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Le Mie Voci

Drops of ink that document the crumbling of my language.

Ever since I moved to America, I've had an obsession with postcards. I am persuaded by the fact that they are a bargain and I always buy a ton. However, they often remain blank in between the pages of books that I don't remember having read. I like to think of them as *inexperienced* postcards - could have been travelling the world, migrating from hand to hand, and, perhaps, arriving safely to the addressee. Sometimes, after having decided what face, what friend, would fit the image on the postcard, I manage to sit down and think of what I want to say. Yet, I inevitably wonder whether I should use the language of the country where the postcard is from, or the one where it would land.

My lips tremble as I consider the possibility that my letter would arrive at the wrong destination, and that a random recipient would not be able to understand my words. Would they question the origin of my postcard or would they, instead, dismiss its past?

Words weigh on my shoulders and cause me to sink in the place where I stand. Today, in New York, I build my day around words which I recognize. At the grocery store, I have stopped buying certain food because I don't know how to pronounce their names. Words turn into enemies and trap me in a cage.

As I walk around the city and try to establish a point of reference in what was once an irrelevant bakery, or library, or Starbucks, I think about Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-*

Philosophicus and its exploration of language. When Wittgenstein writes that “The limits of [his] language means the limits of [his] world,” it fascinates me and I wonder if this work was a letter to me - if I am its random recipient (Wittgenstein).

Ironically, I have moved to the States to expand my boundaries. And yet, now I fear writing on my postcards because choosing one language - choosing who to be - would distinctly reduce the possibilities of my world. That’s why I usually leave them settled between the words of others.

Sometimes, I come across one of my inexperienced postcards and I see words on it that I don’t remember writing. It has been trapped in the book for so long that the ink has moulded into a different voice. I leave it there as a reminder of who I was and how I have changed. It reassures me that I won’t get lost.

In America, I have the hands of a child

I have started writing as a consequence of my tireless reading. My aunt owned the only bookstore available in my town. It was there that all the kids - my classmates - would go to buy their books. I felt violated whenever I would see one of them entering the place while I laid on the floor reading a book. I was scared that other kids could steal from me an idea of what books meant - an idea that I wasn’t quite able to understand yet. Growing up, it was made clear to me that I had to become a reader. If not because of personal interest, reading was the only way to join the conversation at the dinner table.

When I came to America, because my knowledge of English was very limited, reading was a struggle and writing was a taboo. Realizing that my native language wasn't enough to express my thoughts anymore was traumatic. In a desperate search of someone that had experienced what I was feeling, I came across an article, "Born Again in a Second Language," in *The New York Times* by Costica Bradatan in which he gives a satisfying definition of what it means to change language, especially in relation to the writing process. He writes that "to abandon your native tongue and to adopt another is to dismantle yourself, piece by piece, and then to put yourself together again, in a different form" (Bradatan). I wonder what I would have seen, if I stood in front of a mirror then. Perhaps, I would have not found myself; perhaps, I would have seen that I had tiny innocent hands, like the hands of a child.

I have observed that when I write in English I am so vulnerable that I am afraid of people noticing my shameful accent. I'd like it to disappear - to let me wonder clean and spotless, without stains that precede my voice. My mistakes reveal the human that hides underneath the words and I am suddenly naked, unprotected. Mastering a language is a luxury that we appreciate only when we struggle to learn a new one. In Italian, I know what territories I can explore, where I can push myself, and where, instead, I have to stop. In English, I am walking barefoot on a minefield.

My mother speaks Italian

My mother was a veteran character in my stories. She passed through them as an insatiable soul, a diligent teacher, a hungry stray. She had been a part of stories since I began

writing and yet today I am incapable of giving her a role. She is gone - lost in the labyrinth of a language she doesn't know, and I with her. I write and wonder whether I will ever meet my reassuring characters again, even if in another shape or another form. Where before they were waiting along my path, now I see them running on a baseball field, clueless as to what to make of their freedom. They laugh at their illiteracy in this American world and, worse than that, they laugh at me and my inability to catch them. Trying to communicate with them is a lost battle. After all, I was the one who wanted to move to the States, not them.

The first time I wrote in English, I talked about my father who, because of his quietness, had always been a spectator rather than an active participant of my stories. I remember my teacher asking me, *What's the sound of home?* I wrote that home sounded like my father's keys when he comes back for dinner. I have often reread this story. I now believe that writing about my father mirrored the transformation I was undergoing inside. I was carefully venturing into unexplored substance, but still holding hands with the one who held me while I learned to ride a bike.

In his article, Bradatan adds that "a writer's language, far from being a mere means of expression, is above all a mode of subjective existence and a way of experiencing the world" (Bradatan). Language is an extension of myself. Besides being goldsmiths that craft tales of who I was and who I am, words are extensions of my hands. They are the tools I rely on when I explore the world. What I see, what I hear, grows into thoughts which in turn grow into words. As I reach for support in the chaotic New York traffic, I glance at my reflection in the window of a shop. It looks like an older version of myself, more honest and sensible. Perhaps learning a new

language and digesting the world through it means embarking on a second life within a single lifetime. Language has never been closer to a time portal.

In my invisibility, I become words

With time, I have begun analyzing my choice of writing in English. There is a feeling of loss and a sense of betrayal in my attempt to write in a foreign language. I fear that I might leave behind authors that have raised me and a language that still cradles my first words - mamma, papà, ciotola (bowl). I have often tried to translate memories and words that were deeply rooted in my past, but only to find out that their English versions were trapped in the limbo of language. As Crystal Hana Kim writes in her personal essay “Translation and the family of things,” in the stagnant limbo of language, I find “ moments when the language fails [me]. What [I] what to say gets lost in the landscape of the untranslatable” (Kim). The silence of the insurmountable gap between languages forces me to embrace one voice and let go of the other one. Choosing -- choosing who to be, what to write and how to write it -- carries the risk of failing and being unable to undo my choice. Once on paper, words become alive and I can’t go back, erase them from my memory.

Many times, I have thought that there is a sense of responsibility in what I say and what I write, especially when I use words that are foreign to me. They require the accurate care of a physician, or a scientist. Although the writing process might often resemble the ease of a stream of water, when you use a second language, writing entails the difficult act of deciding. I must decide which words are best to pick, or which voice best conveys my idea; I must decide which

language I want to use. The secret to these decisions is perhaps remaining truthful to myself and listening to the voice that knocks at my door.

In her book *In Other Words*, Jhumpa Lahiri writes about her process of learning a foreign language -- Italian -- and adopting it for her writing. By recalling the *Metamorphoses* by Ovid, she compares her transformation as a writer to a metamorphosis that she describes as "a process that is both violent and regenerative, a death and a birth. [...] the beauty of [it] is that it portrays the fusion of two elements, of both beings" (Lahiri). I like to think of the trajectory of changing language as an eternal metamorphosis. The death and birth of the author, to which Lahiri refers, is never completed and it will never be. It is a perpetual motion that doesn't allow answers, plans, schedules. It requires that the author renounce control and cede to a bigger project.

It took me a while to understand that my English words don't substitute my Italian words, that they don't fill in blank spots. Instead they reveal thoughts that were supposed to emerge from the dark, and they choose a language and a voice to do so. I, as the author, become invisible, a mere tool for their survival.

Stars become planes. Planes become words.

When I was little, I would spend a lot of time at my grandma's house. At night, we would sit on her balcony and look for the stars. They were often feeble - hidden by the lights of my town, or by the clouds, or simply asleep as my grandma used to say. We would, instead, count the planes that lit up the sky and we would wonder where they were headed. I would always say

America; I would always say New York. She was more territorial than me, she would say Rome, Paris. Once, she said London but she regretted it right after.

The first time I took a plane, I was ten years old. My attraction to far horizons was present despite my limited travel history. I now believe that it was that idea -- pungent like unripe strawberries in between the shelves of a bookstore -- of what books meant that led me to America. Lying on the fitted carpet floor of my aunt's bookstore, I would hold a book in my hands and, with it, a sense of belonging that I am still not able to find anywhere else. Perhaps it was a blessing. Perhaps everything dates back to my aunt's bookstore.

Words that I use to advance in the understanding of my world come from my readings. Perhaps, I think, my rush in interpreting Wittgenstein's statement about the limits of language led me to wrong conclusions. The limits of my language don't represent the limits of my world, but they instead offer me the opportunity to want to explore what's further. They prove that there is more out there. Perhaps words don't have to be enemies that I need to mediate: they are the facets through which truth reveals itself to us - they are planes that connect us to the unattainable.

Silence is the mistake that reveals what's beneath my feet.

I am back home for Christmas. I am sitting at the dinner table while my parents are asleep. I am still jet-lagged and a bit overwhelmed by the way they have aged in the time I was gone. In order to quiet my thoughts, I have placed a bunch of books that I don't remember I have read on the table. A postcard sticks out from one of them. It is a picture of the City skyline on an excessively bright sunset. I remember that I bought it with the intention of sending it to my

grandmother who can't see anything anymore except for vivid colors. I see that some words from the book I am holding have been printed on the postcard. It is a poem, called "I Limoni," by the Italian author, Eugenio Montale:

Vedi, in questi silenzi in cui le cose
S'abbandonano e sembrano vicine
A tradire il loro ultimo segreto,
Talora ci si aspetta
Di scoprire uno sbaglio di Natura,
Il punto morto del mondo, l'anello che non tiene,
Il filo da disbrogliare che finalmente ci metta
Nel mezzo di una verità. (Montale)

I translate it to English and introduce it to my other self. This is what it sounds like: "You see, in these silences in which things // abandon themselves and seem close // to betraying their ultimate secret, // sometimes we expect // to discover a flaw in Nature, // the dead point of the world, the link that weakens, // the thread to untangle that finally leads us // to the depths of truth."

I find myself interpreting this silence as the untranslatable that lays between my Italian and my English -- as the lack of language -- as the mistake that reveals what's beneath the crust, and beneath the mantle, and beneath the core: what's beneath my feet. The possibility of being misunderstood doesn't scare me anymore; perhaps it is in our errors that we come closer to that frail and ephemeral essence of being human.

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