

Know, Knew, Known

No one remembers learning to talk. There is never a time when you first realize, hey, I know how to talk. No one remembers learning to understand what someone says. There is never a time when you first realize what is meant by “hand me that hammer,” or “watch it, that’s hot.”

Speaking, and understanding what is said, are things that just happen, somehow. But it is not so with writing and reading. I know this from Mrs. Cole’s first-grade class at Oliver Elementary, where I grip a fat pencil and sweat mightily to make A’s and B’s, T’s and U’s, under the constant threat of Mrs. Cole’s red pencil, which she brandishes like a sword in an eager bony hand.

“Messy!” she writes at the top of my papers, where she knows my mother will see it. “Pay Attention!” she pens, in a perfect script, precise and evenly spaced in strawberry beneath my wobbly name.

“Needs Work!” she declares.

I am distressed to learn that there are two A’s, one big and one little, and the same for B’s and C’s and all the rest. This seems unnecessary, and at least a waste of paper, when I must write both the big and the little, one after the other between the lines, again and again, always aware of the merciless red sword. There is a top line, a bottom line, and a dotted line in the middle, where the big “A” must be crossed and the little “a” must curve. Mrs. Cole is very serious about this dotted line.

Finally, there is a time in the first grade when Mrs. Cole puts only a red check-mark at the top of my work, though I think my writing has barely improved. I think she has decided I have caused enough red marks, and that she will pass me on as a burden to other teachers. But Mrs. Cole is not done with other things. She tries to teach us to read. We are divided into groups, with names of colors like Blue and Red and Green. I am in the Blue group, and when Mrs. Cole calls for us we sit around a low table at the front of the class to read.

“See Spot rrr... rrr...,” one of us will begin.

“Run,” says Mrs. Cole.

“Run,” says the reader. “See Jack. See Jack rrr... rrr...,” he reads on.

“Run,” says Mrs. Cole.

“Run,” repeats the reader. “See Janet. See Janet rrr... rrr...,” he continues.

“Run! For goodness sake,” says Mrs. Cole.

“Run,” he says, then in a confused way, “for goodness sake.”

I find that I am able to read in a way that is okay for Mrs. Cole. She will only occasionally correct me or tell me to pay attention. Most of her time is spent with others who do not seem to take to reading, and for this I am grateful.

But it is not my reading that causes me trouble: it is the way I talk. I bring a paper bag of wild plums to school for show-and-tell. I give everyone a plum and tell about how we went to my grandparents’ house and there is a plum thicket on the side of the road along the way, by the big bridge. And how my father stopped on the side of the road and told my brothers and me to pick as many plums as we could in ten minutes, after which he would drive off and leave to the bobcats anybody not sitting in the car with their mouths shut. I tell about how we arrived at our grandparents’ house and showed our plums to our grandfather, and how he was very happy with us

and told us he had never seen anybody that could pick plums like us. He knows how much we like the plums.

“What did your grandfather say?” Mrs. Cole asks, as I stand at the front of the room clutching my paper bag.

“He said ‘I ain’t never saw nobody pick plums like you boys’,” I say proudly, happy to repeat my grandfather’s praise.

“You mean he said, ‘I have never seen anyone pick plums like you’,” Mrs. Cole tells me.

“No, he said ‘I ain’t never –’.” But Mrs. Cole stops me.

“That is incorrect. You must learn to speak correctly or no one will listen to you.”

I don’t know if this is right. I can listen to my grandfather talk all day long.

Over the next months I find that speaking correctly is harder than you might think.

I think, I thought, I have thought, I am thinking.

It is not easy to see patterns. I see, I saw, I have seen. I find out how little I know about language. I know, I knew, I have known. I speak, I spoke, I have spoken. It is, it was, it has been, it shall be.

Spot *runs*, but I *run*. But Spot *ran*, and I *ran*. Spot *has* run, but I *have* run. Spot *is* running, but I *am* running. All of this is very confusing. The people who made-up words have made-up too many, and I don’t like it that there seem to be exceptions to all the rules. But after a time, I accept this, and try to do the best that I can.

One day Mrs. Cole gives us a book that we will use to learn arithmetic. There are pictures of oranges that show how two oranges and three oranges put together are five oranges. But this is true not just for oranges. I am happy to learn that two apples and three apples put together are five apples, and that two bananas and three peaches make five, too. I realize this means that two and three of anything is always five. Always. There are no exceptions to the rules of arithmetic. They are absolute and beyond the reproach of Mrs. Cole. Two Spots and four Spots make six Spots. Two of me and four of me make six of me. I like this very much.