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THE OLD MAN IN THE PIAZZA

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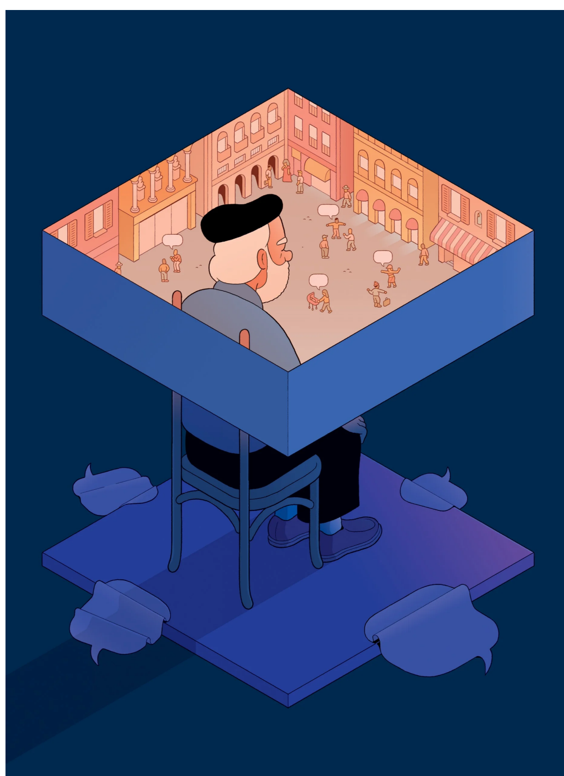

Illustration by Giacomo Gambineri

Audio: *Salman Rushdie reads.*

Every day, at about four o'clock in the afternoon, when the sun's heat has begun to diminish, the old man comes into the piazza. He walks slowly, shuffling his feet, which are encased in dusty brown loafers. He is wearing, most days, a dark-blue jacket buttoned all the way up to the neck, and navy pants that fasten with a drawstring at the waist. His hair is white, and there is a beret on his head. He goes to the only café in the piazza, the Café of the Fountain, and sits on a wooden chair at a wooden table and orders a small, strong coffee. At 6 P.M., he orders a beer and a sandwich. At 8 P.M., he rises, wipes his lips, and shuffles away, presumably to his home. We do not need to know where he lives. Everything of any significance in his life has happened and will happen right here, in this little piazza.

He takes his seat. He is the audience, an audience of one. The show is about to begin.

It is a piazza into which seven narrow roads debouch, one at each corner and one each at the midpoint of three of the piazza's four sides; only the side with the church is uninterrupted by a cobbled street. It should be a quiet place, a sleepy provincial square, but it is not. All around the piazza you can hear the loud sounds of people quarrelling, six days a week. On most of these days there are more people in the piazza than live in the locality. It's as if people came here, to this peaceful little square in this peaceful little town, to get into fights. They drive fifteen kilometres from the big city to express their bad moods. They raise their voices; they pound their right fists into the palms of their left hands; they stamp their feet (doesn't matter which foot—both are stamped equally). If they sit astride motorcycles they sound their horns in frustration, or to drown out their adversaries. If they are arguing while in adjacent motorcars with the windows down, they toot like the motorcyclists but also rev their engines and, when they are irritated beyond the point of endurance, they roll their windows up.

Salman Rushdie on being free to disagree.

There is no end to their disagreements. They quarrel about the likelihood of hurricanes, about the scandal of bribery behind the contentious awarding of the Summer Olympic Games to a city in the Arctic Circle, about the impossibility of love and the futility of politics and the secret illegal affections of eminent Catholic priests. They dispute the flatness of the earth and the efficacy of vaccines for measles, mumps, and rubella. They disagree about the best flavors of ice cream, and have strong and irreconcilable opinions concerning the beauty of film actresses. If they have read novels by writers who are also, or were at one time, married couples, then they vehemently take the side of one author or the other and will not be persuaded to change their minds. It appears there is nothing that unites our people except their love of the quarrel itself, the quarrel understood as a public art form, as the defining heart of our culture. The noise is terrible, grows louder as the day darkens into evening, and continues late into the night. By midnight the populace has had a fair amount to drink and that makes the discussions in the piazza even more heated. It is not unheard of for punches to be thrown.

The old man sits at the Café of the Fountain and listens. Because he leaves at 8 p.m., however, he avoids the later phase of the day, when alcohol has had its effect, and fists start flying.

Sundays are quiet. On Sunday, everyone stays home and eats, or goes to church, begs for forgiveness, then returns home and eats.

On Sundays, the old man does not come to the piazza.

This is how it has been in the square ever since the end of the so-called time of the "yes." That dark age began forty years or so ago, a time when for a period of half a decade it was made illegal to argue. We were all obliged to agree, at all times. Whatever proposition was made, no matter how risible—that bread and wine could transubstantiate into flesh and blood, that the immigrant population transformed at night into drooling sex monsters, that it was beneficial to raise the taxes paid by the poor, that souls could transmigrate, or that war was necessary—it was forbidden to debunk it, even though immigrants ran the best bakery in the town and our favorite wine store, and even though most of us were poor, and none of us remembered any earlier lives spent as tortoises, or foreigners, or eels, and only a small minority of us were belligerent by nature. It was necessary at all times to assent.

Even our language—the language in which such great poetry has been written!—was altered. She was no longer permitted the word "no." There was only "yes," and variations on "yes": "of course," "certainly," "for sure," "absolutely," "totally," "no question about it," "agreed." When some rash radical remembered the word "no," it felt worse than shocking, worse than sinful. It felt archaic. A broken word from an ancient ruined time, like the remnant of a temple built to honor a god in whom nobody had believed for thousands of years. The god of "no." What a laughable god he must have been! At any rate, that was how it felt to many of us.

Our language, however, sulked. She came to sit by herself in a corner of the piazza and often shook her head mournfully. She became pedestrian. She informed us that she was unwilling for the moment to fly or to soar, or even to travel by train or bicycle or bus. She said that she felt leaden-footed and preferred to sit quietly and contemplate the things that languages contemplate when they are by themselves and feel maltreated. If she needed to move, she told us, she would plod. Her attitude was forbidding. She wore tight clothing that constrained her movements, and uncomfortable shoes. We stopped approaching her.

Our language did not join the old man at the Café of the Fountain. She sat alone in her corner. They did not speak.

In the time of the universal "yes," the piazza was quiet. You could hear the songbirds, the larks, whose numbers had not yet been decimated by weekend shooting parties. In the center of the piazza there is a small fountain—the fountain, obviously, from which the café takes its name—and back in the old days the silence allowed you to listen to the water, and soothe your aching heart. The old man was younger then, and his heart ached often, thanks to the repeated rejection of its sincerely offered emotions by young women with hair of different colors.

Even in those days when the word "no" was forbidden, those women were able to inform him that his feelings for them were not requited. "You are so kind," they said, "but on that evening I am having my yellow/brown/red/black hair done." What about another evening, then, he dared to ask, and they replied, "I am deeply moved by your generosity, but I will be having my black/red/brown/yellow hair done every evening for the foreseeable future, except on Sundays, when I will stay home and eat, or, in some cases, will first go to church and ask for forgiveness, and then go home and eat."

After a while the old man stopped asking. He continued to come and sit, most afternoons, on his upright wooden chair at the Café of the Fountain and listen to the water flowing. He grew old before his time, distressed, like faux-antique furniture, by his discovery that even the time of "yes" contained an unspoken "no." His hair grew white, and he sat on his wooden chair and watched the world going by.

Five years passed. In the end it was our language herself who rebelled against the "yes." She got up from the corner of the piazza where she had been meditating silently for half a decade and let out a long, piercing shriek that drove into our ears like a stiletto. It travelled everywhere, as fast as lightning travels. It contained no words. However, no sooner had it been uttered than all our words were unleashed. Words simply burst out of people and would not be held back. People felt great globs of vocabulary rising up in their throats and pushing against their teeth. The more cautious among us pressed our lips tightly together to stop the words from getting out, but the word-torrents forced our lips apart and out they came, like children released from single-sex boarding schools at the end of a long, dour semester. The words tumbled pell-mell into the piazza like girls and boys in search of happy reunions. It was a sight to see.

They were rough words, these first utterances—"Crap!," for example, or "Get lost!" or even the excessively emphatic "Go fuck yourself!"—and this crudeness was perhaps regrettable, but these workmanlike, hard-edged words were effective, that has to be

said. They were like bludgeons or explosives, and as they hammered down around us they swiftly brought the reign of the "yes" to an unsavory conclusion. The "yes" and its fellow-travellers (the aforementioned "of course," "certainly," "for sure," "absolutely," "totally," "no question about it," and "agreed") were hung up on meat hooks in the piazza, and that was an end to that.

That was when the age of argumentation began. "But!" "Rubbish!" "Tripe!" "Nonsense!" "Bullshit!" "Liar!" "Idiot!" "Don't you dare!" "That is such ignorant bigoted shit!" "Just go away! Nobody wants to listen to you!" Who would have guessed that these unlovely words would take center stage in that moment—these, and not our language's beautiful and justly celebrated poetry, to which we previously referred? Odes and sonnets, lyric and epic poetry stood ignored, striking attitudes and gesticulating impotently.

Our language remained in her corner of the piazza, watching, but she had cast off her corset and her disfiguring clogs, and her long hair and skirt flowed loosely around her. The skirt went all the way down to the ground, so we could not see her shoes, although we sensed that she was tapping her feet to the beat of some private music.

The old man also felt the pressure of words struggling to emerge from within him. He tried to contain them, for he was not sure what they might be or do or make possible or engender or destroy, but out they came, like vomit, words he hardly recognized as his own pushing through his lips, angry, contemptuous, blaming. Fortunately, everyone else was experiencing his or her version of the same phenomenon, so nobody was paying attention, and he himself soon forgot what those first words had been and settled back into his wooden chair to observe the life of the piazza as it now was.

Once the "yes" time had ended, the quarrels started up and drowned out the songs of the larks and the soothing plash of the fountain, which cared nothing for changes in society, and kept itself busy, in its insouciant way, with its fountaining. The old man—the man made old by sadness—no longer asked women questions of the heart, questions to which he already knew the answers, which could now be stated plainly without beating about the bush or claiming appointments at the hair salon.

At first, for a little while, he missed the silence of the five "yes" years. There had been something heartening about being in a constant state of affirmation, eschewing negativity, accentuating the positive. There had been something—what was the word?—something *modest* about declining to be judgmental, no matter how great the temptation. And something infinitely relaxing about being excused from a life of objection, of critique, even of protest. It had required a certain remodelling of the brain, that was true. He had had to restrain his natural impulse toward dissent, toward sentences that began "But on the other hand . . ." or "But isn't it true that . . ." or "How can you possibly . . ." Save your breath—that had been the instruction of the age. Keep your unattractive words to yourself. For a time he'd found a measure of comfort in accepting the "yes." In saying the unutterable "no" to "no."

All this happened quite a long time ago. Today, the old man—old now in years as well as in sadness—still sits at the Café of the Fountain, but he is calm, no longer afraid of the rush of forgotten words from his mouth. He watches our disputatious citizenry as one might watch a soap opera on television, or a three-ring circus, or a professional football game.

Our language is still there, in the corner of the piazza farthest from the old man's chair. These days she often has companions, and these companions are invariably much younger than her, young men of a physical beauty that is almost obscene. These Byronic creatures plainly worship her, and perhaps, the old man thinks, she even allows them to ravish her in private, on those occasions when she leaves the piazza for a while. The companions change all the time. It is possible that our language is promiscuous. It is possible that her morals are exceedingly loose. When this thought comes to the old man it is as if a devil were whispering in his ear. But the thought doesn't appear to have occurred to anyone else, or, if the devil has whispered it into other ears, the owners of

those ears think nothing of it and react with a dismissive shrug. Let her be whatever she wants! Let her do as she pleases! That is the general attitude nowadays. The old man sees that he is in a minority, and holds his tongue.

In all these years they have never exchanged even the most perfunctory of greetings, the old man and our language. There they sit, across the piazza from each other, he on his wooden chair and she on a little cushioned stool that was a gift from one of the obscenely attractive young men, who fell into disfavor with her not long afterward and was erased from her consciousness. Nothing of him remains except this stool. Recently, however, it seemed to the old man that she, our language, had nodded in his direction once or twice. But that may have been a trick of the light.

The architectural elegance of the piazza cannot be denied. The Baroque façade of the old church is splendid, and many of the other buildings on the piazza—buildings of mixed use, with little stores at street level and apartments above—are handsome structures made of golden stone, with burgundy shutters at the windows. They are mostly old, the golden houses, and in some cases are not in the best state of repair, but there they stand, solid, attractive, with red barrel-tiled roofs, giving the piazza an air of faded grandeur, like an impoverished nobleman who has squandered the family fortune. To tell the truth, the piazza looks as if it belonged in a loftier environment than this little town. It feels as if it had been imported wholesale from one of our beautiful cities, perhaps even our capital city, just fifteen kilometres away.

Facing the church across the piazza, on either side of the little cobbled lane that feeds into the piazza over there, are two structures that, if we were in Italy, we would call loggias—covered outdoor galleries with delicate pillar work and arches—and in these loggias the municipality has housed marble statues that imitate far more famous statues elsewhere, that copy those other statues to the extent that their makers' skills permitted. We enjoy these facsimiles as profoundly as if they were the real thing. In the absence of genius, imitation is an acceptable substitute. Through these copies we pay homage to the masterpieces that we will never see. Some of us go so far as to assert that the originals do not exist and never did exist, that these alleged replicas are, in fact, the great works themselves, and should be accorded the respect due to their greatness. This is one of the popular subjects debated daily in the piazza. It remains unresolved.

(A clarification is necessary. We are not in Italy. If we were in Italy, our language, sitting over there, would be Italian. She might look like Anna Magnani or she might look like Sophia Loren. But that's not how she looks, because, just to repeat it, she is not Italian, and Italian is not the language we speak. This is our language, which we are speaking now, and we are here, not there. The old man in the piazza wears a beret, but that doesn't mean he's French. He's one of us.)

Now that he has stopped missing the peace and quiet of the "yes" years, the old man has actually begun to enjoy the quarrelsomeness of his fellow-citizens. The vanity of certainty, which gives each finger-wagging debater his or her reason for her or his insistence on that or this dispute, strikes the old man as the very *fons et origo* of comedy. The fervor with which many people in the piazza hold opinions that are demonstrably untrue—the sun, madam, does not rise in the west, no matter how vehemently you may argue that it does, and, sir, the moon is not made of Gorgonzola cheese, and to say this is not to agree with your opponent, who describes it as an elaborate papier-mâché fake, nailed to the sky to make us believe that we live in a three-dimensional universe of stars, planets, and satellites, rather than upon a dish with a great lid over it, a lid like an inverted colander, with many holes through which, at night, shines the bright thing we have been deceived into calling starlight. The piazza is full of passionate nonsense such as this, and the old man thinks, Oh, let them go on, there's no harm in it, after all.

This, too, is the subject of many spirited discussions: Are mistaken notions harmful to the brain, to the community, to the health of the body politic, or are they merely errors to be tolerated as the product of simple minds? The fact that all those involved in discussing this question have heads full of tosh and piffle does not make for productive debates. The old man has the impression that at the end of each day people go home, drunk on wine and niggles, knowing less than they knew in the morning. And yet, he tells himself, the tongue set free is an excellent thing. Our language, sitting on her cushioned stool in the far corner of the piazza with the divine young men at her feet, is clearly happier than she was in the subservient, acquiescent days of the "yes."

A day comes, however, when a certain argumentative twosome—it turns out that they are husband and wife, happily married for thirty years—descend upon the old man seated on his wooden chair and shout at him in unison, "We can't stand it! You decide for us!" Their disagreement, as it happens, is a small thing. Where should they go for their summer vacation? To the sun-kissed island of A., which isn't very far away, or to the distant country of B., which would be a much more adventurous choice, but less restful. "We just can't seem to agree," they chorus. "So we'll do whatever you say."

"Very well," he says, and with those two words he abandons the neutrality of a lifetime, and the little wooden chair upon which he has spent decades being no more than a contented observer of the passing cavalcade is transformed—just like that!—into a seat of judgment. "Very well," he repeats. "In these times of strife and stress, I recommend a good rest. Go and sunbathe on the sun-kissed island of A."

The husband and wife stand very still. Then they turn to look at each other. "Nonsense!" they cry with one voice. "It's a life of adventure for us!" And off they go to that distant country of B. Some weeks later they return and thank the old man for his judgment. They have seen enormous crocodiles that carry off several children a year and munch on them in the swamps, and giraffes that have grown to record heights, and giant axolotls. They have heard languages they had never heard before and witnessed the most vivid of spectacles, an avalanche that buried an entire village and a military coup that littered the streets with corpses. For a few days, while on safari, they were both transformed into hippopotamuses but that soon wore off and they were told that they should have read the instructions to travellers and been inoculated against the local mosquitoes, insects notorious for spreading numerous virulent strains of metamorphism. They say, "Never mind, it was quite an experience, so worth it! So unique! And rolling in mud—we could get used to that!" In sum, they have had the holiday of a lifetime.

"Thank you, thank you," they cry, and their gratitude is genuine. The old man replies mildly that he proposed they go elsewhere for a quiet time, and they laugh prettily. "But that's how we fly!" they exclaim. "Always! We're contrary! We ask people what they think and then we do the opposite. Call us perverse! But it has worked for us, and given us thirty years of happy married life."

Word spreads across the piazza that the old man sitting on the wooden chair at the Café of the Fountain is a judge with the wisdom of Solomon. A crowd of people rush across the square to ask him to judge them, too. The old man has never been in such demand at any point in his long, uneventful life. It is, he concedes, flattering. He gives in.

He asks his petitioners to form an orderly line, and after that, every afternoon between four and six o'clock, when the heat of the day has passed, he hands down judgments, declaring in tones of growing authority that no, the earth is not flat, and no, most immigrants are not sex monsters, no more than you or I, and yes, one hundred per cent, God exists, and so do Heaven and Hell.

Word spreads farther. The nearby city hears that this little piazza in this little town contains a sage of such profundity that he can resolve all your disagreements on the spot. The crowd in the piazza grows larger every day. The police are needed to maintain order. There are television cameras. The old man extends his hours until 7 P.M. so that he can adjudicate more disputes every day

(except Sunday). After seven he adjourns his court and refuses to answer any more questions, insisting on being allowed to enjoy a quiet hour by himself, with his beer and his sandwich. And promptly at eight he leaves the Café of the Fountain and shuffles off to who knows where.

It is rumored that leading members of the government and the opposition are discussing a visit to the old man, to see if he can resolve their differences. However, it is hard for these people, both on the left and on the right, to accept the possibility of being told that they are wrong. The visit of the politicians remains hypothetical.

The old man in the piazza is experiencing something utterly alien to him: renown. Among the growing group of children and adults sitting at his feet, around his little wooden chair, he notices some familiar faces, and identifies them as belonging to some of the golden young men who until recently were our language's most ardent disciples. Our language, suddenly almost alone in her corner of the square while her acolytes wait at the Café of the Fountain, is not pleased by this development. She warns the two disciples who have remained loyal to her that this will not end well. They listen respectfully, but her pronouncement comes across as envy. Times have changed. The people care less for our beautiful and complex language than they do for the great, crude questions of what is correct and what incorrect. We have ceased to be the poetry lovers we once were, the aficionados of ambiguity and the devotees of doubt, and we have become barroom moralists. Does the thumb point upward? Does it turn down? The old man in the piazza is our arbiter, and his thumbs have become a matter of national interest. We are all now gladiators in the Colosseum of the Thumb.

Our language is uninterested in the verdicts of the old man's thumbs (opposable, yet—for the moment, at least—unopposed). She cares only for words of many-layered beauty, for fineness of expression, for the subtlety of what is spoken and the resonance of what is better left unspoken, for the meanings between the words, and the illumination of those meanings that only her greatest disciples can provide. She finds the old man's cheap dicta disgraceful, and even more disgraceful is his growing pleasure at being accepted as the judge of what is right and what is wrong, what is so and what is not so. He used to laugh at the vanity of certainty, the obstinacies of the foolish and the emphatic assertions of the wrongheaded. Now he is the dispenser of nuance-free certitudes, and becomes more vain with every passing day.

Frontiers have long been a vexatious subject around here. In our recent history the drawing of borderlines through our territory by ignoramuses from elsewhere has caused much heartache and loss of life. In our minds the words "borderline" and "ignoramus" are inextricably connected. On those rare occasions when we have tried to cross through one of the few border checkpoints that now exist upon our blood-soaked frontier, we have been either rebuffed or, if allowed to pass, sold counterfeit currency by hawkers on the far side, who know that we are unable to distinguish the fake currency from the real thing. In our minds the words "border" and "fake currency" are inextricably connected.

There are, of course, many frontiers other than those which separate us from our neighbors and make them our enemies. There is the invisible frontier between what we, as individuals or as a group, deem acceptable and what lies beyond that line, in the realm of the unacceptable. That frontier is a place of dangerous land mines, and most of us choose not to go anywhere near it. There is also the invisible frontier between action and observation. There are those who do, and then there are those who watch them do it. The audience sits here; the stage is over there. The fourth wall is a powerful force.

The old man in the piazza has enjoyed his visits to the theatre, but it has never occurred to him to climb up onto the stage, and in those avant-garde moments when actors have descended into the audience he has felt deliciously shocked in an old-fashioned way.

Long ago when he was young he saw a show in which an actor, pretending to be an audience member, sat in the front row throughout the first act. During the intermission a telephone onstage rang unanswered, until finally the actor lost patience and went up onto the stage to answer it. (It was his wife.) While he was onstage, on the phone, the second act began, and he was trapped in the play. The old man found this to be a delightful conceit. Utterly implausible, but a joy to watch. It never occurred to him that one day he would be the person answering the phone during the intermission. He never imagined that he would become the audience member trapped in the play.

But now that he has crossed that border he has taken to his new role with relish. He has nothing against frontiers per se. On the contrary, he has begun to see it as his duty to define the new zones of propriety, winnowing out unacceptable attitudes and corralling them under the heading of Forbidden Things, while those whose attitudes are permissible remain here, among us, in the freedom of our undoubtedly free country. No longer willing simply to answer yes-or-no questions, he seeks to establish which of the disputing parties is the more virtuous, and to hand the palm of his judgment to those who have led better lives. It is even suspected that on many occasions he judges in favor of a plaintiff who is undeniably in the wrong, purely because his rival is shown to have led a less wholesome existence. In short, the old man is making himself a judge not only of rightness but of rectitude. This worries some of us, but we are unwilling to express our worry, because of the old man's popularity.

Our language, languishing in her corner, is perturbed. She tries to argue that the old man may be leading us toward a new version of the time of the "yes," in which even more words may be placed off limits. That's frontier justice, she warns. Remember the land mines. Stay away.

She also worries, she reveals, about herself. For as long as we have known her she has been sprightly, energetic, vivid, the very best of languages, but she has to admit that of late she has begun to feel unhealthy. On some days she is feverish; on others there are aches and pains. She hopes that it isn't anything serious. It may just be a consequence of her advancing years, for while she may look youthful and beautiful—she thanks us for our compliments on her appearance! She is always grateful for our approval!—she is, in fact, a very old language, one of the oldest and richest, though she prefers not to flaunt her wealth, requires no throne to sit upon, and is content with her simple cushioned stool. But she is our language, after all, and so she feels it is her duty to inform us of her condition. She fears she may be decaying. It's even possible—though it's hard for her to admit this, even to herself—that she may die.

Nobody's listening.

Nobody cares.

And finally she rises to her feet, as she has risen just once before, and shrieks.

It is a shriek of an even higher pitch than the earlier one. It rises and rises until it passes beyond the capacity of human ears to hear it. At that point all the windows in the houses looking out upon the piazza shatter and a rain of glass falls and there are many injuries in the crowded square, injuries that cause other, reciprocal shrieks. These shrieks are of a lower order than the shriek of anguish uttered by our language, and they don't break anything.

We see our language standing upright and open-mouthed but we cannot hear her shriek, which has reached such an intensity that it begins to crack the red barrel tiles on the roofs and even the stone from which the buildings are made. One of the statues in one

of the loggias, an elaborate copy of one in the Vatican that depicts the Trojan priest Laocoön wreathed in angry serpents, explodes into a hundred thousand fragments.

Do the golden buildings of mixed use fall? Do the loggias collapse entirely? Is the piazza demolished?

No, that doesn't happen. In spite of our many failings, we are not creatures of melodrama. We prefer drama, pure and simple.

So the piazza stands. But the cracks are there. We can all see them. The buildings are cracked from roof to street. The tiles fallen, the burgundy shutters hanging askew. That is the truth. The piazza is broken, and so, perhaps, are we.

In the meanwhile, she's still standing there, our language, screaming her silent scream. And over at the Café of the Fountain the old man feels something happening to his words. They are drying up. They are scrambling farther and farther back in his mouth and diving down his throat to be dissolved by the various digestive fluids down there. There is a crowd waiting to hear what he has to say, but he is lost for words.

The people thronging the piazza are displeased. They want what they came for—to be judged—and they open their mouths to protest the old man's failure to deliver his verdicts. But there are no words to protest with. The people look over at the corner that our language has occupied for so long, our language whom they have so totally ignored of late, and they see her gather up her skirts and walk out of the piazza, forever abandoning the corner she made her own for more years than anyone can recall. She holds her head high, our language, and then she is gone. And after her departure nobody in the piazza can talk. The people make sounds, but the sounds are shapeless, devoid of meaning. The old man rises helplessly from his wooden chair with his beer in one hand and his sandwich in the other. He stretches out his arms to the people, as if he were offering them the sandwich and the beer. They turn their backs and walk away. He has become once again what he always was: an insignificant old man.

It is unclear what we must do now. What will become of us? We are at a loss to know how things will proceed.

Our words fail us. ♦

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Salman Rushdie is the author of fourteen novels, including, most recently, "Quichotte."