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Ja, Ben, I, Je: A Book Collection in Translation

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Ja, Ben, I, Je: A Book Collection in Translation

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.

—Eva Hoffman, *Lost in Translation*¹

Having newly arrived to the United States in 1998, I spoke no English when I began second grade, no words to communicate my quickly cementing self-consciousness. Embodying my childish embarrassment, I hated myself on the first day for losing my breath, my chest aching suddenly as I stood in line with my new classmates and watched the principal walk away with my mother. With great difficulty, I turned to mimic the others, looking ahead at my teacher.

A year later, when my family's fourth move came with a new school district, my English language teacher insisted to my parents, "This child *will* fail the third grade if you move her now." This failure, she said, would outlast my time in elementary school, though I'd be *lucky* if I wasn't held back. She thought I couldn't understand what she was saying.

The simplest utterances made anxiety second nature. In the meantime, focusing on learning English and speaking Bosnian at home, I was losing Turkish, the language in my immediate environment as a war refugee in Turkey. When my best friend from first grade sent a letter, I left it open for months. Another year would pass, and I would realize I no longer knew how to reply, all I could say, "İyiyim, arkadaş" (I'm fine, friend).

I repressed that. And pressed on—in other fields. Mathematics came easy. You can romanticize in hindsight: maybe math offered the stability language never could. Numbers remain constant. The number 1 would *always* be 1, whereas even something as seemingly simple

¹Eva Hoffman, *Lost in Translation*, 217.

as introducing yourself proved difficult. The first-person singular remained impressionable: from “ja” in the Bosnian we spoke at home, to the “ben” in the Turkish I could no longer speak to my friend, to the most recent “I” and, during college, “je.”

It turns out logic was not my *forté*. Instead of continuing to do what I was good at doing (math), I gravitated toward literature over time. Moreover, it was in the breakdown of the logical or the expected that I began to thrive. When I finally became fluent in English at starting fourth grade, the teacher could not only *not* shut me up, but I became class clown. I seized every opportunity at twisting language from its stable, often serious tone in order to make people laugh, finding my own nook in those spaces in between. Teachers’ comments on progress reports reflected this newfound inclination. But I continued, turning my ESL teacher’s certainty regarding my linguistic failures into pointing to the productively humorous failures of language itself.

This humor later developed into a more general bookworm rebelliousness—perhaps not as *cool* as rebelliousness writ large, but all the same I felt like everyone else just “didn’t get it.” When a Typically Emotional Adolescent, thirteen or fourteen years old, I remember reading a translation of Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* in my room. My mother walked in after a Typically Emotional Adolescent-driven argument and, as if everything was clear to her in that moment, said, “Kafka?! You shouldn’t be reading that at your age!”

But it was exactly what I *should* have been reading and am grateful I did, grateful with a unique lack of cringe-worthiness to gratitude that any refugee can feel because gratitude is, categorically, often insisted upon them. I continued to read—and to collect, accumulating three bookshelves by my sixteenth birthday. (Indeed I quickly saw babysitting as an avenue for my own booksitting. The rebel said, “I get paid today and I’m spending it *all!*” The omission here

being “at the bookshop.”) For it was in literature that I found the sustenance for an alternative understanding of self and an alternative home. Whether *ja*, *ben*, *I*, *je*—the self was only incompletely knowable, and literature could reassuringly dramatize this.

I discover hospitality in migrant, exile, and war literatures, especially in the tragicomic in each. The convergence of these literary traditions and the many languages in which they materialize reflect not only my experience of a divided self, but also my life with a pluralized conception of “home.” In my collection are books that showcase how contemporary U.S. literatures travel beyond two nation-states and among many nodes of a network; the multiple migrations within a single text—like Cristina García’s *Monkey Hunting*, which takes us from China, to Cuba, to the U.S., and, by extension, to Vietnam—draws out the complexity of answering where we’re from or even where we are. In a translated essay collection entitled *Have A Nice Day*, Dubravka Ugrešić reflects, after the Flemish person with whom she is speaking cannot pin down where Zagreb, the city she is from, is located, “Really, where is that? In Croatia. In a country which does not yet exist. [Her collection was published before the war ended in the mid-1990s.] And where is that? In Yugoslavia. In a country which no longer exists. If the country does not exist, then what is happening there cannot, actually, be happening” (19). I remember a scene from high school when a classmate asked me where I was from and, after telling her “Bosnia,” she said, “Oh, where’s that? Why are you here now?” I wished I had read Ugrešić’s essay in time to respond more eloquently. I didn’t want to say I was a war refugee, didn’t want to explain how. Even now, it all feels too sentimental.

Put simply, the books in my collection say it better; they “get it.” There’s Ismet Prcić’s *Shards*, where he writes, “I don’t miss home, *mati* [mother]. I’m there all the time. In the past. In fiction” (41). There’s James Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room*, where David says, “I resented this:

resented being called an American (and resented resenting it) because it seemed to make me nothing more than that, whatever that was; and I resented being called *not* an American because it seemed to make me nothing” (89). There’s Aleksandar Hemon’s *The Lazarus Project*, with “Part of the recollection ritual was admitting the defeat, recognizing that I could never remember everything. I had no choice but to remember just minuscule fragments, well aware that in no future would I be able to reconstruct the whole out of them” (127). My book collection materializes my kinship with literature and all the things I wish I knew how to understand better and how to say better. Literature helps translate my own experience back to me, revives the logician in me, gives voice to my self-consciousness, allows all its potential destructiveness to give way to a more positive force that strives, reminded by these writers, like Eva Hoffman, to “re-create, from the discrete particles of words, that wholeness of a childhood language that had no words” (217).

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