

Excerpts from Eva Hoffman. (1989). *Lost in translation: A life in a new language*. New York: Penguin Books.

When I come out on deck, I see a bit of a world that returned all of my sense of loss to me like a sudden punch in the stomach. . . . There is something about the sight that is ineffably and utterly different from the landscape I'm used to. . . . We seem to be in the middle of nowhere. (pp. 92–93)

To me these interiors seem oddly flat, devoid of imagination, ingenuous. The spaces are so plain, low-ceilinged, obvious. . . . The only rooms that really impress me are the bathroom and kitchen—both of them so shiny, polished, and full of unfamiliar, fabulously functional appliances that they remind me of interiors which we occasionally glimpsed in French or American movies, and which, in our bedraggled Poland, we couldn't distinguish from fantasy. (p. 102)

The twist in our names takes them a tiny distance from us—but it's a gap into which the infinite hobgoblin of abstraction enters. Our Polish names didn't refer to us; they were as surely us as our eyes or hands. These new appellations, which we ourselves can't yet pronounce, are not us. They are identification tags, disembodied signs pointing to objects that happen to be my sister and myself. We walk to our seats, into a roomful of unknown faces, with names that make us strange to ourselves. (p. 105)

The process, alas, works in reverse as well. When I see a river now, it is not shaped, assimilated by the word that accommodates it to the psyche—a word that makes a body of water a river rather than an uncontained element. The river before me remains a thing, absolutely other, absolutely unbending to the grasp of my mind.

When my friend Penny tells me that she's envious, or happy, or disappointed, I try laboriously to translate not from English to Polish but from the word back to its source, to the feeling from which it springs. Already, in that moment of strain, spontaneity of response is lost. And anyway, the translation doesn't work. I don't know how Penny feels when she talks about envy. The word hangs in a Platonic stratosphere, a vague prototype of all envy, so large, so all-encompassing that it might crush me—as might disappointment or happiness. (pp. 106–107)

My shoulders stoop, I nod frantically to indicate my agreement with others, I smile sweetly at people to show that I mean well, and my chest recedes inward so that I don't take up too much space—mannerism of a marginal, off-centered person who wants both to be taken in and to fend off the threatening others. (p. 110)

a pretend teenager among the real stuff. There's too much in this car I don't like; I don't like the blue eye shadow on Cindy's eyelids, or the grease on Chuck's hair, or the way the car zooms off with a screech and then slows down as everyone plays we're-afraid-of-the-policeman. I don't like the way they laugh. I don't care for their "ugly" jokes, or their five-hundred-pound canary jokes, or their pickle jokes, or their elephant jokes either. And the most of all, I hate having to pretend. (pp. 118-119)

It's as important to me to speak well as to play a piece of music without mistakes.

Hearing English distorted grates on me like chalk screeching on a blackboard, like all things botched and badly done, like all forms of gracelessness. The odd thing is that I know what is correct, fluent, good, long before I can, execute it. The English spoken by our Polish acquaintances strike me as jagged and thick, and I know that I shouldn't imitate it. I'm turned off by the intonations I hear on the TV sitcoms—by the expectation of laughter, like a dog's tail wagging in supplication, built into the actors' pauses, and by the curtailed, cutoff rhythms. I like the way Penny speaks, with an easy flow and a pleasure in giving words a fleshy fullness; I like what I hear in some movies; and once the Old Vic comes to Vancouver to perform Macbeth, and though I can hardly understand the particular words, I am riveted by the tones of sureness and command that mold the actors' speech into such majestic periods.

Sociolinguists might say that I receive these language messages as class signals, that I associate the sounds of correctness with the social status of the speaker. In part, this is undoubtedly true. The class-linked notion that I transfer wholesale from Poland is that belonging to a "better" class of people is absolutely dependent on speaking a "better" language. And in my situation especially, I know that language will be a crucial instrument, that I can over-come the stigma of my marginality, the weight of presumption against me, only if the reassuringly right sounds come out of my mouth. (pp. 122–123)

As I listen to people speaking that foreign tongue, English, I can hear when they stumble or repeat the same phrases too many times, when their sentences trail aimlessly—or, on the contrary, when their phrases have vigor and roundness, when they have the space and the breath to give a flourish at the end of a sentence, or make just the right pause before coming to a dramatic point. I can tell, in other words, the degree of their ease or disease, the extent of authority that shapes the rhythms of their speech. That authority—in whatever dialect, in whatever variant of the mainstream language—seems to me to be something we all desire. It's not that we all want to speak the King's English, but whether we speak Appalachian or Harlem English, or Cockney, or Jamaican Creole, we want to be at home in our tongue. We want to be able to give voice accurately and fully to ourselves and our sense of the world. (pp. -124)

At this point in my initiation into the English language, I have an active vocabulary of about six hundred words, it doesn't occur to me that I should mince any of them. I want to tell Canadians about how boring they are. "Canada is the dullest country in the world," I write in the notes for my speech, "because it is the most conformist." People may pretend to have liberal beliefs, I go on, but really they are an unadventurous lot who never dare to sidestep bourgeois conventions. With the hauteur that can only spring from fourteen-year-old innocence, I take these observations to be self-evident, because they are mine. (p. 133)

I learn also that certain kinds of truth are impolite. One shouldn't criticize the person one is with, at least not directly. You shouldn't say, "You are wrong about that"—though you may say, "On the other hand, there is that to consider." You shouldn't say, "This doesn't look good on you," though you may say, "I like you better in that other outfit." I learn to tone down my sharpness, to do a more careful conversational minuet. (p. 146)

I know how unprotected my family has become; I know I'd better do well—or else. The “or else” takes many forms in my mind—vague images of helplessness and restriction and always being poor. “The Bowery,” I come to call this congeries of anxieties. The Bowery is where I'll end up if I don't do everything exactly right. I have to make myself a steel breastplate of achievement and good grades, so that I'll be able to get out—and get in, so that I can gain entry into the social system from where I stand, on a precarious ledge. I am pervaded by a new knowledge that I have to fend for myself, and it pushes me on with something besides my old curiosity, or even simple competitiveness... .

I too am goaded on by the forked whip of ambition and fear, and I derive a strange strength—a ferocity, a puissance—from the sense of my responsibility, the sense that survival is in my own hands. (p. 157)

“Form is content,” at this time, is taken to mean that there is no such thing as content.

Luckily for me, there is no world outside the text; luckily, for I know so little of the world to which the literature I read refers. My task, when I read a poem or a novel, is to find repeated symbols, patterns of words, recurring motifs, and motifs that pull against each other. These last are particularly prized because they have the honorific status of “irony” and “paradox.” These are exercises I perform with ease... .

I became an expert on this business of symbolic patterns. (p. 182)

Eva also reports that

in a democratic education system, in a democratic ideology of reading, I am never made to feel that I'm an outsider poaching on others' property. In this country of learning, I'm welcomed on equal terms, and it's through the democratizing power of literature that I begin to feel at home in America, even before I understand the literature or America, or the relationship between them, very well. (pp. 183-184)

I've become obsessed with words. I gather them, put them away like a squirrel saving nuts for winter, swallow them and hunger for more. If I take in enough, then maybe I can incorporate the language, make it part of my psyche and my body. I will not leave an image unworded, will not let anything cross my mind till I find the right phrase to pin the shadow down. (p. 216)

The thought that there are parts of the language I'm missing can induce a small panic in me, as if such gaps were missing parts of the world or my mind—as if the totality of the world and mind were coeval with the totality of the language. Or rather, as if language were an enormous, fine net in which reality is contained—and if there are holes in it, then a bit of reality can escape, cease to exist. When I write, I want to use every word in the lexicon, to accumulate a thickness and weight of words so that they yield the specific gravity of things. I want to re-create, from the discrete particles of words, that wholeness of a childhood language that had no words.

I pounce on bits of colloquial idiom, those slivers of Americana in which the cultural sensibility is most vivid, as if they could give me America itself”. “Hair of the dog that bit

me,” I repeat to myself with relish; “pork-barreling”; “I’m from Missouri, show me”; “He swallowed it hook, line, and sinker.” When I speak, I’m awkward in using such homely familiarities; I still feel the presumption in it. But in writing, I claim territorial prerogative. Perhaps if I cast my net wide enough, it will cover the whole continent. (p. 217)

I sound natural enough, I sound like anybody else. But I can hear the artifice, and for a moment, I clutch. My throat tightens. Paralysis threatens. Speechlessness used to be one of the common symptoms of classic hysteria. I feel as though in me, hysteria is brought on by tongue-tied speechlessness. (p. 219)

Since I lack a voice of my own, the voices of others invade me as if I were a silent ventriloquist. They ricochet within me, carrying on conversations, lending me their modulations, intonations, rhythms. I do not yet possess them; they possess me. But some of them satisfy a need; some of them stick to my ribs. I could take on that stylish, ironic elongation which is X’s mark of perpetual amusement; it fits something in my temperament, I could learn to speak a part of myself through it. And that curtailed, deliberate dryness that Y uses as an antidote to sentiment opens a door into a certain New England sensibility whose richness I would never otherwise understand. Eventually, the voices enter me; by assuming them, I gradually make them mine. I am being remade, fragment by fragment, like a patchwork quilt; there are more colors in the world than I ever knew. (p. 220)

this is the most important thing: that it was in English, and that English spoke to me in a language that comes from below consciousness, a language as simple and mysterious as a medieval ballad, a gnostic speech that precedes and supersedes our analytic complexities... .

Perhaps I’ve read, written, eaten enough words so that English now flows in my bloodstream. But once this mutation takes place, once the language starts speaking itself to me from my cells, I stop being so stuck on it. Words are no longer spiky bits of hard matter, which refer only to themselves. They become, more and more, a transparent medium in which I live and which lives in me—a medium through which I can once again get to myself and to the world. (p. 243)

She further elaborates on her sense of mastery.

I’ve learned how to size people up; stepping into a room crowded with strangers, I can figure out quickly what species—public species, that is—the people in it belong to; I recognize that self-assured young man who peppers his international technocratic career with a few progressive ideas, that British academic who mutters hilarious remarks without bothering to change the pitch of his voice, that young poet whose posture is stiff with the strain of his sacrifice, that cosmopolitan Indian woman who has made the transition to modernity with evident grace. I’ve learned to read the signs and symbols governing the typology of the contemporary world.

I take great pleasure in these skills, and the sense of mastery they give me. But how fragile they seem as I step back into that first, most private kind of knowledge. (p. 251)

For me, therapy is partly translation therapy, the talk-cure a second-language cure. My going to a shrink is, among other things, a rite of initiation: initiation into language of the subculture within which I happen to live, into a way of explaining myself to myself. But gradually, it becomes a project of translating backward. The way to jump over my Great Divide is to crawl backward over it in English. It's only when I retell my whole story, back to the beginning, and from the beginning onward, in one language, that I can reconcile the voices within me with each other; it is only then that the person who judges the voices and tells the stories begins to emerge. (p. 271-272)