

GRADUATION SPEECH

Mr President, Faculty and Graduands, Families, Ladies and Gentlemen.

Thank you for asking me to give this speech. It is a great honour and privilege.

It adds to the high privilege of being here, at this extraordinary School, crossing the Atlantic as we do most summers.

Before I speak further to you I must tell you of a bizarre incident that suggests how Bread Loaf is never far away from us.

I live in a coastal city in the south of England whose main claim to fame is that the Titanic sailed from it. Last year I was checking prescriptions with a pharmacist, who was from Kenya, before coming here. 'Where in the States are you going?' she asked. 'Teaching in Vermont', I said, rather cagily, wondering how I would describe my summer to a stranger. 'Oh', she said, my cousin's going somewhere called the Bread Loaf School of English in Vermont – she's sent me all the pictures and she's taking a course from someone called Armstrong.' 'But that's my husband!' (I don't know why I allowed a note of protest into my voice at this point.) 'Really! So what course are you teaching, and do you live in one of those houses called after the names of trees?' Vermont, Kenya and England met in my home town.

Bread Loaf is never far away from us, literally and metaphorically.

My talk to you begins with the reunion weekend, at which we gave workshops to returning Bread Loafers. Mine was on Wordsworth's 'The Solitary Reaper' and Christina Rossetti's 'A Birthday', two beautiful poems. It was attended by sixty silver-haired ex Bread Loafers, freshened with the chlorophyll rush of Vermont's greenness (about which Michael Cadden spoke so eloquently at the start of the session). I remembered Jim Maddox's account of his very first class at Bread Loaf, and the feeding frenzy of questions in Piranha fish mode that greeted him. Sure enough, my people were in Piranha mode. It was a marvellous seminar.

In the course of it, we talked about the voice that is overheard, as the solitary reaper's voice is overheard. When a voice utters, its sounds no longer belong to the person who utters them – nor even to the person to whom the utterance is addressed. They are sounds in common. No one owns sounds.

No one owns words. The sounds of the voice belong to the world, can overflow vales, as the young woman's song does.

I carry this thought with me when I listen to Bread Loaf's sounds. I don't mean those incessant John Dere mowers on the meadow, or those telephones that stop just as you get to them, or even that jazz trio in the Barn, with its lovely rendering of 'Body and Soul'. I mean Bread Loaf's many, eloquent human voices. I was aware of the soundscape of Bread Loaf as I strolled across the campus after having been told that I was giving this speech, the primal grunt of tennis players, the primal cries of the Frisbee players and an actor shouting and gesticulating outside the theatre – it was Alibius from *The Changeling* rehearsing his delight at showing off a bunch of lunatics.

I want to say two very simple things to you today, but I thought I would come at them through Bread Loaf's soundscape, Bread Loaf's voices.

First I will celebrate the voices of the students I have taught – I hope they will stand in for the whole vociferous student body – vociferous and voracious for knowledge.

This year I have taught a class on the 19thC novel and things, artefacts and objects in fiction for the first time.

I asked my students at the final class to spend 10 minutes writing down a response to their own learning – it would be anonymous - someone else would read their words – they could write in any form – poems, lists, free association, a single philosophical sentence. These responses always astonish me with their perspicuity, energy, wit.

Here are a dozen or so very brief extracts:

Voice number **one**, the laconic first line of a poem:
The things you own end up owning you.

Voice number **two**:
everything has become
an object . . .
walking in the rain
the other day, hand-in-hand

Heidegger and Marx and Carlyle – Oh my!
It's a thing dammit, it's all about the thing . . .
Come on, brain, . . .
Objects, artefacts, things, objects, artefacts
But what are things objects artefacts
Do I know yet?

Voice number **eight**:
Miss Havisham
decays with her cake . . .
phenomenologically speaking
I do not decay
because I have touched
and shared what I
have touched.

Voice number **nine**:
Vase (pronounced VAHZ) . .
My husband and daughter made fun of me – 'it's the qua jug', they said,
'Look at its thingness . . .

Voice number **ten**:
Things . . .
look under things, over them, between,
the space around an object, how it was made,
its substance, texture, where it
came from, who owned it. Did it cost?
was it traded? Was it a gift?
but perhaps, more than these . . .
look at my own looking
consider not only the exterior
but the transmission from object back to looker . . .
And thinker . . .

Voice number **eleven**:
Where are Adirondak chairs made? When did they become associated with
Vermont?
Are these hard boiled eggs things, objects or neither?
When did this four-poster bed arrive at Bread Loaf?

(This refers to the bed in the red room, in *Jane Eyre*, but we found 19thC novels are full of four-poster beds.)

Other Voices:

Oscar Pelatio, a photographer visiting with the annual Andover-Bread Loaf workshop, a visit that is so important to us, said – ‘I think I’m going to call it intellectual magic’.

‘As soon as you’re born you start learning things’, a character in one of Jonathan Strong’s stories says, and Bread Loaf attends to this.

Remember that this intellectual magic spreads, the voices travel – if you attend the Bread Loaf Teachers Network meetings, you will hear voices telling you, for instance (just one example from many activities), about an internet community, about exchanges between schools in Providence and Kenya, exchanges about the political situation there, the exchange of poems.

Bread Loaf speaks most loudly through its poets. There is Paul Muldoon, whose poem about Uncle Pat, held up by B Specials in Ireland, resonated for us, whose hybrid proverbs - ‘you can lead a horse to the water but you can’t put its nose to the grindstone’ – surprise us, together with those virtuosic rhymes, rhymes that slice words apart and splice them together again with often terrifying effect – ‘the sudden failing of a brake drum/ Extended her hold on Elysium’.

There is the Blue Parlour, packed every Sunday to hear student poems. (My husband went to all of these sessions.) There is Ed’s weekly one-minute stopwatch-timed poetry festival, where people compete to read the most minimalist poem. Here is Peter Newton’s ‘Pigeon Haiku’ – one of three bird poems:

Nothing is more
beautiful than the birds
clearing their throats.

Bread Loaf is not sealed off from the world. David Huddle begins his classes with where-I-come-from poems: (he thinks he’s written about 48 over the years) because where-I come-from defines us here. Hang around the mail boxes for 5 minutes and you will see students on the watch for mail from outside, from where they come from. Here is the voice of student A - ‘I’m

waiting for that fudge my sister promised to send me': the voice of Student B, disappointed of mail, replying – 'The demise of the letter': the voice of Student C, 'O no - my mother writes wonderful letters'.

And then there are those letters from absent children in camp:

'It's like the weeks are days and the days are weeks. I have studied my homesickness behaviour and have made this chart:

7.15 – 12.30 I'm at the top of my game, I have a great time

12.30 -3.45 I start to think about you

3.45-7.00 I need something BIG to distract me

7.00- night I am really homesick

So what do all these voices tell us?

Here are my two simple points:

'Keep talking': in David Huddle's story-poem about marriage to a deaf woman, this is what the wife signs after a quarrel: 'Keep talking'. When we come here we keep talking. We tell each other stories like the stranded occupants of the burning hotel in the story Catherine Tudish read. Every year Bread Loaf re-makes itself miraculously as a community. In his lecture, 'African American Classics in the age of Obama', Robert Stepto spoke of the narratives of self-invention black men required to imagine themselves as part of a community. He spoke of a fragile collectivity. He spoke of community not as a monolith but as a world of difference. This ideal is as true of our community as it is of those in Toni Morrison's fiction. Like Paul's rhymes, that slice apart difference and splice it together again, we need to constantly re-make our differences and affinities. Negotiation, adjustment, generosity: what we carry away from Bread Loaf's micro community to our larger associations and groups is that the process of creating community is endless, sometimes difficult, sometimes a wonder, always unfinished. And so it should be, otherwise we atrophy. But here we do make it through, each summer.

That is the first simple thing I have to remind you of.

The second is perhaps even simpler.

Bread Loaf's voices overflow, overflow the vale. We carry them with us when we leave, rather as Wordsworth carried the reaper's voice in his heart. ['That music in my heart I bore', he wrote, one of Wordsworth's wonderful unostentatiously complex lines. 'Bore' suggests something being carried, perhaps something heavy. You do bear a 'burden', a pun on choric song. You also bear children: there's a sense of gestation here, as Wordsworth crosses genders to think of what the reaper's song engenders.]

Never let yourselves believe, never let yourselves be told, that once you have left the mountain you are re-entering 'the real world'. Never let yourselves believe that the life of the mind, the passions of intellect, creative thinking, must be sequestered, take place apart. For that is to be made to collude with an invidious myth that these gifts are irrelevant to our society or marginal to it, because they cannot enter it, cannot belong to it. That is not so. Bread Loaf's reality is continuous with our lives. We are always, as one of John Ashberry's insouciantly post modern non sequiturs put it, 'In the middle of the beginning . . .' ('Even if you like the rain', he added).

Graduands. Congratulations, good luck, and bon voyage.

Isobel Armstrong