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Second Language

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In English I can say ‘I love you’ to a man in a month or two. Not just to any man, don’t worry, to a man I am with. The words fall out of my mouth like milk teeth. ‘I love you.’ ‘I hate you.’ God is not listening when I speak English.

In Russian, my birth language, it would take years of not saying it – to say ‘I love you’. In Russian the word ‘love’ (*lyubov*) and the word ‘freedom’ (*svoboda*) sometimes have a crushing weight. Just to lift them up to my mouth takes most of my strength.

We are chained to words in our birth languages.

In English I am free.

A birth language is vulgar, hot, world-making, capable of slicing and splicing like a battle-ready Samurai Katana sword. When it’s beautiful—and it’s frequently beautiful—it’s, by itself, a reason to live. When it’s degraded—and it’s frequently degraded, at least where I come from—it makes the world feel precarious, on the verge of being trashed.

A second, third, language is a code. A system. You pick it like a lock. At the beginning at least, it cannot evoke or injure beyond the superficial. You speak a new language with your mouth. You write it with your hand as if driving a tractor.

We do not choose our parents. We do not choose the language our family flees towards.

I come to Australia as I am about to turn sixteen. I say, ‘thank you for your hostility’. I mean, ‘thank you for your hospitality’. It takes me two hours to enroll in a local library. English is out to defeat me. I am a Lilliput in the land of Gullivers. An underperforming lab rat lost in a maze, running out of my rat juice.

When I get better at the maze, at hostility and hospitality, when I get proficient—that’s the inelegant word for it, isn’t it?—it becomes only clearer that I can’t be a writer in English. Yes, yes, bring up Nabokov now. Or Brodsky. Or another Joseph—Conrad, who also conquered English. Or Aleksandar Hemon. Or Eva Hoffman. Mohsin Hamid. Or Valeria Luiselli.

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I am not them.

Eva Hoffman was a teenager too when her family immigrated to Canada from Poland. She remembers coming across the word ‘river’ in English and finding it cold, dry, unflowing, flat. A word without an aura. “River” in Polish’, Hoffman writes, ‘was a vital sound, energized with the essence of riverhood, of my rivers, of my being immersed in rivers. “River” in English ...has no accumulated associations for me ... it does not give off the radiating haze of connotation.’

The words you learn in the new language are cold and hollow at first, and the new world around you is like that too – no aura, little pulse.

What happens then? You know what happens then.

Slowly, slowly, the word ‘river’ in the new language starts swelling, extending into the third dimension, setting off a memory of smells and sensations; slowly, slowly, it becomes fuller, more intimate, more sentient, magnetised with meaning, and when one day you find yourself saying in your new language, to your children perhaps, the words of Heraclitus, ‘No man ever steps in the same river twice...’, the word ‘river’ might just feel big enough, deep enough too, to stand-in for time and its passing.

In Russian I am in a valley surrounded by tall mountains – the day’s clear, the visibility’s second to none. I am on notice for every moment of smugness, of overplaying my hand or obfuscating. God help me—she won’t—if I take myself too seriously and my subject-matter not seriously enough.

English is for school assignments and undergraduate essays and my Honours thesis on the history of sleep and my PhD on physical sites of trauma; it is for emails to electricity providers (subject line: Request for a payment extension) and to my daughter’s school principal that time when she was shamed in front of her class for playing the game in which whoever said the word ‘penis’ the loudest won and she won and was then made by her teacher, a middle-aged man, his face burning, to write the word ‘penis’ on the white board many times over to put the fear of God into her or something, whatever was the plan, it succeeded for a while there, she was eleven. In that email to a suburban school principal I brought up Joseph Stalin and the show trials. Moscow of 1930s. Totalitarianism starts small, I said. Not a problem. I was writing in English.

The word hybridity feels too domesticated, beige. Multicultural is even worse. It smells like a UNESCO brochure. Bicultural is OK, I guess. Tricultural. A statement of fact.

Second, third language is not something you stick a flag in. What you want from it is not to yield to you, to drop its defences, but to hold you in its thrall and its line of vision. What you want is not mastery, but—that’s the inelegant word for it, isn’t it?—accountability.

When did it happen? I can’t tell you. Somehow I stopped writing in Russian, started writing in English. What I can tell you is that I no longer spit the word ‘love’ or the word ‘home’ or the word ‘freedom’ out at will like kids and old women used to spit out chewed sunflower seeds in my childhood. These words are soaked in life, in other people’s lives; they have a visceral, spoon-bending power. English has moved deep into me. I cannot sell my children down the river in it. It counts. It sticks. I will burn for all the false, empty words I’ve written in it. Finally I will burn.

Eva Hoffman, *Lost in Translation: a life in a new language*, Heinemann, London, 1989