

I'd be willing to bet that all of you—even the most bored, contempt-filled science concentrator—have had one or two brushes with a piece of writing or speaking that excited you, a poem or an oration that took you out of yourself, that filled you with a spirit. The first time tends to stick in your mind, like your first fight or your first kiss. I remember all three of those events, and while they all have their little shrines in my memory, only one was of any enduring importance.

On October 25, 2001, I thought that my father had gone crazy. It was a sunny autumn day, and I was sitting at my dining room table, wearing my Snoopy sweater and doing my math homework, and generally minding my own business, when my father busts into the room, wild-eyed, shirttails out, and starts waving his hands over his head like this. He then starts yelling—my father, like me, is a loud man—and this is when I thought that he had lost his mind; for while the rest of the symptoms could be warranted by an exciting news item he wanted to share or a sports victory by our alma mater, DeMatha Catholic High School, this occasion was unusual: I did not understand a single word that he was saying.

My father kept going without other evidences of mental instability, so I settled down to wait for the inevitable explanation—my father, like me, is a talkative man. The language was English, but I didn't really understand it—there were a lot of strange words and even the words that I knew were put together in a strange way, but not an altogether unpleasant one. And when my father's voice suddenly dropped and he leaned in, pulled his sleeves back and said—

“Then will he strip his sleeve and show his scars,

And say ‘These wounds I had on Crispian’s day.’

Old men forget; yet all shall be forgot,

But he'll remember, with advantages,

What feats he did that day. Then shall our names,

Familiar in his mouth as household words—”

—well, my heart just about stopped. He finished his monologue, looked me in the eye and said, “That is the greatest speech ever written. Men died for that speech.” He left the room. I sat there and thought for a while, and eventually went back to my homework.

Needless to say, I later learned about Henry the Fifth and his invasion of France; I learned that October 25, the day my father came screaming into my dining room, was the date of the Battle of Agincourt and, centuries removed, the date of the battles of Balaklava and Leyte Gulf. I learned about the men who died with that speech echoing in their ears and hearts and bones—those bands of brothers, those royal companies of death. I don't know why my father loved that speech so. Maybe the circumstances of a rash king running into a rash battle far from home resonated with him; but my guess is that he too felt that pulsing spirit under the iambs, and loved it. As for me, I never forgot the power of those words, the hotness of the blood and the hardness of clenching teeth, the hair rising on the back of my neck; and ever since, I've felt that I've been chasing that aliveness in everything I write and say.

My father and I are very different in some ways. I'm cleanshaven; nobody has seen my father's chin in thirty-odd years. He's dark, I'm fair. He's broad, I'm narrow. But in some things we're very alike—I once had a girlfriend who told me privately, "It's really unsettling to hear you talk to your dad." "Why's that?" I asked. " 'Cause it's like hearing you talk to yourself," she said. We both love words. I think that's why we use them the same way. Now, I don't know if you can really tie it together this neatly—life is rarely neat—so I'm not going to say that the recitation of the St. Crispin's Day Speech on the five hundred and eighty-sixth anniversary of Agincourt was the beginning of my obsession with words and the ways I can make them work for me. All I'm going to say is that, for every year after that, my father and I read that speech together, and every year, I sound more and more like my father.