

ELENA BOSSI,

Nací en la Argentina hablando italiano. Hasta que no fui a la escuela no supe con claridad en qué parte del mundo estaba. Una sensación permanente en mi vida es la de no pertenecer a ningún sitio. No pertenezco a la patria de mis padres; pero tampoco a aquella donde nací. Italia y Argentina no dejan que me afirme. Vivir en Jujuy, cerca de la frontera, intensifica mi desarraigo. No sería raro que hubiera elegido vivir allí por eso mismo. La literatura me consuela, después de todo, ¿quién no está de paso?

I'll try in English:

I was born in Argentina speaking Italian. Even when I went to school, I didn't know clearly where I was. A permanent sensation in my life is no to belong to any place. I don't belong to my parents' country; but neither to place where I was born. Italy and Argentina do not allow me to become firm. To live in Jujuy near to the border (frontier) intensifies my uprootedness. It would not be too strange had I chosen to live there for that reason. Literature makes me feel better. After all, who is not passing through?

Alex Epstein

Longings are more of a fiction than a word. (I never managed to write a story about the airport where I heard Hebrew spoken for the first time in my life. Still, a few years ago, at a different airport, in line for passport control, I saw a young woman in a wedding dress and both her arms were in casts. That was, of course, one of those moments when you curse yourself for wasting your film on the meandering and too well-cultivated garden fountains, on all the church steeples which resemble each other in any case, and on some stupid motorcycle pulling a sidecar and driving too fast; and you decided to buy a new film only at the duty free store, before the flight back. After passport control, in the departures hall, I didn't see her again; and so I could never determine conclusively which language she was trying to forget.)

Translated from the Hebrew by Rachel Tzvia Back

KSENIA GOLUBOVICH:

Russian is my language, for sure. But since I was very little I always felt that there was Russian and then there was Russian. There was Russian of the official television, of news-papers, of people who could barely express their feelings so awkward they felt in talking, and then there was Russian of the fairy tales, of strange old people, spoken in the dimmed apartments I used to go to with my mother. Where every word was quite vibrant, addressed, had a story to tell; the music of that language always amazed me. Later I realized that it was not only Russian and Russian, it was USSR and not USSR. Luckily enough my choices were not to be very radical. I was 15 when the USSR fell, leaving an enormous black hole, quickly usurped by fast money

and the language that presupposes, by the most clichéd products one can imagine, and a small tiny island of what I felt as Russia.

That state of mine has never become official, it never raised a banner and had an anthem, but the manner and the talk of those who inhabit it is different from those who do not. It is different on two sides, for now the gap between the rich and the poor is so big that really it can be said there are three Russias in one country. Two of them use the spoilt, criminally burdened or officially cleansed, or at best MTV- irony driven language, while the “inner immigration” is in between and it also speaks “Russian”, beautiful at times, but with a great disconnect from the actual events which have reserved a ruder forms of expression to themselves. Can that disconnectedness be broken? Can one come out of the ghetto, and make a gift of the language to the population? Then one would have to address the issues that the very same impoverished and suffering population prefers to leave unanswered, unlock the memories it would not want to hear? Or does one have to proceed as one does, hoping that those who need it will come?

Lawrence K. L. PUN

Mother tongue. Are you talking about my blood mother, or stepmother? In other words, Chinese or English (Oxford English. For example, “honour” but not “honor”). But I will be condemned to call the United Kingdom the stepmother (who can bear the accusation of Imperialism?), though when I was little, I was taught that my home was called the Crown Colony. Then, one day after the handover, it became the Special Administrative Region, in short, SAR (not the Severe Acute Respiratory virus spread years ago). But in fact the concept of motherland is so vague to me, that the only name I prefer may be just Hong Kong: better to be a grown orphan than a permanent baby. However, etymologically, it is still a given name, one which means “fragrant harbour” (again, “harbour” but not “harbor”: your old English teacher will put a cross on the latter), said to have been exclaimed by the British army and Tai-pan when they set their feet there in 1842.”Handover” is always “hangover”. It is a matter of haunting – postcolonial is really post.....colonial.

Okay, even if I limit myself to my “Chineseness” (is there such a thing, anymore? I doubt it), mother splits still more. Phonetically, should my mother tongue be Cantonese or Mandarin? Pictorially, should my mother characters be Traditional or Simplified? I belong to the former category, but I know what the big trend is-- irresistible. I may know how much is lost in the process of this “simplification”, but the United Nations has recently abolished Traditional Chinese characters. A matter of fact. One day, they may exist only in Chinese calligraphy and antiquity. Language is a matter of power.

Tongue and Hand divide (colloquial Cantonese and written Mandarin). Head and Heart depart (a distance which writers strive a lifetime to bridge: a few feet physically means infinity). We are forever split. Things topple, and we become more ancient (Cantonese, traditional characters) than our mother. We are the forebearer of our mother. Isn't it a paradox, like the “one country two systems”, pronounced as an unprecedented experimental political model in the world? Hong Kong becomes King Kong (Peking's Kong) – a dialectical tie you can neither forge nor deny.

Simone Inguanez

I write in Maltese. I can hardly call this a choice. It comes naturally - it's my language. And I find my mother tongue an awesome language indeed. On the other hand, writing in my mother tongue means I have to be translated to make my works accessible to most readers.

And this because, my language is spoken only by 400 000-some people in the Maltese islands, and some other 100 000, mainly in the countries of the Maltese diaspora, : Australia, the US, Canada and the UK. At least, where Maltese is spoken, it is quite standard. We can't really say we have dialects; only some minor--tough very interesting--variations along the 316km² stretch of Maltese land.

So, when I read my originals here in Iowa City, you can only appreciate the sounds and rhythms and passion of my language. OK, that's already something. But I'd be surprised if I' had managed to communicate something more to anyone in this room. Now, some might even believe that writing in an exotic language, one can get away with murder. In effect, this is as correct as believing that a prime line-up of instruments would guarantee a masterpiece. (Should you have any doubt, try me on that one.) So, one of my constant hopes is to do justice to this treasure of a language.

At the same time, English is the second official language of my country. Thus, I could opt for English and I wouldn't have to bother any translator. But to me it's like having a second mother. I might have an exceptional bond with such mother, yet I neither can, nor will, reverse my true motherhood and all it carries with it.

Mani RAO:

Who knows what Mother Kali means to say with her lolling tongue.
Whatever it stands for, vulnerability is not one of them.

The demon Raktabija (trans. blood-seed) had a boon that a thousand clones would be born from every spilled drop of his blood. Kali's tongue licked his blood in mid-air, and won the battle.

"Whoever, then, can understand the word, not only before it sounds, but even before the images of its sounds are contemplated in thought – such a word belongs to no language.." (St Augustine, Chapter 10).

KAVERY NAMBISAN

About Mother Tongue and Nationhood: what it means to me.

In India we're abused for writing in English, by none less than other learned writers who write in regional languages, all of who send their kids to English schools and colleges. I've thought a lot about it and have come to believe that the tongue of writers is universal. It is the instrument of communication. Just as music is not sullied by the choice of instrument, true literature cannot be sullied by the nature of language. What matters is that the writer is true to the language she chooses to communicate in.

The forked tongue of writers dredges from experience and imagination. The only thing that matters in the end is the honesty, and the merit of that honesty. We can only strive. As for nationhood, I no longer have a sense of pride or patriotism. It is an accident of birth. How can I feel proud of what my forefathers did or did not do?

Laszlo Istvan Geher

A mother usually has only one tongue. And you usually have only one mother. Since the nineteenth century national identities have generally been defined by language and the national consciousness attached to the notion of a particular language. But history is much more complex. You may tend to have stepmothers or you may tend to be in a state where it is hard to decide which mother is the original. What's more, you may have a mother who has two or more tongues in her mouth.

The eagle of the Hapsburg Empire had two heads and several tongues. When the eagle had been beheaded the tongues remained scattered along without those two heads. I would never like to regain the heads because there would be no tongues in them. I do not like dumb eagles.