



BANANA REPUBLIC

A sign for Banana Republic, partially obscured by other billboards.

Ingrid Wendt

Learning the Mother Tongue

A poem sequence in 16 parts

1 It's wicked, I know, but sometimes I can't help feeling just
the tiniest glee when my good German friend, whose English tongue
has mastered the footwork of all Swan Lake ballet, stumbles over
the English translation of *wenn*, saying "if" when she really means
"when," and vice versa,
 while I, good German American, keep
clumping along: learning the word *Kopfsalat*, for example ("head
lettuce"), so proud of myself: first time in the land of all four
grandparents, shopping for salad, asking the produce clerk "*Haben Sie
ein Kopf, bitte?*" "*Ja, natürlich,*" she answers. "*Und Sie?*"

2 But this is what comes of book learning, not every day stretching
the tongue: discipline, discipline, flash cards. syllables
splashing in and out of the ear

out of context: out of their forests
of kelp: circling, circling, whole
words unbidden as fragments of tunes

Denkbar, I hear, and it's one of those reef fish floating up
to my face mask, right out of my fish classification book
but right then the name won't come, I have to look it up

Ergebnis, I hear, (outcome/result)
Abgeschiedenheit (solitude): listen
what am I telling myself, and in whose voice?

3 "Brr," I practice, over and over, the special teacher so happy
(so easy to please), "Brr, Brr, Brr, Brrd" (such a pretty
poster: blue jays, orioles, robins) and then
we blow the candle out. Not
with lips puckered, oh no, that's the usual way,
but because I am special, this secret: the tongue

not behind the teeth ("Duh"), but rather just
a flicker beneath: "Thhh, Thhh, Thhh," the breath

we can chase with another nice sound: "The," "They," "This,"
"That." Six years old. And two weeks later I master what
my German-Chilean father, with more than twenty years in this country,
whose accent has read to me to sleep each night from the moment

books began, still
hasn't achieved.

4 Always the question: Did our Illinois family speak German at home?
During the war years in which I was born? Let's qualify:

*Father born 1902 in Chile. Mother, 1911, in Michigan. There, that does it.
Except for the shadow. (Fit in. Fit in. What else is there to know?)*

5 And still, "*Mach schnell!*" (when I was too slow).
"*Strewwelpeter!*" (my hair was a mess).
"*Dreh dich rum,*" my mother would say in her Schwabian mother's

tongue, never, of course, outside of the family, never
translating: sporadic spices her tongue dished out without
one of us questioning. Look!

In this textbook, the recipes: words with real
meanings attached. "Make quick!" "Naughty
child from Heinrich Hoffmann's pen!" It's not

after all, just
family oddness, not
baby talk. Look at
this middle-aged tongue abandon its teetering. This
fabulous, sturdy new foot!

6 Yet what translation for what wasn't spoken?

*A child's duty is following orders, no questions. A leader is bad, if he fails.
Parents are always, always, always right. You've had your fun. Now, duty.*

Where this came from, what child thought to ask? She knew.

7 Ach, this relentlessness. Ach, this unforgiving side of the tongue. "*Grübeleien*," the German-American poet Ted Hirschfield calls it. "The German search for perfect order."

(Good, better, best. Never let it rest, till the good is better, and the better, best.) Meaning: Good is never good enough. Good is always one step backwards into bad

Which maybe has something to do with "Case": the ways all nouns can be rearranged (*Who does What to Whom, unpredictable*): lacking the right "the," you can say something strange:

The mother gives the girl a spanking.
The girl gives the mother a spanking.
The spanking gives the girl to the mother.

Not *Why*, of course.
Never *Why*.

8 Why did the father never punish the child? Why let the mother shoulder all anger? All

those years the child thinking her father the most perfect: the one she failed to please the one time and one time only, all the years of her childhood the one time she asked him to teach her German and he raised his voice in such fire as never could issue forth from him and all

because she could not pronounce no matter how many times she tried, the "ü" umlaut he over and over tried to teach her and over and over all

her stubby, graceless tongue could muster was "oo."

9 Case (*n.*)

Covering. (Middle English, *case*; Old French, *casse*; Latin, *capsa*: carton, from *capere*: to hold)

Situation. (Middle English, *case*; Old French, *cas*: event, chance;

Latin, *casus*: accident; from *cadere*: to fall)

Condition/state/circumstance/
plight/
predicament

10 And who in those days in her hearing said one word about World War II

11

What cannot be spoken
What cannot be heard
Sharp instant of knowing
No substitute word

For a meaning uncharted
Beyond either tide
Bridge between continents
Dateline Divide

What pulses on paper
Precarious heart
Could break like a wave
Could wash us apart

Still moment of tension
License to choose
And/or/something more
History/News

Silent as footsteps
That cannot be sung
What will not be recognized
Severs the tongue

12 *Gang*: way of walking.

Vergangen: bygone, former, last, past.

Vergangenheit: our history.

Vergären: curdle; to ferment.

Vergänglich: passing; transient.

Wal: whale.

Walten: to prevail.

Bewalden: plant with trees.

Bewahrung: security.

Bewältigen: to cope.

Vergangenheitsbewältigung: to come
to terms with the past; regroup.

13 To know who we are. To speak. To start all over again, lugging along the whole sense of everything, all that kit and kaboodle, not only the meanings of nouns, verbs, adjectives, but

the structure of speech itself: planning the order of each sentence

a rucksack of rations the mind

carries along on its everyday field maneuvers. Such a burden of foreknowledge. Such earnest syllables: look again: "the"

can never be just "the," it's *die*, or *der*, or *das*, and depending on where in the sentence you find it, *dem* or *den*, and don't forget "number," *des*, and maybe this verb or that

preposition takes dative or genitive case, O, the combinations would baffle even the periodic table of elements. You could be forever held in suspension: before you can open your mouth,

the solution must always, always, always be at sentence end already known. That slap you never knew was coming. No end to the blame you (or she) (or he) (or we) could own.

14 To believe we are what we speak, and still take heart: how

about the implications of "Art"

("nature") and "artig"
("well-behaved")?

And how do you like these words, like Chinese ideograms, pictures
to cling to: *Selbständig*, ("self-standing;"
"independent").

Unabhängig: ("not hanging on;" "independent").
Hochfliegen: ("high-flying;"
"explode").

15 *Abgeschlossenheit*, O you syllables rolling
over the palate: thick milkshake: such work to
pull you through the straw, such dense reward

Sehenswürdigkeit (sight worth seeing), O you rich
stew with your stock ingredients--garlic, carrots, celery,
onions, beans--look at your infinite mutations!

Wiedersehen
Wiederaufnahmeverfahren
Kinderfreundlichkeit

(We can even make some of these up) and even
the singular ones, the peppercorns, how sweet to the tongue:
nein, the mother says to her little one

gentle, this sound the moon
makes when it's full--the lap, the pillow--not
"No," not "Nyet," but *nein, nein, nein*.

16 And the other side of meaning's suspension: all
the sweetness of cookie dough: this isn't the end, the best's

Yet to come. All
the intellectual passion of Wagner, of *Tristan, Isolde*.

The consummate pleasure of consummation withheld. All
this intricate, verbal footwork: words like chess pieces:

Langsam, deliberate, *langsam*, slowly. *This Tango. Flamenco*.

This power.
Control.

17 "Bist du
ein gutes Mädchen?"
"Ja, ich bin ein gutes Mädchen."

Out of hiding, this memory, that morning. I'm ten. This whole sentence I say again and again, snuggling, Saturday morning and Mother letting us under her covers, into the words she learned from her

own mother: words I learn by rote, not sense, but now, here in this class, with this text, in one big bang, the whole hump of Africa – foothold

every map of Europe stands on – sliding back into the lap of Florida, Mexico, Texas, where once it belonged: *gutes (natürlich)*: predicate nominative (how

logical) intersecting with singular neuter (you've got it): one small part of the whole ballet my tongue will learn (*natürlich*) from what the runaway heart brings home.

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