



The Shadow Factory

Paul West

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From the introduction by Diane Ackerman:

Paul West recalls the early days after his stroke, exploring some of the all-too-real tricks the mind plays to save itself from the tomb of lost words.

Paul had a massive stroke, tailored to his own private hell. The author of over fifty stylishly written books, a master of English prose with one of the largest working vocabularies, a man whose life revolves around words, he had suffered brain damage to the key language areas of his brain and could no longer process language in any form. Global aphasia, it's called, the curse of a perpetual tip-of-the-tongue memory hunt. He understood little of what people said, and all he could utter was the syllable "mem."

His prognosis was grim. The brain cells were dead in Broca's and some of Wernicke's area, he could no longer swallow food without choking, and it was a left-hemisphere stroke. After three weeks in the rehab unit, he was able to say proudly: "I can talk good coffee." Still, it was a complete sentence.

"You know, dear," I said about two months later, when he was feeling mighty low, "maybe you want to write the first aphasic memoir." He smiled: "Good idea! Mem, mem, mem." And so he began dictating, sometimes with mountain-moving effort, and others sailing along at a good clip, an account of what the mental world of aphasia felt and looked like. Writing the book was the best speech therapy anyone could have prescribed.

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