

Conversation Pieces  
Volume 66

# Everything is Made of Letters

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## Techt

The Burton machine began to function once it had recognized the complete structure of the source. The machine was almost three years old, an outdated model, but since there was no budget for an updated version, they'd have to make do.

Ludwig had worked on the source for three full days, more than ten hours each day. He had edited the text in detail, breaking it up into clearly delimited sections, and including notes, appendices, and hyperlinks so the Burton machine could process it. So when the machine lit its beautiful yellow pilot light indicating that the reading had been carried out without problems, the other employees at the production company all congratulated him. They knew that his work was the most complicated of all.

The machine took barely three minutes to generate the short film. Ludwig's colleagues began to work on it as soon as the Burton sent it to the screens at their work stations. They were so absorbed that no one saw Ludwig when he put a hand on the machine and remembered verses from a poet he admired:

*I never put a hand on a stone  
that did not become warm with my touch.*

The emotions aroused in that twentieth century man by ancient architecture was comparable to the feeling of complicity Ludwig had with the machine, one of the few things on the planet with whom he shared a language.

“*Wat du nao?*” one of his colleagues asked.

Ludwig pulled his hand from the Burton as if he had been caught doing something wrong and answered hurriedly:

“I think we should get *King of Katoren* by Jan Terlouw underway. It’s fantasy, and I don’t know how long it will take. I’ll let you know.”

There was the habitual silence while his colleagues tried to make sense of the gibberish that had come out of his mouth. He used Long Language with them not just because he knew they were educated: he used it in every one of his conversations as a political statement with the hope that it would not die, or at least not so rapidly. He refused to fall into the trap of social convention and wind up, out of sheer convenience, adopting the dialect he abhorred. Maybe he was eccentric, antiquated, or even in a certain sense he used it to call attention to himself, but it was non-negotiable. If he stopped using Long Language, the only island where he could still feel right would be lost, and he would, once and for all, have lost himself too.

“Underway?” one of them asked.

“Go next,” Ludwig clarified. He loathed the lack of semantic logic in Techt, but he could remember most of its simplifications and roots.

“No hurry you, ‘undertake’ take much us,” grunted the lighting technician, spritzing her hypertactile screen with a spray of dust to generate effects and textures.



Then she blew over certain areas to intensify the effect, forgetting about Ludwig.

It meant they would take a while. The film the Burton had just produced involved complex visual and narrative aspects. He took advantage of the wait to visit the dark cubicle where Domingo, the editor, worked.

“Now is run the after one?” Domingo asked, trying to speak Long.

“You say, ‘is running.’ And ‘the next one,’ not ‘the after one.’”

Domingo smiled. For him Long Language was only a pastime, and he had no need to speak it perfectly. For his work it was enough to understand its written form, but he had become accustomed to listening to Ludwig and now understood almost everything. He was the only person Ludwig could talk to who wouldn’t make puzzled or grumpy faces.

They returned to their eternal topic of conversation, the relationship between the written form of stories and their conversion to visual format. Both men were key players in the process: the intersemiotic translator and the editor.

“The next job is a children’s film,” Ludwig complained. “It’s an excellent book, and we’ll see if we can keep it that way.”

Domingo agreed sorrowfully. He didn’t like to make films for viewers under thirteen years old. When he made videos for adults, at least, he had something to work with, a message, no matter how tenuous or vague. Sometimes after a projection, they’d handed out surveys to spectators asking them what they thought the film’s message had been, and the discouraging majority responded with

“Don’t Know/No Answer.” After those depressing results, Ludwig and Domingo had experimented, making several films that had no message at all—and they had failed horribly in the box office. Perhaps the adults couldn’t locate the message behind the narrative images or they lacked the verbal ability to express it, but films without meaning or moral held absolutely no interest for anyone.

On the other hand, children didn’t care if there was any storyline at all as long as there were surprising, dramatic images and enough visual and sound effects to satisfy their hungry senses. They didn’t need meaning. Perhaps their more pliable and imaginative minds could *create* meaning.

Children’s films were a challenge for the visual and sound art team, who had filled the building’s attic with all sorts of bits and pieces, and who would chase a bee until it stung them as long as they could record a new buzz for their samples. They enjoyed creating and configuring the craziest and most surreal films. And yet for Ludwig and Domingo, the lax plots that had proven to be the greatest commercial successes were sheer torture, among other reasons because this creative process usually meant distorting and deforming the original texts until they were thoroughly unrecognizable.

At first Ludwig had been shocked by the way children’s films held no educational intent at all. Then he reconsidered his nostalgic ideals, thinking that perhaps people capable of processing large quantities of linear text were no better prepared for deep reflection than those who could rapidly understand several screens at a time. Was it necessary to look for the meaning of things

or was it enough just to let it soak in? Perhaps people who simply absorbed images, dialogues, and sounds were happier because they felt no need to interpret them.

Eventually he had reached a kind of agreement between his two past selves. Neither of his earlier positions now seemed right. He regarded any kind of educational goal as containing implicit bias, but he was also sure that verbal incapacity implied incapacity for humanist thought. When no meaning could be found and was instead constructed, no matter how fascinating the process was, no active communication existed. For that reason, the exact same films should be projected to both children and adults.

Domingo didn't read books, but he enjoyed Ludwig's simplified versions for the Burton so much that he collected them. They both discreetly exchanged comics. Nothing actually outlawed or banned that, but it was so antiquated in the eyes of the hypermodernist throwaway culture in which they lived that it was beginning to seem suspect or perverted.

"Like dramas less and less," Domingo said, who was editing a version of *The Diary of Anne Frank*. "Am tired them."

"The same with me," Ludwig answered, who often didn't bother to correct him since it had proven useless. "I suspect that's something else that sets us apart from our companions. They always appreciate dramas because they require little effort: stock sunrises and mists, minor keys from the sound bank..."

Domingo nodded. "Think every story can be disguise as drama or comedy."

"It's an age-old debate," Ludwig said with a smile.

“For this reason edit is so important,” Domingo said as he worked, rapidly selecting the best version of the scene from among many options. “Comedy or drama depend the order.”

“That gives the impression that there ought to be other important variables, right? The music, the blue-out images... If they heard you, our companions would think their work is useless.”

Domingo shook his head. “Nothing more. Just the order. Bring me saddest picture, I spend ten minutes in edit, and I give you comedy, happy and optimistic end. The order is everything.”

Ludwig took leave of Domingo, letting him work comfortably with all those panels where alternatives of each scene passed by with hellish speed, and thought he might be right. Contrasts accentuated emotions. It was enough to add a hopeful ending to a series of tragic scenes so that, suddenly, they seemed to form part of a chain of destiny that had needed a long time to be fulfilled. And likewise the most enchanting and inoffensive comedy of errors could become something terrible if a tragic accident took place after so much frivolity. A smile frozen onto a face was more bitter, more biting, than the omnipresent cold.

He left the building. Since most of his work could be done on a small portable device, he didn't need to carry it out in the production studio. Still, he couldn't go home yet: he was obliged by contract to view at least ten films a month. His employers were afraid that if he didn't, he would lose all ability to understand audiovisual language.

On the way to the cinema he saw a group of adolescents, each carrying two mobile devices, simultaneously typing with both thumbs while chatting among themselves. They could maintain three simultaneous conversations.

With a tired expression, he showed the nail on his little finger to the box-office attendant, who used a pistol scanner to examine the printed circuit that contained all his credits and privileges, along with his free passes.

“Ah!” she said with a dreamy look. “Job’n film!”

“Yes, I work in films,” he admitted. “But I don’t produce, direct, or select the cast. So don’t get excited. I know that everyone in a box office wants to be an actor.”

The girl stepped away, frightened by the torrent of words, only able to recognize a couple of concepts. They sounded as unnerving as the spells of evil sorcerers in the films.

Ludwig entered an individual cabin with a single seat and a small triptych panel a meter wide and switched on the viewing for the latest version of *In Search of Lost Time*. It was a full-length film somewhat longer than usual, in fact it stretched out to the longest format possible: thirty-five minutes. But as in all films, twenty-second scenes overlapped each other, adding more information in the transitions or in flashback image bubbles meticulously calculated so they would never be located in a blind spot.

Using head movements, Ludwig indicated to the cabin which of the three simultaneous plots he preferred to have before him at any given moment. He detected a layer of subliminal sound and did everything he could to ignore it, as he knew he should. But he failed.

He left irritated by the spoiled narrative and a gimmicky special effect that had given him a tremendous migraine headache. His annoyance was caused not just by the speed and simultaneity of the images. The subliminal sound wasn't intended to be detected, and its perception at a conscious level while his mind was occupied with all those other tasks was extremely disturbing.

He shook his head to try to clear it and consoled himself with the thought that the time had finally come to go home. He was eager to start reading an especially appealing book, but due to lack of time and to work demands, he had never been able to find a few consecutive hours to dedicate to it.

He traveled in the tube wearing earplugs and with his eyes shut so the omnipresent slogans would not infect him with Techt. It was very catchy. He grumbled a curse at Hypatia even though he knew that was unjust: the true culprit was Klink.

Although he couldn't see or hear the advertisements, Ludwig knew they were there with their compressed temptations, their bait wrapped up like gifts, and their manipulative traps that could set loose primary instincts while their content barely touched the conscious brain. Those three-second announcements with their mix of visual and audio pyrotechnics and their perverse use of Techt condensed everything that he hated about the times in which he had to live. They called them "snips," obeying the dictate of snappy monosyllables that had overtaken the world.

He left the tube and walked several blocks to his building. He held his breath when he saw old Pai hanging around the entrance, a beggar well-known to the neigh-

borhood. People told horrible stories about her. Rumors claimed that spiders lived in her eye sockets, that she had devoured her own eyes over an anguished love affair, or that she had given them to her hungry child to eat. According to the story told most often, she had been an important sculptor, or a harp player, and to master her art she had become one of the first guinea pigs for testing augmented reality systems, letting her eyes be removed so the devices could connect directly with her optical nerves.

Coming into contact with new, superimposed layers of each and every image of her daily life artistically modeled by the best creative geniuses of the day had led to an enormous improvement in her own creative capacity, and the dihedral supplements had refined her spatial perception and tactile accuracy to amazing extremes. Her fame and success grew until she achieved greatness. Some even said she had managed to live in the elevated part of the city, the summit of civilization.

But something went wrong. Perhaps old Pai had reached an artistic level so complex and exclusive that no spectator could grasp it. Perhaps what she did—whatever it was—simply went out of fashion. The artist fell out of favor, and then into misery and ruin, incapable of providing for her own subsistence or even paying for her ocular prostheses. The most troubling rumor assured, in its usual disembodied, nameless, and unaccountable way, that the old lady had learned to see without needing eyes and could perceive much that was invisible to others.

The gossip spoke of a past full of excesses and glory. The reality of the here and now was an unkempt old woman with two black holes instead of eyes, extremely

perceptive and sensitive to the slightest sound. Although Ludwig tried to sneak into the doorway, she became aware of him.

“Ah! Yer der!” she shouted, turning a surprisingly agile body toward him. “Cash! Cash!”

Several times, Ludwig had seen people throw coins to the other side of the street for the pleasure of watching the blind woman’s anguished search for them. He rarely gave money and would have preferred not to, but he dropped a coin in the palm of old Pai’s hand so she could buy something to eat and drink.

She stammered a couple of syllables of thanks, which instead of coming from her mouth seemed to be emitted from her terrifying carved-out eyes. But when her hand brushed against his, her face’s flabby, servile expression of thanks changed into fear.

“Two bads today you! Two bads!” she repeated and ran off as if the man who had just offered her charity suffered from a contagious illness or brought bad luck.

He sighed as he passed over the threshold. He had almost arrived at his refuge. He lived in the basement of a building on the outskirts of town. He had chosen the area for its rocky subsoil, utterly dry. The lower apartments, which received hardly any light, were the cheapest, and he needed a lot of space to store his precious books.

When he moved in, the doorman had looked at him fearfully, as if he were a dangerous terrorist. Or perhaps something even worse, since terrorists were understandable. But why would anyone want to accumulate all those unhealthy tomes, written in that useless old language no one understood anymore?



Ludwig had to explain in his poor Techt that they formed part of his work and he needed to translate them into machine language to make films. When the doorman heard that word, his eyes lit up. Ludwig realized that he had taken the right tack and showed him posters of the most recent premieres in which he had collaborated.

“For this, talk strange,” the doorman said understandingly, looking at him with something halfway between admiration and pity.

But on that day the same doorman gave him a friendly greeting and handed him a letter he had received in the post. In addition to involving real paper, the post was such an expensive service that it seemed even more important than eccentric in the eyes of the doorman. Ludwig responded with a smile to avoid a conversation that might make him lose concentration. Mutilated language always compelled mangled thoughts.

He didn't know what irritated him most about Techt: the name itself, which laid claim to a technological quality that in reality was much more present in the Long version of language; the abolition of verb forms, economies of space that obliged cutting “unnecessary” letters from every word, and the superabundance of symbols; or the lack of respect for the recipient in every sense, distilled into that perversion. Snips and glottal stops included.

Safe at home, he sat down for a few minutes in the armchair dedicated to reading, located right in the center of the room. All the basement walls were covered floor to ceiling by metal shelving on rails, each shelf deep enough to hold three rows of books. The light from the only small window, an opening of tempered glass of military thickness, was little more than a pale glow,

since all the buildings around it were higher than twenty stories. Ludwig allowed himself the minor luxury of an electric light. Except for the purchase of secondhand books on the rare occasions when they went up for sale, he had few other things on which to spend his pay. And the volumes, despite their scarcity since most paper had been burned in the awful energy crisis of '59, weren't too expensive. They were considered eccentric interior decorating, strange little curiosities, a witness of times gone by for which few people felt nostalgic.

He prepared some instant soup, grabbed the book he so much wanted to read, and returned to the armchair around which his silent world revolved. From the shelves, millions of universes waited for Ludwig to select them and light them up with his eyes. He felt them hum, shivering with potential. He thought once again, sadly, that he would never have time to read them all before he died, and he got the impression that all the books that surrounded him gave a brief, soft, dusty sigh.

When he sat in the armchair, safe from the stammering half-language that contaminated the rest of the world and frustrated him so much, he felt at peace. It took him some time to manage to get down to work, and during those minutes that constituted his personal trip to concentration, he liked to look at the thousands of leather and pressboard spines that shaped his private landscape, so different from the unbearable advertisements in the tube and the street.

Just when he had reached his personal nirvana and was about to begin reading, for him the closest ritual he had to religion, someone knocked on the door. Ludwig muttered an especially dark curse. He left the book on

the side table, got up from the chair, and opened the door with a face as sour as if he had brushed his teeth with vinegar.

“Mir Casares,” the doorman said in an apologetic tone, “erjnt mes. Caryer say yu ident.”

“Fine,” he conceded. “I’ll accept it.”

He’d lived several years in that building and had very rarely received certified mail. What could it be? Something like a shiver of expectation ran up his arms.

The letter carrier was a woman who couldn’t have been more than nineteen years old. When she reached the doorway and came into visual contact with the interior of the apartment, her eyes grew wide. They expressed a feeling halfway between surprise and fright.

“Cat got your tongue? Haven’t you ever seen the inside of a house?” Ludwig asked, amused.

The girl cleared her throat while she took a micro-sample of blood with a quick shot from her bioidentity reader.

“It is just... I never had the ch...ance... the o... portunity to see so many books in a gathering.”

“So many books gathered together,” Ludwig automatically corrected her, astonished. “Although it would be better to say ‘so many books in one place, or at once’...”

The girl blushed, placed a packet in his hands, and fled.

As if in a dream, he closed the door and headed for his armchair. A girl that young speaking Long Language... It didn’t fit into the world he experienced every day.

He sat down again. He looked at the book that he was so eager to read, then at the packet. He decided to act responsibly and deal with what was least appealing,

so he opened the packet. Inside was only a letter with the return address of his place of work. A letter on *paper*, with an official letterhead sealed by hand.

He swallowed. Perhaps it would not be an exactly agreeable surprise.

#76532643

@ curnt recip LUDWIG KSARES

instnt end mply.

RE: purch new modl BURTON mach.

legit dsmsl.

no cmpens.

The message had been signed by three of his superiors. Astounded, Ludwig read and reread it, hoping its meaning would magically change before his eyes. As usually happens in such cases, it did not.

Dismissed without compensation. Immediately. That told him he needn't bother going to work the next day. Justified cause, it seemed.

He went on the net to look for information about the "new model of the Burton machine." The manufacturer's home page announced the "Burton 2001" with great fanfare. In big icons, it told how recent innovations would permit the machines to make films directly from Techt. Beneath that he found the same information in the alphabetic version of the language. There was no possibility of error.

That was why his dismissal was justified. It was no longer necessary for anyone to work with Long Language to make it comprehensible to the machine. It could di-

rectly swallow the impoverished lamentable babble of contractions and icons.

That made sense. For the state film producer, which was obliged by law to transform into film every book that had achieved more than a million readers throughout history as part of the Cultural Guarantee Program (they called it Cultr Gar'nt Progrm, however that was pronounced), Ludwig's salary constituted the biggest expense. It took an average of two days to translate each book into a guideline script intelligible to the Burton machine. The script was basically constructed from Long Language precisely because it had been created to turn traditional texts into images.

But now the Burton machine could work directly in Techt, and given the large quantity of books that had already been translated into that code during previous decades, Ludwig was not needed at all. With the salary they saved, they could make five films per week instead of two.

He knew it would be completely useless to propose any sort of reconsideration of the process to his superiors. Even if he prepared his arguments in Techt and managed to make himself understood, he would never manage to transmit certain nuances into their minds, which were modeled by post-capitalism to work within the parameters of efficiency, speed, and productivity. If he told them that Short Language ("Simplified" was the usual euphemism) meant a loss of nuance, images, and meaning of close to 80 percent, that the translations from the '50s and '60s had been made by amateurs who, on many occasions, barely understood Long Language or, even worse, by linguistic conversion robots...

They wouldn't even understand what he was talking about. They'd look at him suspiciously and reject his out-of-date, nostalgic claims. Simplified Language was democratic, popular. It had imposed itself naturally and fast, in the space of barely a single generation. It had been designed to facilitate communication between the nine simplified languages so automatic translation between them would usually be perfect. Humanity was about to achieve the goal of unifying itself with a single lexicon and a single grammar. Only an enemy of progress would oppose that.

He knew perfectly well what they would think when they heard him talk. *Who is he to act like he's better than we are? If he believes the way we talk isn't good enough for him, he should be polite and smart enough to keep his opinion to himself.* But the fact was, they couldn't even think that, since they lacked the vocabulary to do so. Ludwig could hardly imagine how people using such simple, vague concepts would even be able to think and to reason. Who knew, maybe they'd found a way to think that barely used words and everything was mere images, visceral and intuitive, just like in advertisements.

He'd been fired. In a few months he'd have run out of his savings. Damn Hypatia. Moved by a sort of impulse he wasn't consciously aware of, Ludwig approached a small safe and unlocked it.


























For almost twenty years he hadn't opened the box inside.

He took it out of the safe and put it on his bed. Carefully, he opened the hydraulic lid and made sure, with some relief, that its contents were still there and intact. It was probably his most prized possession. Be-

fore Hypatia died, the world was full of statues honoring the creator of Techt. Everything seemed to indicate that her original notes for Simplified Language, or Smpl or Alphabet 100 as she called it, would be worth a fortune years later. That was why she left them in her will to her favorite great-grandson.

A few years later, the statues and holograms of Hypatia had been replaced by images of Klink, the host of a comedy program.

Ludwig held up a photo of his great-grandmother when she was young. It was already starting to fade, but it clearly showed an attractive, dynamic woman whose smile still transmitted mischievous joy despite the decades that had passed and the inert material of the shiny paper.

			A	æ	Alt	Z			
“	2		G	th	™	C	J	Δ	F
Ψ	Ξ		S			!		life	ω
>	J	@	@	1	L	<b>K</b>	...	prt	<
⌘	10	N	-			+	↑	P	
		ctrl	%	α	Ω	X	↓	♀	spr
I	R	#	<b>D</b>	△	?	<b>&amp;</b>	§	Π	†
V	ÿ	∅	E			‡	□	bl	Y
8	M	kr	Σ	B	©	U	0	∞	∩
			Π		T	√			

He admired the simplicity of Alphabet 100, now in disuse. After Hypatia's death it had been substituted by the Chess keyboard, with sixty-four black and white little

boxes connected to two rear variable control keys (multiplying the simultaneity and possibilities of combination), which made Ludwig dizzy. Perhaps he really was antiquated after all.

In Hypatia's original model, the most frequently used keys were grouped in the intersections and marked with a darker color: "at," "okay," "the" (based on the runic letter Thorn), and "and." *Correspondence*, *approval*, *determiner*, and *addition* occupied the place of honor in the multiple-touch keyboard whose basic idea, inspired by Hypatia's experience as a pianist, was simultaneous touch. In that way, each character could be combined with the other 99 to create an essential vocabulary of 10,100 words.

The corners were dedicated to the elemental symbols corresponding to *earth*, *air*, *fire*, and *water*. Next to them appeared the emotions traditionally associated with them. In the center were the icons dealing with universal concepts: *centrality*, *open space*, *end*, and *beginning*.

The complexity of the keyboard, excessive according to some initial skeptics, captured numerous adepts among videogame fans, as learning to use Alphabet 100 resembled a gamelike challenge. Simply by clicking any two keys, a word or phrase appeared on the screen. For example, the key for "time," represented by a clock face, could mean *past* if it was pushed along with "↓" and *future* if it was pushed at the same time as "↑". Combined with "sun" it represented *day*, or *night* when accompanied by "moon."

Pushing "life" plus "α" created the word *alive*, while "life" plus "Ω" created the concept *dead*. The same key



“life” combined with “A” signified *animal*; accompanied by “V” meant *vegetable*.

The individual keys represented fundamental concepts like *open* or *closed*, *construction* or *destruction*, *increase* or *decrease*. Normally, the buttons that represented opposing concepts or antonyms were located in symmetrical positions with respect to the center of the keyboard. In addition to the keys already described were *space*, *individuality* and *group*, *person* and *machine*, *concave* and *convex*, *processed* and *natural*, *excess* and *lack*, *known* and *unknown*... There were also keys for the five senses, for the concepts of *learn*, *forget*, and *dream*, and to describe the physical climate and metaphorically the emotional climate, for basic interactions and the most frequent exchanges.

He took one of the first Smpl machines, which he'd been given for his seventh birthday, out of the box. At the time he'd been fascinated by the device's ability to generate images or concepts when he pushed keys at random, and it had taken him only a few weeks to be able to write simple sentences. “My dog has left our home and I think it is lost,” for example, was as simple as pressing the keys for (M + 🐕), (life + A), P, 🐕🐕, (🏠 + 🐕),?, (☉ + 🌊). *Possessive, animal* followed by D (the system understood that “D” meant *dog*), *dispersion, home, question, loss* (“center” + “disorientation,” which was the meaning acquired by the icon “air” in this context). Seven clicks instead of the 45 that a traditional keyboard would have required, or the 17 that it would have been reduced to in confusing SMS code (m dg lft hom n thk z lst).

The essence of Smpl had changed little, although the icons themselves had when they were turned into Techt. Currently, only official communications, like the

letter he had received that morning, medical reports, contracts, and other legal documents were written in the form of Techt that still used old-fashioned letters. Everything else (slogans, thirteen-line digital newspapers, and private messages) were exclusively expressed in symbols and icons.

His great-grandmother, as she explained in a letter to him that he found inside, had filled that box with the first outlines and notebooks, which were frequently peppered with humorous reflections; lists of the statistical frequency of terms, signs, and icons; and her extensive bibliography about generative grammar, linguistics, and the history of writing. No scholar had ever had access to all of that. He imagined, as she had explained in her letter, that this inheritance would become extremely valuable material...and yet, no Techt programmer had ever asked the family for information. They didn't care about any of that. Once the system had been created and understood, they didn't need to research its origins to perfect it. What was important lay not in the past but in the future.

Hypatia's legacy was worthless.

And besides, no one remembered Smpl's creator. The hive mind preferred to think in terms of collective creation, as if each person who used a 100 Keyboard had contributed to its invention. The statues erected to Hypatia had been melted down to recover the bronze, an essential metal for manufacturing augmented reality prostheses.

The irony in all that was further multiplied when the evolution of Smpl (Ludwig preferred to think of it as a

devolution) and its further compression after Hypatia, had banished from its vocabulary the concept of irony itself.

Her first critics accused her of destroying the beauty of language by substituting simplicity. *If only it had been just the beauty*, Ludwig said to himself.

His great-grandmother never understood that she was creating a virus, not a tool. She could never have anticipated *Klink*, the Yutu program that had spread through the net like a virus, popularizing the new way of speaking, using snips and grunts to substitute for entire words. The comedians who acted out those brief sketches were so ingenious that their skits rapidly went viral. No one could have imagined that the reduced form of language, almost emaciated, practically a ghostly sound, would wind up devouring its mother tongue and completely replacing it.

Stunned, Ludwig went out to the street to look for cardboard boxes that local deli employees had thrown out. The only sure thing was that he wouldn't be paid in the coming month, so he could no longer afford to live in that apartment. He'd have to begin to box up his books.

He had a depressing vision of himself several years in the future living in a tiny room burning books to keep warm, and this future became mixed with the past when he remembered his mother doing the same thing, with tears in her eyes, to save his life.

Ludwig had been only seven years old. An economic shutdown and the depletion of fossil fuels, along with deepening climate change, had meant the immense majority of books in the world met the same fate. In his mind, he held a vivid image of his mother in a basement similar to his current apartment throwing books into a

stove while she told Ludwig that stories weren't as important as the fact that people existed who could read them.

He put the book he had so much wanted to read into the first box. Once again it would have to wait.

And then the doorbell rang.

His subconscious summoned up the memory of old Pai's words: "two bads." The first one had already taken place. If a second one did, it might mean that in fact the old lady really could see more than other people.

After weighing the possibility of not opening the door, he decided to do so for the simple reason that he preferred to have one certainty rather than to imagine multiple possibilities, each one more depressing than the last. He walked to the door with the tired, tense, fearful steps.

Once again it was the young letter carrier. Her face reminded him of his mother, perhaps because he had been thinking about her.

"Do you have another letter for me?" Ludwig asked.

"No," the girl assured him. "It is only... I would like to know...you. You speak Long Language. Me...we would like to learn it."

The girl stepped back, letting Ludwig see the boy behind her. He was about twenty years old, completely indistinguishable from any other young man.

"We would like to learn from you," the boy slowly articulated. Ludwig had the impression they both had practiced those sentences at home before they came to see him.

He looked at them for a while. He couldn't come to grips with what was happening.

"What are your names?"

“Sandra and Patrik,” she said.

Ludwig let a few more seconds pass. He saw fear of rejection on both their faces.

“Are you both of legal age?”

The two nodded. Ludwig gestured for them to come in, and after they had done so, their eyes opening wide when they saw all the books, he closed the door.

“How can it be that two people as young as you want to learn Long Language?” he asked as he prepared some tea.

They told him that a book exchange network existed among some people of their age or even younger. They told him that books, unlike films, gave them the impression of entering into people’s minds, and they had realized that some especially complex ideas couldn’t be expressed in short sentences without creating misunderstandings. Ludwig explained the meaning of the word “trivial,” which immediately fascinated them. They wrote it down in a notebook.

They had read *The Odyssey*, *The Lost Honor of Katharina Blum*, *Frankenstein*, and *Nils Holgersson*, and they were surprised that Ludwig knew them all and could converse for a long time about each one of them.

He told them how in other eras, in other societies, he could name them a thousand titles that a well-educated person would probably know. They were filled with admiration: they were so slow to decipher a text they could not read one in less than two weeks. Ludwig spoke to them about the stories that covered his walls. He congratulated them on their skill when they tried to speak Long.

“Unfortunately, I don’t know if I’ll be able to fulfill your request and give you lessons,” he told them, when

the light entering by the window faded and reality imposed itself on their dreams. “The letter you brought me earlier told me I’d been fired. I don’t know where I’ll wind up living.”

The two exchanged an anxious look.

“But we can pay for the...lessons!” the girl assured him.

“That is right,” Patrik added. “Be many like us. Excuse me: *there are* many like us.”

The boy clenched his fist, angry at himself for having made a mistake. Then Ludwig realized that for Patrik, learning Long Language was even more important that it was for Domingo, who didn’t worry about errors of syntax or noun and verb agreement he might make. And he understood the reason: the editor had managed to learn complex ideas thanks to his work and to the language he’d learned from comics in his childhood, but these young people, the next generation, had perhaps never been exposed to any verbal stimulus throughout their entire childhood. They needed to learn Long in order to think and to gain access to a culture denied to them. They were aware of what they lacked, which was why they considered it so important.

Sandra came close, interested in his glasses.

“May I?” she asked him. “I like...would like to see world by your eyes.”

“*The* world,” Ludwig reminded her.

She repeated the phrase correctly, while Patrik wrote it down. Ludwig leaned forward toward the girl so she could take off his glasses.

Then he felt excruciating pain.

It was as if when the girl took the glasses from his face, she had taken his eyes with them, plucking them out smoothly and slowly with drawn-out agony. Ludwig, racked by anguish, starts screaming while the world disappears, dissolving into small evanescent panels.

“Stop! No shout!” a woman yells at him. It’s not a friendly voice.

“Sandra! What’s happening?” Ludwig stammers. His own voice sounds strange and fragile.

“No Sandra,” the rough female voice assures him. Ludwig feels someone take him by the shoulders to pull him upright.

He hears the woman whispering to someone else, a man, who, speaking fast and in Techt, seems to want Ludwig dead, although he isn’t angry. Ludwig feels uncontrollable trembling in his knees and a sudden cold knot in his neck.

The woman and man continue arguing. He scolds the woman for not having killed Ludwig, as seems to be specified in some contract. She answers that she doesn’t intend to do in an old man and tells him if that’s what he wants, he can do it himself.

“What’s happening?” Ludwig shouts.

The conversation stops, melting into a silence as tense and thick as the darkness.

“You...memb kw’k,” the woman says. *Soon you’ll recover your memory.*

They drag him into another room and drop his body on a hard little mattress. More snips of argument: the man is afraid of the legal repercussions they could face if they

don't fulfill their contract. The woman responds that those would certainly be better than the legal repercussions for killing someone. Or something like that. Their words are coarse and caustic, so plain and brutal they burn his ears. Then the woman laughs. "What's this leftover going to do to us?" she jabbars in her mutilated dialect.

A door slams and he can no longer hear them. Ludwig still can't see anything. He has the vague sensation of having been in a similar situation before. He feels around with his hands and comes to the conclusion that he's no longer in his apartment.

It's useless to try to understand or remember anything in his overwrought state, so against his instincts of destruction and flight, he forces himself to lie back on the cot and control his breathing to make his heartbeat return to normality.

As his body calms, his mind does, too. He understands from the pain in his joints and the feel of the back of his hands that he's an old man now. And he knows, remembers, that he was an old man before.

"Sandra..." he mutters.

Just by hearing his old man's voice pronounce the name, he recalls that the woman who had been his first disciple and friend, to whom he had taught so much and from whom he'd had the opportunity to learn so much, is dead. He has not just met her. He has passed his whole life beside her.

Images of a funeral form in his mind. He doesn't remember them from having seen them in any film, only for having been there. In person. Not long ago.



At that moment, like the lash of a whip, he sees another image. A surgical suite, a lightning strike of cold light. And then, nothing. The vacant space of his eyes.

Sandra has died. Illness has taken her after so many years bringing words to those who felt they needed them, to those who knew what they themselves lacked. He remembers her reading the story of Merlin to groups of children, recording audios of Ludwig's books in her own voice to play them in shopping malls, surreptitiously posting illegal signs with beautiful antique words and their definitions, and trying to attract new youths who wanted to learn about themselves through complete language.

His hand shakes as he raises it to his eyes, discovering vacant sockets. The interior of the cavities leaves something sticky and warm on his fingers. He doesn't remember having lost his eyes.

At that moment he discovers he still has tear glands because he feels a couple of tears fall directly onto his nose, missing his cheeks because he has no eyelids.

Sandra has died. Patrik had left many years earlier. Is all that true, or is it a trick within a trick of memory? The experience he just had could only be a virtual immersion with augmented reality glasses, or something like it. He has traveled into the past through his memory to the precise day when he met Sandra.

He is confused. The memories return slowly, like a viscous fluid held back by its own thickness. He doesn't know if he let them take out his eyes voluntarily. Could he have reached such extreme desperation? He'd always felt repugnance, even physical repulsion, to virtual or enriched reality. The few times he had used peripherals or plus-lenses he had felt intensely uncomfortable

throughout his entire body, as if his system were rejecting the enveloping lie.

There is only one possible reason for him to have given up his eyes in exchange for reliving that moment in the past: he no longer had any reason to live and wanted to have one final happy day. In that case, it would make sense to have chosen that particular day. The augmented memory-recuperation peripherals, it was said, could recreate the past in every detail. If Sandra was dead, the only way to be with her again would have been to voluntarily take away his own vision, the greatest possible sacrifice for a book lover.

Intangible letters danced in the multicolored darkness of ideas within his mind until they composed the verses he had reread so many times:

*Let none think that I by tear or reproach make light  
Of this declaration of the mastery  
Of God, Who with magnificent irony  
Gives me at once both books and night.  
In this city of books. He made these eyes  
The lightless rulers who can only read  
In libraries of dreams...*

Then he understood that he had renounced all his books to see Sandra one last time that day, to return to the first hopeful moment in his life. Perhaps no purer act of love existed.

A new flash: the image of an empty and inhospitable basement, with hard old beds on the floor where children lie, almost frozen stiff. There's only a stove. With

tears in her eyes, a woman throws a book into the belly of the fire. The woman has the face of Ludwig's mother. The woman has the face of Sandra.

Mother.

Sandra.

The woman turns toward Ludwig. He can finally see her face clearly. She's Sandra and she's his mother. They're the same person.

"What's important is the language, not the books," the woman tells him. Ludwig is a child like the rest. "They'll make new books. You've taught them to create their own meanings."

And Ludwig weeps with those tears so amiss that they don't fall onto his cheeks but roll down his nose.

"Language doesn't exist if books don't exist."

Hearing his own childhood voice in the center of his imagination pronounce those words, he realizes they're right. Now no book remains. His library, perhaps the last library ever, has been lost even before Sandra died.

She, with a face that is her face and also his mother's face, and also Hypatia's face, caresses little seven-year-old Ludwig and dries his eyes with her apron, which smells of ashes.

"You asked to relive the past and then die, remember?" she tells him, now with Domingo's voice. The conversation between the employees at the memory recovery center now makes total sense.

"But they haven't dared to kill me. They've made me remember again. I didn't want to remember... I didn't want to live in a world without you, without books."

"You don't have to do that," the woman says with a smile. "You never needed a machine to live the stories

in the books that you used to read, right? I'm sure you won't need one to dream either."

"To dream away to death..."

"To dream, yes, so intensely that your body can no longer bear it, no longer continue, if that's what you wish."

Ludwig clutches his arms to his chest, filled with intention, and then relaxes them. His mother, Hypatia, Sandra, hands him a small, leather-bound volume. Ludwig recognizes it, and seeing it gives him childish pleasure, utter relief. On the other side of memory, at the far end of all those stories and all those tales, his mother awaits, Sandra awaits, and Domingo and Hypatia.

With trembling hands, he opens the book that so many times, so many times he had wanted to read, but he never had the time to do so.

## About the Author

Sofía Rhei (Madrid, 1978) is an author, experimental poet and translator. As a poet, she has written *Las flores de alcohol* (La bella Varsovia), *Química* (El gaviero), and *Otra explicación para el temblor de las hojas* (Ayuntamiento de granada), *Alicia Volátil* (Cangrejo Pistolero) (a book in 3D), *bestiario microscópico* (Spórtula), and *La simiente de la luz* (Lapsus Calami). She has edited the anthology *Sextinas* (Hiperión). For her poetry, she won the national prize “Javier Egea” and was shortlisted for the Dwarf Stars and Rhysling awards.

Her books for kids include the series *Krippys* (Montena), *El joven Moriarty* (Fábulas de Albión), and *Los hermanos Mozart* (Diquesí), as well as many individual titles such as *Olivia Shakespeare* (Edelvives), and *La calle Andersen* (La Galera), co-written with Marian Womack. Her YA novels are *Flores de sombra* (Alfaguara) and its sequel, *Savia negra*. She received a “Spirit of dedication” award from the European Science Fiction Society for her children’s books.

She writes short stories of science fiction and dark fantasy for adults, such as the ones appearing in the publications Casatomada and Calle 20 and in the anthologies *Más allá de Némesis* (Spórtula), *Presencia humana* (Aristas Martínez), *Crónica de Tinieblas* (Spórtula), *Retrofuturismos* (Fábulas de Albión), and *Terranova 3* (Fantasy). Her story collections are *Las ciudades reversibles* (UCLM) and *El bosque profundo* (Aristas Martínez).

Her novels for adults are *Róndola* (Minotauro), *Celsius* award winning humorous fantasy fairytale retelling, and *Espérame en la última página* (Plaza y Janés), a story about books.