

# Imported Breeds

Literature of Cultural Exchange



*An Anthology*

Edited by

Phillip Sterling

## Lucy Ferriss

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### *The Difficulty of Translation*

Kate worked in one of those gray European cities whose monstrous eighteenth-century buildings abide within cages of scaffolding. Over its cupolas and steeples hovered the maws of bright yellow cranes. Everything was being restored: halls of justice, fountains, Doric columns, statues of long-forgotten soldiers and poets. In the few vacant lots where history had gnawed out the root of the old civilization, towers of glass and onyx loomed like spears hurled down from another planet, warning the natives.

Winter was passing for her, had passed almost, in a damp miasma of dog droppings and soiled newspapers backed against the deserted circular fountains. All the unrestored cast-metal statues sported a chartrouse green. Kate wondered frequently, repetitiously, whether their casters had been aware of the corrosive tendency of brass, whether they had planned for centuries of empire-supported polishers to keep the brass shiny. Perhaps they hadn't minded the onset of this druggy green, sign of seniority.

Seagulls circled above the leathery surface of the pond she passed daily. Truck vendors sold sausage sandwiches and fried potatoes with spicy mayonnaise dressings, which Kate bought for a shiny coin and ate with a thin red plastic fork. The first bite burned the roof of her mouth, and the last tasted of the animal grease in

which everything was cooked. She noticed these things. She was falling in love, and it scared her.

The small, pleasant office where Kate worked sat at the bottom of steep granite steps that led from the massive city hall to the theatre district. Kate's job was to appraise antiques for export to the United States. She had arrived here, three years ago, because she was having an affair with the export manager. When he died in a car accident shortly after her arrival, she had stayed on. The firm liked her work—she had a careful eye, and a kind manner with the old ladies whose crystal she rejected—and Personnel managed somehow (she didn't ask) to renew her papers each year. And each year she stayed, though summer passed hesitantly and winter made her think always of the wars this city and others like it had barely survived. Lines for bread, she thought; dung burned for fuel.

She spoke the language passably. Once a week or more she was invited to a dinner party at which others her age—bureaucrats, young lawyers, antique dealers—chatted excitedly around her and she soaked up their energy like a sponge going red with the excellent wine. Her thoughts felt simple to her on these occasions. The vocabulary at hand contained none of the shadings she was used to. In the empty, half-sober moments after she'd returned to her flat, she wondered sometimes if her party companions thought simple thoughts—but that was her American prejudice at work, filtering out whatever subtleties it couldn't immediately process. She went to bed with the vapor of mystery. What did anyone think, really, and was language just a bowl to contain it? On rare occasions she missed the manager who had brought her here, the one who had died on a hairpin turn in the neighboring mountains. But she had scarcely known him, when you got down to it, and the years had smudged him into the gray of the city, until when she dreamed of him he was speaking in this other language, the one that made thoughts simple.

She fell in love not at a party but at a sidewalk stand, the one nearest her office, where she waited in spring mist for a grated lamb sandwich and a can of beer to make her lunch. The man in front of her spent his waiting time fooling with a fancy pocket calculator. He seemed nervous, and she thought maybe she would help him, when his turn came, with the strange names of the sandwiches. The day was windy, she would remember later, it had been windy for more than a week, and her hair was going tangled and coarse at the ends.

She had learned to tie a scarf around her neck like the local people, but she would not wear their loose-knitted hats.

He ordered a large sausage sandwich with Andalusian sauce, a beer and a package of pork rinds. He placed the order fluently, in the slack dialect of men who depend on such food, and he adjusted what she noticed were large hands to carry it all to one of two splintery green benches in the small park by the food stand. By the time she made her way to the other bench, he had spread his lunch on either side and was eating calmly in the wind with a thick text spread over his knees. He wouldn't spill a drop of grease on his neat pants and sweater, she thought, and she practiced the phrase in the local language a few times before she realized, suddenly, that she had said it, aloud and in English: "I bet you won't spill a drop of grease on those pants."

"I've spilled plenty in the past," he said. He didn't look up. He spoke like someone from the Midwest. "One learns."

"Your book won't flop closed, either. Mine always flops closed, if I don't have a hand free."

"You have to choose heavy pages." With a long pinky, he turned the page, then looked over. His lips were full and almost feminine, shining a bit with the oil from the sandwich. "There are restaurants," he said.

"I'm inside all morning."

"You work here, then?"

She nodded in the vague direction of her office. He didn't even glance, but smiled cunningly, as if he'd already mapped the route. "This isn't a city, you know," he said, crunching a pork rind. "It's a work zone."

"Will they ever finish, do you think?"

He shrugged. "They restored the Coliseum. And those were

Italians."

"They have better weather."

He said something she didn't understand.

"What?"

"Polish saying. 'Plant in the rain and the roots grab hold.'" He pushed the last of the sandwich into his mouth and washed it down. Closing the book, he stood and wiped his hands on his paper napkin. (Where had he gotten that napkin? They never gave her one, at the stand.) Then he reached into his inside jacket pocket and pulled out a card. *J. Roscher*, it read. *Simultaneous translation & interpretation. French, German, Dutch, Italian, Polish, English.*

He took her first to an Indian place several blocks into a questionable district of the city, where they ate papadurns and a lightly saffroned, greaseless lamb. (She initiated the phone call, though not the rendezvous. She invented the pretext of needing to translate a Dutch inscription on a silver bowl.) Next they tried a very expensive, tiny Japanese pocket where he selected varieties of raw fish that she never knew swam in the sea. At the third restaurant, his neighborhood favorite, a round fussy woman prepared them both, chicken waterzoi and plied them with a bright green aperitif while they waited. Kate got up her courage to ask about his scar, a neat slice in the shape of an acute accent running from his left earlobe toward his prominent Adam's apple. She had not noticed it the first day, at the lunch stand, but as he swallowed and spoke, she found her eyes straying there.

"A memory," he said, tasting the fine though slightly sweet wine he'd ordered, "of my roustabout days."

She loved the way he used slang, not inappropriately, but with the imagination of someone who has discovered rather than inherited. The picture of Joaquim—that was his given name, not quite compatible with the "J." of the card—with his pursed lips and fair forehead, as a roustabout, made her laugh.

"I almost died," he said.

"I'm sorry?"

"That's quite all right," he said. "Anyhow, I lived."

Smiling at him over the narrow rim of the aperitif glass, Kate realized she had begun dreaming about Joaquim's face and body, the slouch in his posture, the sleepy weight of his eyelids, the hair he combed straight back from his high forehead, like a symphony conductor. That night he came back with her to the ground-floor apartment she had been renting since the export manager's death, and they made love with a competence that, at least on Kate's part, just managed to hint at her wild rush of feeling. While they were at it, Joaquim murmured to her in German, French, Italian, Polish, and one other language that could have been Danish or Norwegian. Later he lay with a hand cupping her breast and told her a funny story in English about the first American girl he had known, who had exclaimed over the shape and behavior of his uncircumcised penis.

"How," Kate asked sleepily, suffused with love, "do you hold all those languages in your head?"

"How does a mother hold all her babies in her arms?" he asked her back. "How does a criminal hold all his crimes in his conscious? How does a composer hear all the instruments of the symphony?"

Kate did not answer; she was not supposed to answer. She was supposed to lie with her head on Joaquim's bony chest and smell the wine-sweetened exhalations of his pores. Only as she drifted off to sleep did she catch his error. *Conscience*, he had meant, not *conscious*. The kind of mistake that even a native might make.

What scared her were the silences. What she knew about Joaquim might have explained them. He had been born, he told her, in Holland, but had moved to Paris with his mother, who took up with a Polish diplomat. They lived five years in Chicago. "And the rest, as they say, is history," he said, twirling a lock of Kate's trimmed hair.

Silence was the space between one language and another, the place of memory. But that explanation, for Kate, didn't suffice. She wanted to know what he was really. She watched him sleep and wondered what language he dreamed in. When he spent the evening at her flat, he brought classical CDs and sat listening to Albinoni or Messiaen. She could cook or watch the news or sit with him, holding his hand, but he would not hold up his end of a conversation. He wasn't angry, he told her, or bored. He was just emptying his reservoir of words, drifting back to the original *da*.

Out in the world, he was full of words. The international courts kept him on retainer; he also translated sometimes for visiting theatre troupes and TV crews. In his spare time, he was translating World War I accounts from Italian into German. Thus the heavy tome, which he had been reading in the wind, and the calculator, which was a translation device.

As the days warmed they went biking together, through the beech forest just outside the city that had once been the king's domain. The paths criss-crossed, dead-ended, climbed around hills and dove into gullies. The sun, out at last, glistened through the tall beeches, their leaves lime green. Once they took lunch at a former cloister in the midst of the woods, where people much taller and more beautiful than Kate's co-workers sat with their large sleek dogs at outdoor wooden tables drinking Abbey beer and rosé wine and eating open-faced peasant sandwiches of white cheese sprinkled with radishes and onions. Ten feet from them, new families of ducks and coots, hopping for tosses of bread, cruised the edge of the pond once

used by the monks as a fishery. The baby coots had bright red beaks and pushed their heads along, pigeon-like, imitating their stern bourgeois parents.

"Comme tu es belle dans cette lumière," said Joaquim. "Wie schön du bist in dieser licht. È bella alla luce—"

"I get it," Kate interrupted. He looked hurt. "I'm sorry," she said.

"No problem. It is hard to switch gears. You look lovely, in this light."

"Thank you, darling," she said.

He turned his attention to the pond and took a long draught of his beer. "Watch the egret," he said. He gestured with his beer glass toward a thin gray bird stepping daintily around the brick wall edging the pond. Leaning his long neck over the side, the bird came up with a small fish, which he wriggled down. Suddenly there was a movement high in a willow tree. "Ah," said Joaquim.

"What? What's in the tree?"

"The fellow who got here first," said Joaquim.

A larger egret swooped out of the thick branches. He made a pass at the fishing bird, then landed on the far side of the pond.

"Maybe they're male and female," Kate said, watching the near egret jump away to take refuge in the overhang of another willow. "This could be a mating ritual."

"Dream on, Polyanna," said Joaquim, and she tucked that one, *Polyanna*, away to ask him about later. The larger egret stalked the pond. The other patrons were watching now. One woman had pulled a video recorder out of her large bag. Soon, as the newcomer wandered out of his haven, the big egret launched a stealth attack, flying low and straight over the surface of the pond. At the last moment, while Kate held her breath, the newcomer took to the air. The birds climbed, glided, flapped, turned. Faster on account of his wider wing span, the pond's defender kept coming up on the intruder from below, his beak out, ready to peck belly or wing. They flew through the fountain in the middle of the pond, over the willows; they pivoted as sharply as they could. The woman with the video camera kept squeaking, but Kate could not make a sound.

Finally, the bigger egret chased away the newcomer—first to a willow tree that shook with its weight, and finally away from the pond, out over the vast beech woods. Then the winner sloped down to a rock, gave a little shiver, and posed, immobile, on one leg. "Now," said Kate, "he'll be all alone."

"That's how he likes it," said Joaquim.

"I was rooting for the littler guy," she said. She took a bite of her white-cheese sandwich. She could taste the rye field in the bread, the milked cow in the cheese.

"It is all about territory," he said. And then in an undertone, not meant for her to hear, *Es gibt immer am heimat. Tu chodzi o ziemi.*

That night they ate oysters at his apartment, a tidy, elegant top story of a family house. His Italian war volumes lay scattered about the sitting room. CDs of chamber and orchestral music—no voices—lined the shelves. From the open window to the balcony came the throaty lyric of the local nightingale. Down below lay the tiny, carefully partitioned gardens that ran behind the tall houses, the length of the block. Kate pictured lifting the brick walls that separated them, the way one might lift the cardboard honeycomb of a wine case, and letting the gardens run together in a lush city forest.

Later she lay awake, watching his face move through sleep. She herself had dreams in which she spoke her second language perfectly, without accent, and her thoughts in these dreams were as thick and beveled as crystal, though they vanished when she woke.

She went to watch him work. He had promised her it would be dull. He sat in a glassed booth at one of the courts, where one fishing industry took another's dumping practices before the bar, or one country's pharmaceuticals objected to another's patenting practices. This litigation had to do with exporting antiques from the European Union, an issue in which she might take a passing interest. "Passing!" exclaimed Kate.

On the first truly hot day of summer, she took an afternoon off work. Dressed in an uncharacteristic sleeveless dress of bleeding blue madras, she rode the subway to the end of the line and then stood by the city's outer wasteland of industry to catch a rumbling bus to the glassed-in complex that held the courts. On the bus, which was crowded, several men glanced approvingly at her. Kate had grown prettier since falling in love. Her export manager had liked her for her youth and competence and possibly for her hair, which in good weather hung in thick chestnut curls just over her shoulders. But she had been shy back then, and since his death she had taken to hunching her shoulders in what seemed the constant chill of the city. She no longer looked American—she never walked from the hip as the American tourists did, nor did she raise her voice above the other commuters on the subway. But on this ride out to the halls of

European justice, she stood tall in her foreignness. She was like the new buildings, designed by architects from the Orient or California, and not like the crabbled and crutched representatives of a vanished empire.

Joaquin had left her name at the desk. The stern woman who sat there took her passport and gave her a name tag. Huge modern paintings hung on the high blond walls of the corridors; it felt more like an auction house than a courthouse. She made her way up to the fourth floor and down a long gallery to a set of heavy wooden doors, where a coterie of dark-suited men stood conferring. A pair of them glanced at her. She smiled apologetically and slipped inside the chamber.

There was a fair crowd of spectators. A few sat straight and listened to the proceedings—three judges at the front and lawyers with documents and arguments in what Joaquin had told Kate would be Polish. The others sat hunched on the long benches with headphones plastered to their ears. The nationality bringing the case, Joaquin had explained, was allowed to argue in its own language—and sure enough, two of the three judges had their own earphones, like odd wigs. The respondents could argue in that same language or in either French or English. All arguments and opinions would be translated into nine languages, fourteen if the matter involved the constitution of the European Union.

All these things Kate understood. But as she slipped into one of the pews toward the back of the room, the silence and strangeness felt more alien to her than anything she had encountered in her three years of living abroad. The lawyer arguing gestured mightily with his hands but spoke in a hurried, muted Polish directed at the one judge without earphones. That judge would nod, or lift an eyebrow, and perhaps five seconds later, as the translation came through the other judges' earphones, they would mimic her gesture.

Before she reached for the black headpiece dangling from a hook at her knees, Kate scanned the elevated glass booths at the front of the courtroom. There, in the third one, sat Joaquin. He, too, was gesturing, with even more alacrity and purpose than the lawyer. He kept putting the tips of his fingers to his forehead and then letting them spring away, as if he had yanked a difficult thought from his brain. *Deutsch*, a white label on his booth read. Kate clapped the earphones on her head and turned the dial to German. There was Joaquin's voice, no mistaking it: the rising vowels, the almost undetectable lisp, the emphatic *schwas*. But the intensity of his voice

was something altogether different. She was used to light irony, to coy allusions and elliptical phrasing. Even without understanding the German, she knew from the voice coming through the headpiece and the body movements of the man in the glass booth that he meant every word he said.

Kate turned the dial to the next language, Italian, and scanned the booths. She matched a woman to the voice, a plump olive-skinned matron with her hair in a bun. Like Joaquin, she gestured, but her words were less fluid, more full of stops and rushed starts. Kate turned again, to English. *Following Section Three of the 1973 accords, the male voice said, these transactions are in keeping with the—with the fundamental principle of estate sales and free distribution. Museum purchasing is entailed by Section Five Part Three. There we have granted the plaintiff his remedy. Here in specific we are talking about Louis Quinze jaundiced intaglio.*

Not jaundiced, Kate thought. He must have meant *varnished*. The translator—a balding fellow in the booth nearest her, who kept adjusting his round glasses—sounded British, but then Joaquin could sound American. Perhaps the two words, *jaundiced* and *varnished*, sounded the same in the original; or perhaps the lawyer had used another word that meant yellowing, and the translator had come up with *jaundiced* before he understood the meaning of the whole sentence, and now it was too late. The words tumbled on. "The worst," Joaquin had told her, "is German into French or English. You have to hold the entire sentence in your head until the speaker finally lands on that darn verb at the end, and then you recite it all in order while the speaker goes right on to the next subject."

"That darn verb," Kate had repeated, and looped her arms around him.

The arguments dragged on. Spectators came and went. It seemed the Poles bringing the case believed that lost Jewish treasures, just now uncovered, were being plundered without regard for the butchered culture they represented. But the arguments waxed more technical. In the glass booths, after a half-hour, new translators entered from the back, clapped headphones over their ears, adjusted their microphones, and between one breath and the next, relieved the one who had been at the task. When Joaquin left his post, Kate rose and exited to the wide, hushed corridor.

Joining her, Joaquin pressed a hand into the small of Kate's back and steered her to the elevator and down into a small courtyard ringed by the building. He looked ravaged; as soon as they were

outside he pulled out his pack and lit a cigarette. They sat at a small iron table. The sun had gone behind a scrim of clouds, and Kate shivered in her blue dress. Joaquim leaned over, smoke in his breath, and kissed her.

"So what do you think?" she said.

"About what?"

"This case. It seems to me they've got a point. No one's brought found estates to us yet, but I'd think we'd pause before shipping anything abroad. There ought to be laws."

Joaquim looked at her intently. "Katerina," he said, "I don't know anything about the case."

"Well, neither do I, really, but just from what you were saying—"

"I don't even know what I was saying." He drew on the cigarette and stared at a corner of the courtyard. "It's just words," he said. "As soon as I hear them I must remold them. I get them to make sense in German—"

"Or French. Or English."

"Yes, or Italian, and then they leave me while the other words are pouring in. My dear, I know less about 'the case' than the mouse who nibbles in the corner."

"Oh," said Kate. Then there seemed nothing more to say. Joaquim smoked. Just when she thought he was annoyed with her, he took her hand. His warm fingers stroked her palm. Tentatively, she reached out and touched his scar, which was no more than a rough indentation on his neck.

After ten minutes, he glanced at his watch. "Time for me to go back in," he said.

"And make with the words again," said Kate.

"Yah. And make the words."

She began bringing Joaquim with her to the little soirées her friends had. He conversed readily, if not at length. Her friends, for their part, accepted Joaquim as one of their own. It was only as they were walking home through the long, late twilight, that Kate felt her lover shedding the conviviality of the evening like a coat that had grown too heavy for the warm air.

"If you don't like them," she said at last, "we don't have to go, next time."

But they did go. And Kate would introduce herself to a new arrival: "Yes, I'm American. And Joaquim is—well, I guess Joaquim

is everything. Or nothing." The new person would laugh indulgently, and Joaquim would smile patiently, and Kate would glow.

"You should see where he works," she found herself explaining one night. "It's this complete Tower of Babel, only disassembled. I mean, there they are discussing stolen Jewish property from the Holocaust, for God's sake, and Joaquim here is politely translating from Polish into German."

"What would you rather?" asked the person she was speaking to. "That he go to war over the past?"

"No! Only there should be substance, don't you think? Not just strings of legal terms."

They turned to Joaquim, who smiled thinly. "Much," he said, "gets lost in translation."

To her own surprise, Kate was becoming at once comfortable and cruel. She pushed for a raise at work and began to dress like the people they had seen in the Abbey garden. She corrected Joaquim when he used *lay for lie* or claimed to be hungrier. She walked taller and laughed louder.

In short—Kate told herself frequently—she had changed.

When she broke off with him, she told her friends at one of the soirées that she could be with someone who thought in another language, but not with someone who thought in no language at all. She was speaking more fluently, by then. The words she had adopted had become plastic. She could say one thing and mean another, or mean two things at once. She cracked jokes, told stories about her childhood. For a short time she dated the retail manager at a rival export house, a square-jawed soccer player who had grown up in the city.

Through the cool, damp summer, she looked occasionally for Joaquim at the sidewalk lunch stand. He had not seemed hurt by the breakup. He had regarded her thoughtfully and kissed her tenderly and said almost nothing. She dreamed several times of his scar, of how he had gotten it—a bar fight in Chicago, a near escape as a spy in Poland. And then she thought of him little, until the scaffolding came down on the little theatre near her office.

All through one lunch she watched the workers bringing down the tiers of planks and ropes and metal tubing, their teamwork a delicate dance of climbings and lowerings. The day was windy, like

the day she had met Joaquim, only it was autumn blowing in now. The workers had to step carefully, once the guard rails came down.

Underneath the scaffolding, the theatre had been scraped and whitewashed, its cornices replaced, its windows refitted. Over the door, a polished brass Cupid aimed its bow at passersby, who turned to point. Kate wanted to tell someone in her office how the theatre looked like a newborn baby, fragile and robust at once. But she knew them, the locals and the Americans. Like most antique dealers, they preferred the new. The theatre with the scaffolding and the theatre restored looked more or less the same to them.

Next day, leaving work early, Kate took the bus back out to the industrial park and the international courts. The woman at the desk would not give her a pass—but yes, she said, Mr. Roscher still worked here. Kate left a message and then waited in the lobby, under a large abstract oil that made her think of Pick-up Sticks.

When she saw him, he was deep in conversation with the carefully coiffed translator she had seen in the Italian booth. They were speaking Italian, obviously—Joaquim used his hands in the Italian way, folding the air in front of him like pasta dough. When they reached Kate they kissed cheeks and called "Ciao," and Joaquim sat next to Kate on the cushioned bench.

"So," he said, his English still slightly inflected by Italian, "you have flown back to my territory."

"Have I?" Kate looked around. The courts were letting out. Soon all the languages of the Old World would pass by her bench.

"Then you must chase me away," she said.

"But you are female."

"More important," she said, "I am not an egret."

"What are you, then?"

"I think," she said, shifting her hips to turn toward him on the bench, "I am a crane."

"Then I am a crane."

"Or perhaps I'm a heron."

"My legs are long and blue."

"I think, actually," said Kate, "my mother was a swallow."

"We are good luck for newlyweds, we *hirondelles*."

"But I must know what sort of bird you are really, before I dare enter your territory."

Joaquim's face, this close up, was a landscape of pores and laugh lines, his beard a newly planted field. On his breath Kate smelled cheap mints, and under them beer and sausage.

"The funny thing about birds," Joaquim was saying, in Kate's adopted tongue, "is that the newest species are often confused with those that are almost extinct. They remain difficult to classify."

"What song do you sing?"

"Our species," he said, "utters a lyric so rare and strange that ordinary ears cannot hear it at all."

"So they mistake it for silence?"

Joaquim nodded, the scar on his neck contracting. Kate closed her eyes. Her ears opened. She strained at first, then simply waited, to hear.