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### The Silence of the Hedgehog

I was a junior in high school, a second-year member of Speech Team, the head of my event: Impromptu Speaking. Every Saturday, I travelled with my team to high schools around the state and gave six-minute speeches on prompts given to me two minutes in advance. I loved the competition, and my season was unfolding beautifully. After a string of good performances with high rankings, our head coach sat down with me, looked me in the eyes, and told me:

“I think this could be your year. I think you’ll go far this season, maybe even win State.”

The prediction was not mine at its birth, but I adopted it and nurtured it as my own. I wanted it desperately to be true. From then on, every tournament outcome and piece of feedback I received was placed into a roughly Bayesian equation, as I evaluated and reevaluated my prospects of achieving my ultimate victory.

On Speech Team, we’re taught to approach our speeches and our competition as Tetlock’s foxes do: meticulously. We nitpick our gestures, our word choice, our tonalities, with vicious fastidiousness. Every scrap of constructive criticism from peers is weighed thoroughly and taken into account; every critique from a judge is appraised like a gemstone. We sit forward when our opponents speak, listening for clues about what might give them an edge. When we walk out of a round, we pour over our performances, trying to predict what our rankings will be. As the regional tournament that was a qualifier for State approached, I practiced speech after speech, polishing details. Meanwhile, I felt the pressure of expectations bearing down upon me. The cheery encouragements my teammates gave me weighed on my shoulders like lead, and I felt the usual butterflies in my stomach reverse-metamorphose into caterpillars crawling over my insides when I spoke. Unrelentingly, anxiety gripped me.

When the tournament lineup was released, I felt relief. The competition in my qualifying round was easier than I’d expected; I determined that my odds of advancement were high. Still, I spent hours scrolling through an online database of my competitors’ past rankings, trying to refine my forecast of how I’d perform against them. My teammates assured me smilingly that my advancement was inevitable; I longed to feel their certainty. I told myself a thousand times of my prediction that I’d meet victory, but I could not induce this sentiment to seep into my core.

I was still pining for certainty in the minutes before my competition. I remember my coach, my prediction’s birth mother, patting me on the back before I entered. I remember fumbling with my pen as I prepared, standing, delivering an acceptable

introduction and body. I remember starting my conclusion, searching for a word to finish a sentence.

Then, I remember remembering absolutely nothing. Words failed me. Panic blinded my thoughts. Silence choked me unmercifully. When I looked out, my gaze met dozens of pairs of pitying eyes, and at my feet I felt the puff of dust that comes when a cherished prediction belly-flops onto hard ground.

Earthquakes a hundred miles from any known fault line, Donald Trump winning the Republican nomination, me freezing mid-sentence during the most important speech of my career thus far—these things do happen. Only in hindsight can we properly discern the path that reality took to reach the unexpected. After a miserable awards ceremony and two days of wallowing in disappointment, I decided I had to know: how had all that signal and noise led me to only blank silence?

Insight found me in the first minutes of team practice the following Tuesday, as our captain delivered her weekly impassioned pep talk. I realized that, while we on Speech Team view our speeches like foxes, we view *ourselves* as hedgehogs, believing in the one big idea of our own success. It's a survival strategy which involves throwing logic to the wind and glazing our minds in self-confidence. To some degree, this is necessary. Standing in front of an audience and speaking as if we know what we're talking about on a topic we got just two short minutes ago requires an irrational amount of confidence, so good speakers must have artificial confidence in ready supply. In the minutes before a speech, we medicate self-doubt with broad statements like "I can do this" and "It'll be great!" These were mantras I had marched through my brain over and over during the past week, until their rhythm drowned out everything else—including the words I could have used to save myself from the silence.

I had never frozen before. In Donald Rumsfeld's terms, my known knowns were my past experiences speaking, my competitors' past performances, and some rehearsed speaking points, and my known unknowns were how my competitors would fare, the prompt I'd be given, and the exact words I'd use. With a hubris I'd constructed to counter my titanic fear of failure, I'd closed myself off to the prospect of anything beyond the known unknown. My freezing was an unknown unknown, a possibility I hadn't even imagined before it happened, because I'd overfit my data from past tournaments where I'd been under less pressure. I'd failed to recognize that data from the past about my ability to recover from stumbles would be of decreased relevance at this special tournament, because I'd never before gone in feeling such crippling stress. I'd been a selective fox, ferociously analyzing the known unknowns, while my inner hedgehog flung her foresight straight past the notion that manufactured poise could crumble.

At first, I regretted that this realization had not come a week sooner. Quickly, however, I remembered that this is not the way the world works. For our models to

improve, some predictions must fail. With a new year came a new season and, gratifyingly, progress. I revised my conception of myself. I learned to manage pressure, and let the fox converse with the hedgehog. I haven't frozen since, and I predict I shan't again.