

Conversation Pieces
Volume 7

Ordinary People

A Collection
by
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To Jon and Sia
with Love

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The Land of Ordinary People

For John Lennon

I.

Welcome to the land of ordinary people.
Our buildings are low.
Our roads are made
for bicycles not limousines.
As for our public monuments, they celebrate
achievements of day-to-day life.

Here, in the main square,
the cube of bronze
ten meters tall is for
the Unknown Inventor of Bean Curd.

And here, above the boulevard,
this line of wash
made of heavy plastic
and hung on steel—
this celebrates

the housewives and laundry maids
throughout all history.

Oh women with muscular arms
beating sheets on rocks by the river,
we honor you!
We shall not forget
your labor in the cause of cleanliness!

II.

Our streets are named for flowers and for trades.
At the moment, we stand
at the corner of Magnolia Lane
and Key punch Avenue.
Further down
is the fountain at the start
of Plumbers' Promenade.

Notice the shape: a giant bidet
shooting jets of water
that glisten in the sunlight.

III.

Politicians?
We have none, holding—as we do—
the very name accursed.

No soldiers
nor theologians,
not even one philosopher.

But a multitude of gardeners
and potters,
mechanics
and extruders of plastic.

IV.

In the center of every town, we build
a hall—
large and lined with mirrors.
We bring our children there
on days off when it's rainy.

“Look around,” we say.
“This is the source of power.
Here are the heroes.
Here are the leaders.
The ones who sing,
the ones who are sung about—
all are here.

“Look and see
how they return your gaze.”

The Grammarian's Five Daughters

Once there was a grammarian who lived in a great city that no longer exists, so we don't have to name it. Although she was learned and industrious and had a house full of books, she did not prosper. To make the situation worse, she had five daughters. Her husband, a diligent scholar with no head for business, died soon after the fifth daughter was born, and the grammarian had to raise them alone. It was a struggle, but she managed to give each an adequate education, though a dowry—essential in the grammarian's culture—was impossible. There was no way for her daughters to marry. They would become old maids, eking (their mother thought) a miserable living as scribes in the city market. The grammarian fretted and worried, until the oldest daughter was 15 years old.

Then the girl came to her mother and said, "You can't possibly support me, along with my sisters. Give me what you can, and I'll go out and seek my fortune. No matter what happens, you'll have one less mouth to feed."

The mother thought for a while, then produced a bag. "In here are nouns, which I consider the solid

core and treasure of language. I give them to you because you're the oldest. Take them and do what you can with them."

The oldest daughter thanked her mother and kissed her sisters and trudged away, the bag of nouns on her back.

Time passed. She traveled as best she could, until she came to a country full of mist. Everything was shadowy and uncertain. The oldest daughter blundered along, never knowing exactly where she was, till she came to a place full of shadows that reminded her of houses.

A thin, distant voice cried out, "Oyez. The king of this land will give his son or daughter to whoever can dispel the mist."

The oldest daughter thought a while, then opened her bag. Out came the nouns, sharp and definite. *Sky* leaped up and filled the grayness overhead. *Sun* leaped up and lit the sky. *Grass* spread over the dim gray ground. *Oak* and *elm* and *poplar* rose from grass. *House* followed, along with *town* and *castle* and *king*.

Now, in the sunlight, the daughter was able to see people. Singing her praise, they escorted her to the castle, where the grateful king gave his eldest son to her. Of course they married and lived happily, producing many sharp and definite children.

In time they ruled the country, which acquired a new name: Thingness. It became famous for bright skies, vivid landscapes, and solid, clear-thinking citizens who loved best what they could touch and hold.



Now the story turns to the second daughter. Like her sister, she went to the grammarian and said, "There

is no way you can support the four of us. Give me what you can, and I will go off to seek my fortune. No matter what happens, you will have one less mouth to feed.”

The mother thought for a while, then produced a bag. “This contains verbs, which I consider the strength of language. I give them to you because you are my second child and the most fearless and bold. Take them and do what you can with them.”

The daughter thanked her mother and kissed her sisters and trudged away, the bag of verbs on her back.

Like her older sister, the second daughter made her way as best she could, coming at last to a country of baking heat. The sun blazed in the middle of a dull blue, dusty sky. Everything she saw seemed overcome with lassitude. Honey bees, usually the busiest of creatures, rested on their hives, too stupefied to fly in search of pollen. Plowmen dozed at their plows. The oxen in front of the plows dozed as well. In the little trading towns, the traders sat in their shops, far too weary to cry their wares.

The second daughter trudged on. The bag on her back grew ever heavier and the sun beat on her head, until she could barely move or think. Finally, in a town square, she came upon a man in the embroidered tunic of a royal herald. He sat on the rim of the village fountain, one hand trailing in water.

When she came up, he stirred a bit, but was too tired to lift his head. “Oy-” he said at last, his voice whispery and slow. “The queen of this country will give—give a child in marriage to whoever can dispel this stupor.”

The second daughter thought a while, then opened her bag. *Walk* jumped out, then *scamper* and *canter*, *run*

and *jump* and *fly*. Like bees, the verbs buzzed through the country. The true bees roused themselves in response. So did the country's birds, farmers, oxen, housewives, and merchants. In every town, dogs began to bark. Only the cats stayed curled up, having their own schedule for sleeping and waking.

Blow blew from the bag, then *gust*. The country's banners flapped. Like a cold wind from the north or an electric storm, the verbs hummed and crackled. The daughter, amazed, held the bag open until the last slow verb had crawled out and away.

Townfolk danced around her. The country's queen arrived on a milk-white racing camel. "Choose any of my children. You have earned a royal mate."

The royal family lined up in front of her, handsome lads and lovely maidens, all twitching and jittering, due to the influence of the verbs.

All but one, the second daughter realized: a tall maid who held herself still, though with evident effort. While the other royal children had eyes like deer or camels, this one's eyes—though dark—were keen. The grammarian's daughter turned toward her.

The maiden said, "I am the crown princess. Marry me and you will be a queen's consort. If you want children, one of my brothers will bed you. If we're lucky, we'll have a daughter to rule after I am gone. But no matter what happens, I will love you forever, for you have saved my country from inaction."

Of course, the grammarian's daughter chose this princess.

Weary of weariness and made restless by all the verbs, the people of the country became nomads, riding

horses and following herds of great-horned cattle over a dusty plain. The grammarian's second daughter bore her children in carts, saw them grow up on horseback, and lived happily to an energetic old age, always side by side with her spouse, the nomad queen. The country they ruled, which had no clear borders and no set capital, became known as Change.



Now the story turns back to the grammarian. By this time her third daughter had reached the age of 15.

"The house has been almost roomy since my sisters left," she told her mother. "And we've had almost enough to eat. But that's no reason for me to stay, when they have gone to seek their fortunes. Give me what you can, and I will take to the highway. No matter what happens, you'll have one less mouth to feed."

"You are the loveliest and most elegant of my daughters," said the grammarian. "Therefore I will give you this bag of adjectives. Take them and do what you can with them. May luck and beauty go with you always."

The daughter thanked her mother, kissed her sisters, and trudged away, the bag of adjectives on her back. It was a difficult load to carry. At one end were words like *rosy* and *delicate*, which weighed almost nothing and fluttered. At the other end, like stones, lay *dark* and *grim* and *fearsome*. There seemed no way to balance such a collection. The daughter did the best she could, trudging womanfully along until she came to a bleak desert land. Day came suddenly here, a white sun popping into a cloudless sky. The intense light bleached colors from the earth. There was little water. The local people lived in caves and canyons to be safe from the sun.

“Our lives are bare stone,” they told the grammarian’s third daughter, “and the sudden alternation of blazing day and pitch-black night. We are too poor to have a king or queen, but we will give our most respected person, our shaman, as spouse to anyone who can improve our situation.”

The third daughter thought for a while, then unslung her unwieldy bag, placed it on the bone-dry ground, and opened it. Out flew *rosy* and *delicate* like butterflies. *Dim* followed, looking like a moth.

“Our country will no longer be stark,” cried the people with joy. “We’ll have dawn and dusk, which have always been rumors.”

One by one the other adjectives followed: *rich*, *subtle*, *beautiful*, *luxuriant*. This last resembled a crab covered with shaggy vegetation. As it crept over the hard ground, plants fell off it—or maybe sprang up around it—so it left a trail of greenness.

Finally, the bag was empty except for nasty words. As *slimy* reached out a tentacle, the third daughter pulled the drawstring tight. *Slimy* shrieked in pain. Below it in the bag, the worst adjectives rumbled, “Unjust! Unfair!”

The shaman, a tall, handsome person, was nearby, trying on various adjectives. He/she/it was especially interested in *masculine*, *feminine*, and *androgynous*. “I can’t make up my mind,” the shaman said. “This is the dark side of our new condition. Before, we had clear choices. Now, the new complexity puts all in doubt.”

The sound of complaining adjectives attracted the shaman. He, she, or it came over and looked at the bag, which still had a tentacle protruding and wiggling.

“This is wrong. We asked for an end to starkness, which is not the same as asking for prettiness. In there—at the bag’s bottom—are words we might need someday: *sublime*, *awesome*, *terrific*, and so on. Open it up and let them out.”

“Are you certain?” asked the third daughter.

“Yes,” said the shaman.

She opened the bag. Out crawled *slimy* and other words equally disgusting. The shaman nodded with approval as more and more unpleasant adjectives appeared. Last of all, after *grim* and *gruesome* and *terrific*, came *sublime*. The word shone like a diamond or a thundercloud in sunlight.

“You see,” said the shaman. “Isn’t that worth the rest?”

“You are a holy being,” said the daughter, “and may know things I don’t.”

Sublime crawled off toward the mountains. The third daughter rolled up her bag. “All gone,” she said. “Entirely empty.”

The people looked around. Their land was still a desert, but now clouds moved across the sky, making the sunlight on bluff and mesa change. In response to this, the desert colors turned subtle and various. In the mountains rain fell, misty gray, feeding clear streams that ran in the bottoms of canyons. The vegetation there, spread by the land-crab *luxuriant* and fed by the streams, was a dozen—two dozen—shades of green.

“Our land is beautiful!” the people cried. “And you shall marry our shaman!”

But the shaman was still trying on adjectives, unable to decide if she, he, or it wanted to be feminine or masculine or androgynous.

“I can't marry someone who can't make up her mind,” the third daughter said. “Subtlety is one thing. Uncertainty is another.”

“In that case,” the people said, “you will become our first queen, and the shaman will become your first minister.”

This happened. In time the third daughter married a young hunter, and they had several children, all different in subtle ways.

The land prospered, though it was never fertile, except in the canyon bottoms. But the people were able to get by. They valued the colors of dawn and dusk, moving light on mesas, the glint of water running over stones, the flash of bugs and birds in flight, the slow drift of sheep on a hillside—like clouds under clouds. The name of their country was Subtletie. It lay north of Thingness and west of Change.



Back home, in the unnamed city, the grammarian's fourth daughter came of age.

“We each have a room now,” she said to her mother, “and there's plenty to eat. But my sister and I still don't have dowries. I don't want to be an old maid in the marketplace. Therefore, I plan to go as my older sisters did. Give me what you can, and I'll do my best with it. And if I make my fortune, I'll send for you.”

The mother thought for a while and rummaged in her study, which was almost empty. She had sold her books years before to pay for her daughters' educations;

and most of her precious words were gone. At last, she managed to fill a bag with adverbs, though they were frisky little creatures and tried to escape.

But a good grammarian can outwit any word. When the bag was close to bursting, she gave it to her fourth daughter.

“This is what I have left. I hope it will serve.” The daughter thanked her mother and kissed her one remaining sister and took off along the highway, the bag of adverbs bouncing on her back.

Her journey was a long one. She made it womanfully, being the most energetic of the five daughters and the one with the most buoyant spirit. As she walked—quickly, slowly, steadily, unevenly—the bag on her back kept jouncing around and squeaking.

“What’s in there?” asked other travelers. “Mice?”

“Adverbs,” said the fourth daughter.

“Not much of a market for them,” said the other travelers. “You’d be better off with mice.”

This was plainly untrue, but the fourth daughter was not one to argue. On she went, until her shoes wore to pieces and fell from her weary feet. She sat on a stone by the highway and rubbed her bare soles, while the bag squeaked next to her.

A handsome lad in many-colored clothes stopped in front of her. “What’s in the bag?” he asked.

“Adverbs,” said the daughter shortly.

“Then you must, like me, be going to the new language fair.”

The daughter looked up with surprise, noticing—as she did so—the lad’s rosy cheeks and curling, auburn hair. “What?” she asked intently.

"I'm from the country of Subtletie and have a box of adjectives on my horse, every possible color, arranged in drawers: *aquamarine, russet, dun, crimson, puce*. I have them all. Your shoes have worn out. Climb up on my animal, and I'll give you a ride to the fair."

The fourth daughter agreed, and the handsome lad—whose name, it turned out, was Russet—led the horse to the fair. There, in booths with bright awnings, wordsmiths and merchants displayed their wares: solid nouns, vigorous verbs, subtle adjectives. But there were no adverbs.

"You have brought just the right product," said Russet enviously. "What do you say we share a booth? I'll get cages for your adverbs, who are clearly frisky little fellows, and you can help me arrange my colors in the most advantageous way."

The fourth daughter agreed; they set up a booth. In front were cages of adverbs, all squeaking and jumping, except for the sluggish ones. The lad's adjectives hung on the awning, flapping in a mild wind. As customers came by, drawn by the adverbs, Russet said, "How can we have *sky* without *blue*? How can we have *gold* without *shining*? And how much use is a verb if it can't be modified? Is *walk* enough, without *slowly* or *quickly*?"

"Come and buy! Come and buy! We have *mincingly* and *angrily, knowingly, lovingly*, as well as a fine assortment of adjectives. Ride home happily with half a dozen colors and a cage full of adverbs."

The adverbs sold like hot cakes, and the adjectives sold well also. By the fair's end, both Russet and the fourth daughter were rich, and there were still plenty of adverbs left.

“They must have been breeding, though I didn’t notice,” said Russet. “What are you going to do with them?”

“Let them go,” said the daughter.

“Why?” asked Russet sharply.

“I have enough money to provide for myself, my mother, and my younger sister. *Greedy* is an adjective and not one of my wares.” She opened the cages. The adverbs ran free—*slowly, quickly, hoppingly, happily*. In the brushy land around the fairground, they proliferated. The region became known as Varietie. People moved there to enjoy the brisk, invigorating, varied weather, as well as the fair, which happened every year thereafter.

As for the fourth daughter, she built a fine house on a hill above the fairground. From there she could see for miles. Out back, among the bushes, she put feeding stations for the adverbs, and she sent for her mother and one remaining sister. The three of them lived together contentedly. The fourth daughter did not marry Russet, though she remained always grateful for his help. Instead, she became an old maid. It was a good life, she said, as long as one had money and respect.



In time, the fifth daughter came of age. (She was the youngest by far.) Her sister offered her a dowry, but she said, “I will do no less than the rest of you. Let my mother give me whatever she has left, and I will go to seek my fortune.”

The mother went into her study, full of new books now, and looked around. “I have a new collection of nouns,” she told the youngest daughter.

“No, for my oldest sister took those and did well with them, from all reports. I don't want to repeat someone else's adventures.”

Verbs were too active, she told her mother, and adjectives too varied and subtle. “I'm a plain person who likes order and organization.”

“How about adverbs?” asked the mother.

“Is there nothing else?”

“Prepositions,” said the mother, and showed them to her daughter. They were dull little words, like something a smith might make from pieces of iron rod. Some were bent into angles. Others were curved into hooks. Still others were circles or helixes. Something about them touched the youngest daughter's heart.

“I'll take them,” she said and put them in a bag. Then she thanked her mother, kissed her sister, and set off.

Although they were small, the prepositions were heavy and had sharp corners. The youngest daughter did not enjoy carrying them, but she was a methodical person who did what she set out to do. Tromp, tromp, she went along the highway, which wound finally into a broken country, full of fissures and jagged peaks. The local geology was equally chaotic. Igneous rocks intruded into sedimentary layers. New rock lay under old rock. The youngest daughter, who loved order, had never seen such a mess. While neat, she was also rational, and she realized she could not organize an entire mountain range. “Let it be what it is,” she said. “My concern is my own life and other people.”

The road grew rougher and less maintained. Trails split off from it and sometimes rejoined it or ended nowhere, as the daughter discovered by trial. “This

country needs engineers,” she muttered peevisly. (A few adverbs had hidden among the prepositions and would pop out now and then. *Peevisly* was one.)

At length the road became nothing more than a path, zigzagging down a crumbling mountain slope. Below her in a valley was a town of shacks, though town might be the wrong word. The shacks were scattered helter-skelter over the valley bottom and up the valley sides. Nothing was seemly or organized. Pursing her lips—a trick she had learned from her mother, who did it when faced by a sentence that would not parse—the fifth daughter went down the path.

When she reached the valley floor, she saw people running to and fro.

“Madness,” said the daughter. The prepositions, in their bag, made a sound of agreement like metal chimes.

In front of her, two women began to argue—over what she could not tell.

“Explain,” cried the fifth daughter, while the prepositions went “bong” and “bing.”

“Here in the Canton of Chaos nothing is capable of agreement,” one woman said. “Is it age before beauty, or beauty before age? What came first, the chicken or the egg? Does might make right, and if so, what is left?”

“This is certainly madness,” said the daughter.

“How can we disagree?” said the second woman. “We live topsy-turvy and pell-mell, with no hope of anything better.” Saying this, she hit the first woman on the head with a live chicken.

“Egg!” cried the first woman.

“Left!” cried the second.

The chicken squawked, and the grammarian's last daughter opened her bag.

Out came the prepositions: *of, to, from, with, at, by, in, under, over*, and so on. When she'd put them into the bag, they had seemed like hooks or angles. Now, departing in orderly rows, they reminded her of ants. Granted, they were large ants, each one the size of a woman's hand, their bodies metallic gray, their eyes like cut and polished hematite. A pair of tongs or pincers protruded from their mouths; their thin legs, moving delicately over the ground, seemed made of iron rods or wire.

Somehow—it must have been magic—the things they passed over and around became organized. Shacks turned into tidy cottages. Winding paths became streets. The fields were square now. The trees ran in lines along the streets and roads. Terraces appeared on the mountainsides.

The mountains themselves remained as crazy as ever, strata sideways and upside down. "There is always a limit to order," said the daughter. At her feet, a handful of remaining prepositions chimed their agreement like bells.

In decorous groups, the locals came up to her. "You have saved us from utter confusion. We are a republic, so we can't offer you a throne. But please become our first citizen, and if you want to marry, please accept any of us. Whatever you do, don't go away, unless you leave these ingenious little creatures that have connected us with one another."

"I will stay," said the fifth daughter, "and open a grammar school. As for marriage, let that happen as it will."

The citizens agreed by acclamation to her plan. She settled in a tidy cottage and opened a tidy school, where the canton's children learned grammar.

In time, she married four other schoolteachers. (Due to the presence of the prepositions, which remained in their valley and throughout the mountains, the local people developed a genius for creating complex social groups. Their diagrams of kinship excited the awe of neighbors, and their marriages grew more intricate with each generation.)

The land became known as Relation. In addition to genealogists and marriage brokers, it produced diplomats and merchants. These last two groups, through trade and negotiation, gradually unified the five countries of Thingnesse, Change, Subtletie, Varietie, and Relation. The empire they formed was named Cooperation. No place was more solid, more strong, more complex, more energetic, or better organized.

The flag of the new nation was an ant under a blazing yellow sun. Sometimes the creature held a tool: a pruning hook, scythe, hammer, trowel, or pen. At other times its hands (or feet) were empty. Always below it was the nation's motto:

WITH.