

The Code of Hammurabi

by Gita M. Smith

She is tall and pecan-brown, repeating a history course for the second time. It is not that she doesn't study. It is that she cannot write. She has been told to craft an essay about the code of laws assembled by the Mesopotamian ruler Hammurabi and to give the reader a picture of domestic life with all its inequalities for women and for slaves.

We pull up chairs. I breathe in her Bath and Body Works vanilla, read her paper slowly and aloud because the ears catch what the eyes miss. Her sentences are awkward, stilted, like someone's idea of what academic prose should be. It is slow going.

I ask her, "So, what does this sentence mean, this part about 'grafting onto' another society?"

It turns out, after several long moments, that she meant "grafting."

I ask her to explain a paragraph that is convoluted. She has tried to discuss a portion of the code stating that women had to utter their grievances before being allowed to leave a husband, but men could leave their wives without an explanation. She starts to talk, and when she does, I see her understanding is both clear and deep.

"Write down what you just said," I tell her. "That was perfect: that's what you should have written." She smiles widely, and I see that she must have grown up in poverty or out in the country with unfluoridated wells. The essay is a twisted mess. But then she talks a moment, brilliantly, with all the indignation that modern women feel when reading the ancient laws that turned women into chattel.

I ask her why she thinks her oral explanation and her writing are so different, and she looks at me with shuttered eyes. She's gone from the conversation. She's cold as a lizard, now.

I shift and look away from her, myself, waiting it out. They do this, students who can't write, sometimes. It is a form of shame. I didn't mean to shame her, but I have to ask the question so that we can move on to the next step, to the part where I tell her she has "the horse power up here" (I touch her head lightly) and she should *trust*

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her ability to word her answers as she thinks them -- and not try to sound like someone else.

Finally she comes around and answers me. It is an answer I've heard before. We talk; I let her talk.

And in the end, with patience and new certainty, she writes.

