



# The word came to me



In the beginning was the word and the word came to me and resided. Only prophets and poets can usually pride themselves on such stories.

Initially they were just words, lovely combinations of letters that sounded good in my mind before I weighed them in the balance on my tongue. After some time I tied the words together, making finely-tuned phrases that rang out. What they were meant to express was of secondary significance.

To begin with I wrote my phrases on the blackboard, when it was free, which was during our breaks. This attracted the attention of both my classmates and my teachers. I was constantly being asked what I was trying to say with all that, but not even I knew the answer to this question. When the phrases, too, began to cling to each other and take the shape of long paragraphs, I moved them into a little notebook with a blue cover.

Time passed and the blackboard now stood empty during

the breaks. Where there had once been lyrical sentences understood by no one, there were now at best caricatures of teachers or insults to players on the soccer team the artist didn't support. The absence of my words was a fact.

Many were the people who asked to read my notes and they were never refused. But one day the notebook vanished from my schoolbag, never to be recovered. Curious or envious fingers had probably groped their way into my bag at some unguarded moment.

Now there was silence.

My reticence was interpreted as a consequence of the disappearance of my notebook, but in fact I was on an interior journey. I was expectant. Again. I had completed my journey from letters to long paragraphs for the time being, and was returning back to syllables and letters.

Now lots of new, invented words were born. Words that did not always mean or symbolize anything. Words that were fighting for the freedom to be precisely words and nothing but words. Words that did not wish to be labeled subjects or objects that were also unwilling to conform to a clause or a subordinate clause under the yoke of grammar. Words that did not really want to be expressed. Words that did not want to be conjugated.

One day at lunch hour, when the classroom was empty, one of these words was able to emerge. I let it step out of the corner of my brain in which it had been tucked away and take possession of the top left-hand corner of the blackboard.

The days that passed were numerous. I wrote the words over and over again in the same place, and just as often the eraser was at the ready in the hands of a teacher or classmate. After some time the word was left in peace. The word was placed under protection. The word vanquished. My word became a natural part of our everyday life at school. I no longer had to defend it. If some nasty hand came out to erase the word, there

were now plenty of others, close at hand, who could rewrite it in the same place, in the same chalk tracks on the blackboard.

The word soon gained ground and spread, first from our class to the class next door, and from there throughout the entire floor of the school where we freshmen spent our days. But the word had not yet been exhausted of its content, and it made its way to the next building, where all the high school sophomores had their classrooms.

The word was now free I was no longer in a position to govern it. It multiplied and was soon to be found on every blackboard, on the corridor walls, on the bricks surrounding the schoolyard, and on the covers of textbooks.

Now the word defined me. I was born anew and given a new name: Ashmis.

Those at school who did not know me or who did not know my name began to call me Ashmis. Many were they who asked me what it meant but who received no answer. Many were the free interpretations that circulated by word of mouth on the schoolyard: the distorted name of someone I'd been in love with and been rejected by, the name of a concentration camp in Germany during World War II, or the title of a masterpiece by some unknown author.

Many were the girls who were promised that the truth would one day be revealed to them alone.

Not even the long, hot summer vacation brought to an end the expansionist ambitions of the word. Now that the school was closed there were new ways of communicating. The word was reproduced on every bank note that passed through my hands. On the round, empty space to the left, where the top half of the body of the Shah appeared if you inspected the bill by holding it up to the light, I also wrote the word in Latin script.

The essence of the seasons shifted and changed name to autumn.

Eagerly-awaited reunions filled the schoolyard with plenty of laughter and exclamations of pleasure day school resumed. That year we were not going to have the opportunity to finish many chapters in our books, but no one knew that yet.

Right in the middle of all the hullabaloo, when the first class was about to begin but the teacher had not yet arrived, I was called to the principal's office. The silence of the others and their astonished gazes followed me out into the hallway as I made my way to the office. Our principal, Mr. Arvin, did not have the reputation of being a stern pedagogue, and I had done no wrong. But the moment I entered the office I saw the implacable look in his eye. He was a tall, thin man in his fifties. His graying hair was always neatly combed back, and matched the suits in varying shades of gray he wore. The disarming smile that never left Arvin's lips was offset by his firm, searching gaze.

Arvin looked particularly stern sitting there behind his desk. He signaled me in, and I stood opposite him, a little way back from his desk, knees quaking. To my left, sitting on the little couch in the office, there were two well-shaven men in black suits.

Arvin asked what Ashmis meant, who we were, and what we were involved in. He had metamorphosed into the most terrifying interrogator I could ever have imagined. His attitude ranged from threats of expulsion and a huge fine for my parents to pay since he was going to have to repaint the whole school, to moments of being kind-hearted and sensible. Everything would be fine if I just confessed. I felt particularly uncomfortable and awkward in the presence of the two men, clearly fathers of my classmates, but of course my best defense was the truth. Ashmis didn't mean anything at all and if there was an instigator behind it, it was no one but me.

After twenty endlessly long minutes, Arvin suddenly turned to the men on the couch. I was right, you see, he said in

a relieved tone of voice, and without anticipating a reply he pointed to the door, indicating that I could leave. Surprised at this sudden denouement, I left Arvin's office with a light step.

Between classes that day I tried to remain invisible. However, at afternoon break Arvin saw me on the schoolyard and came over to where I was standing. I was certain he was going to tell me how much it was going to cost to remove the graffiti. I imagined facing my parents and having to tell them about my unfortunate prank.

Arvin removed from his pocket a bank note with written on it, in my hand. In a tone of voice that was gentler than before, he urged me to forsake my word once and for all.

A couple of weeks later every school and university in the entire country was closed. During the months that passed before they opened again, storms of words wreaked havoc. Words shot out of the sky like hailstorms, with a heretofore never beheld intensity. Words blasted with the force of hurricane winds. Words flared up and overflowed.

Many new words invaded the atmosphere: demonstration, military force, Molotov cocktail, state of emergency, martyrdom, tear gas, pamphlets...

Forbidden words were released: imperialism, capitalism, socialism, freedom, SAVAK, independence. Trade union, CIA, suffrage... Old words were dusted off and put back to use: strike, extortionist, election, proletariat, class struggle, solidarity, oppressor, freedom of speech, democracy ...

Words designating people, places or nations gave us new lessons in history and geography: Che Guevara, Vietnam, Allende, Golsorkhi, Victor Jara, Lenin, Marx, Nicaragua, the Philippines, Pinochet, Nelson Mandela, Fidel Castro, Siahkal, Mossadegh...

It was one person's word against another's: Western or Islamic, veiled or unveiled, monarchy or republic, tie or beard,

Shah or Khomeini...

All these words, both new and old, expanded my world and replenished my vocabulary. I travelled in words, I sang new words, I was expectant with new words. My word came to be relegated to the past tense.

My new words gave me new insights, new means of interpretation. I realized that the two suited gentlemen in Arvin's office weren't fathers of my classmates'. They were agents from SAVAK, the secret police, whose mission was to expose clandestine student organizations.