Our enemy marches at the head of the column;
And yet we march!
The voice we obey is the voice of the enemy,
Yet we obey!
And he who is forever talking about enemies
Is himself the enemy!

[Book Review]

USEFUL ZULU PHRASES


White South Africans are convinced that having servants is no easy matter. They like to say that servants are like children. What they mean is that servants need watching. That they lack responsibility. And that their understanding is on a level with their English.

For an English-speaking employer, the servant who speaks English is indeed the best sort to have. But the tiresome fact is that servants grow up speaking their own languages. If they speak English at all, it is of a rather primitive variety. This clearly hampers the process of serving. And there is the additional problem of knowing just how much English a servant understands. On the one hand, employers maintain that servants understand far more than they pretend to. And, on the other, that they have the infuriating habit of pretending to understand when they don’t.

Just to make sure, an employer will usually follow an order with, “Do you understand?” To this question all servants nod. But then the Hoover turns up broken or the white sauce comes out like glue, and where is Master or Madam to turn next?

One might think that a solution lies in learning Zulu. But this is to ignore the difficulty English speakers have with foreign languages. And particularly with languages like Zulu, whose complexity seems to them to be in inverse proportion to that of its native speakers. Zulu is a language of strange sounds and clicks and whooshes far beyond the skills and dignity of most English speakers.

For the frustrated householder, there is help. An Easy Zulu Vocabulary and Phrase Book: Simple Sentences for Use in the Home and Garden and on Other Everyday Occasions is a small paper-bound volume, first published in 1938 by Shuter and Shooter, an old and respected South African publisher of schoolbooks and other texts. Now in its fourth edition (1982, with new orthography), the “primary object” of the book, according to its preface, “is to help newcomers in their common contact with Zulus.” Phrases of common contact are grouped under the headings Gardening, Health, Housework, Motorizing, Store work, Stabling, and Miscellaneous.

The beauty of this little book lies in the fact that most of the phrases of common contact are voiced either in the interrogative or in the imperative. If, for instance, one wants to know what to wear, there is the phrase for “Is it hot today?” If one has trouble hearing, there’s “Always call me when the telephone rings.” Offensive habits can also be done away with. “Do not touch anything,” “Do not spit like that,” and “Do not smear your clothes with blood” are a few of the phrases that are provided for this purpose.

For the talkative servant, one finds a trio of injunctions: “Be silent,” “Be silent while I am speaking,” and, “You must not speak while another is still speaking.” To deal with the tricky problem of encouraging one’s servants’ intellectual skills while still maintaining household standards, there is the following sketch in the Miscellaneous section:

Can you read?
It is good to read.
You may go to school in the evening.
You must finish all your work first.
You must not neglect work for the sake of reading.
That is bad.
It is very bad to make learning an excuse for laziness.

Free time on Sundays—always a sticky point when hiring a servant who claims to be devout—can be solved with, “If you go to church on Sunday you must return in time to do what is necessary.”

The hiring of servants itself is, in fact, a complicated matter. There are things an employer must know. If a cook is to be hired, what kind of cooking has been done before? “Plain cooking” (anchovy toast, Welsh rarebit, rock cakes) might suit one madam, but another may demand “Jewish cooking” (chopped herring, fried fish, and knowing which rag is meant to clean which dish). Standards differ too. So do duties, wages, hours.

An Easy Zulu Vocabulary provides some welcome relief. An employer can start off with a few standard phrases like, “You will have to do any work that I tell you,” “Do not make a noise
in the evening," and "Come at once when the bell rings." And follow these up with such specifics as, "You must get up at six," "Catch two young roosters," and "Cut their heads off."

Using this book, one can lend one's servants to friends—"Go with the White man," "Go with the lady." Or make sure that errands are carried out properly. "Take the master's food to the store" is followed by, "Hold it carefully, that the gravy be not spilled."

"That the gravy be not spilled" demonstrates nicely one of the subtler points of master-servant dialogue. The quaint formality of the word order, the injunction against spilling (gravy here, rather than seed)—the whole tone of the message, in fact—is intended to communicate to the servant that God is speaking. A God somewhere between the fierce Old Testament Jehovah and the rather more benign New Testament Pater Noster.

It is this role toward which the employer actively works, and which, in the end, tests the master-servant bond. If the white man is God, the reasoning goes, then the servant, like Abraham, can be tried. To effect.

A small picnic vignette, hidden in the Motoring section, demonstrates the point nicely. We will stop here. Sizokumalapha. We will have some lunch. Sizodlaukudlakwasemini. Make a fire. Phemba umlilo. Put the kettle on. Basela iketela.
Spread the rug in the shade.
Endlala ingubo enhungumini.

Get out the lunch basket.
Khopha uBhasikathi wokudla.

See how deep the river is.
Hloa ukushona komfula.

I KNOW WHAT
I'M DOING

"I Know What I'm Doing About All the Attention I've Been Getting," by Frank Gannon. From Yo, Poe, a collection of Gannon's writing, to be published next month by Viking. Gannon lives in Demorest, Georgia.

I was really worried about what to wear. It was like an anvil on my brain, just beating and beating and never stopping. Earlier that afternoon I saw someone walk into a clothes store and come out with a package. I knew what was in that package.

NEW CLOTHES.

It was like, Somebody bought some clothes, why can't I have some clothes too?

I went into my closet and got down on all fours and started to breathe really heavy. I was trying not to get nervous. I nudged a pair of brogans with my nose. Why not wear everything that's fallen off the hangers? It was a desperate, Hans Arp type of gesture, but what was left me? Yesterday I went to buy dog food in absolutely the worst thing: green shorts, gray socks, white sneakers. A brown shirt with the numeral "16" on the back. As soon as I walked into the grocery store I knew right away: wrong, wrong, WRONG!

But what could I do? It was too late then. I was trapped. I went through with it, but when I got to my car my heart was pounding and my face was flushed. My throat was dry and my hair was wet. My feet were bent and my back was twitchin'.

I'll never do that again.

I'm a quirky dresser. I'm absolutely fearless about what it is that I believe in. My shirts are incognizant and my socks—you must be completely unaware of my socks, that's, like, my approach to socks. My pants can be wily or even dishonest on some days if I just get up and feel that. But I have to feel it. When I wear a tie—and, believe me, sometimes I really wear a tie—it can be porcine, strait-laced, odious. I have a certain little-boy quality, but there's also that big-fat-sweaty-guy thing in there too.

I've stopped taking myself so seriously. I can take a step back and laugh at myself. Sometimes I can get a really big charge out of what an absolute idiot I am. I'll have this big intellectual stumbling block right in my way, and suddenly I'll realize, Hey, who put the damn stumbling block there in the first place? That's right: Mr. Serious Artist Person!

Whoa, I just crack up when that happens.

Give me a nickname, prison,
this first April evening of sadness
shared with you.
This hour for your songs
of evil and goodness,
confessions of love,
salty jokes.
They've taken my friends,
ripped the cross from its chain,
torn clothes,
and then with boots
struck at my breastbone
torturing the remains
of hope.
My name is filed
in profile, full-face—
a numbered dossier.
In custody—
nothing is mine!
Just as you have
no one, nothing!
On the window's grating
here's all of me—christen me,
give me a name, prison,
send off to the transport
not a boy, but a zek,
so I'll be welcomed
with endearments by Kolyma,
place of outcasts, executions
in this twentieth century.

From Beyond the Limit, a collection of poems written in prison by Irina Ratashinskaya, published by Northwestern University Press. Ratashinskaya, thirty-three, spent two and a half years in a Soviet labor camp because of her writings. She was released last October, two days before the Reykjavik summit. Beyond the Limit was translated by Frances Padern Brent and Carol J. Avins. Kolyma is a region in northeastern Siberia where many labor camps are located.

Give me a nickname, prison,
this first April evening of sadness
shared with you.