory and delivery above all else in our elocution. We memorized poetry by Eugene Field, Edward Lear, and Hilaire Belloc and recited for her.

My mom was so passionate about education that she homeschooled me and my siblings all the way through high school. She provided us with curricular structure and resources, yet in comparison to our friends who attended public school we were relatively independent, like the Vanderhofs in *You Can’t Take It with You*, though in our own minds less eccentric.

~

When at age sixteen I began working part-time as a library page (roughly translated as “he who puts books away”), I used to sort through stacks of books patrons donated. Not the headache-inducing bosom-burners that smelled like cigarette ash and cats. I liked to heft and inspect the old and attractive books, the ones with an aura and that “old book” smell. Hemingway’s *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. Thomas Paine’s *The Age of Reason*. The kinds of things

most patrons would overlook, especially the ubiquitous pre-adolescents and teens who wanted to know how long a sperm whale could hold its breath, where to find Stephen King's *Carrie* so they could accumulate more points in the state's accelerated reading program, or why they were not allowed to download pornography on library computers.

During my browsing, a workbook on learning Biblical Hebrew caught my attention. Language, at least the English language as I then understood it, was familiar territory, especially writing and reading. After my mom had taught me how to write, I composed numerous short stories and rhyming couplets and complete nonsense patched together from spelling lists. As a teenager, my reading diet comprised Locke, Aquinas, and Hobbes. Thomas, not *Calvin and*. But this workbook promised a new frontier. I had no experience in studying languages that were not English, but the claims the book made about helping the reader learn to interpret ancient texts drew me in. I copied pages to work through. The library director ordered more books on Hebrew and a CD-ROM with language lessons. She even let me take those resources home before they were even catalogued. I could be frequently found on the sidewalk in front of my home, striving to write out perfectly formed alephs, beths, and gimels in pink, blue, and green chalks.

I never made much progress with Hebrew, except understanding the Hebrew alphabet and reading a few words. What I did not know at the time was that my dad was bragging about my efforts to learn Biblical Hebrew to anyone who would listen: people at church, the Glanbia truckers who picked up our milk, bull semen salesmen.

“He’s out there writing it on the sidewalk...”

When I discovered he was sharing that information, I felt like a sideshow performer. How *dare* he?

“The gingham dog and the calico cat / Side by side on the table sat...”

Eugene Field, “The Duel”

~

My father’s language (a dialect I fall into sometimes around my kids) and all it represents has continued to influence my attitude and behaviors as an adult. My choice to become an English major the summer before my junior year of college may seem outwardly random or coincidental (I looked at the list of possible majors that were not Psychology and picked the least repulsive one), but deep down I suspect I may have been motivated to choose English for the same reason I told my father I did not want to take over his farm when he retired: I simply did not wish to be like him. It took me years to realize what I was then too immature to appreciate. Yes, my father was not the most educated person ever, nor did he sound like it, but he was proud of me for aspiring to levels of education he never achieved.

Because of my training in English, I have developed knowledge of and healthy respect for the value of “standard”/“academic” English. One of my greatest resources is my ability to edit. I am really good at it. When students come into the communication center asking specific questions about their grammar or vocabulary, I can help them turn chaos into, well, slightly less chaos. (Communication is always a bit chaotic; order is mostly illusion.) I can recite rules for days if clients ask for them, and even if they don’t that is still an option.

Still, my experiences with my father and the way he spoke has proven a valuable complement to my formal training. I used to stigmatize my father and his family by their language, their “ain’ts” and “she don’ts” and “I says,” passing them off as incorrect, improper, imperfect, because I valued so-called “correctness” over the rich culture reflected in their language. I have come to learn that being a quality and sensitive consultant has less to do with

your working knowledge of language than it does with your ability to be an empathetic individual who treats others with concern and compassion and authenticity. Correctness may be a valuable principle of communication, but people are more important than principles, as my wife's grandfather likes to say.

Many clients are already made to feel stigmatized by peers, professors, colleagues, and recruiters because of the way they communicate. The feedback that I give clients should be useful to them, whether it involves topic sentences, noun-verb agreement, organization, conventions, audience, etc., and while *the paper or project* can stand some improvement, the way I talk about the way they communicate should never make *the client* feel inferior or unintelligent. We are not helping them "delete" the parts of themselves certain members of society regard as inferior; we are helping them to elaborate on themselves, to add new details, to help them practice using those details to move effortlessly between situations in ways that will bring them success or help them attain their goals.

I should never let my pedantic eagerness to "fix" problems, show off knowledge, or communicate enthusiasm for language replace my concern for them and their success. I should ask myself, Am I doing this for them, or am I selfishly perpetuating some sense of linguistic superiority and judging them in the process? There is so much about them and their stories, their desires and their challenges, that I can never understand in a half-hour session. So wouldn't I be foolish to try summing them up somehow, extrapolating all that they are from something as trivial as "I says"?

## Works Cited

Bukowski, Charles. "Classical." *Bone Palace Ballet: New Poems*, HarperCollins, 2002, pp. 23–

4.

Field, Eugene. "The Duel." *Poets.org*, <https://poets.org/poem/duel>. Accessed 18 February 2020.

Hofmann, Scott. "The Village Schoolteacher." *Boys' Life*, Boy Scouts of America, January 1983.

*Google Books*, <https://books.google.com/books?id=u2YEAAAAMBAJ&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false>. Accessed 18 February 2020/.

Lewis, C.S. *Surprised by Joy*. Harcourt, 1955.