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The Ebbing Language

i

The people of the coastal countries of the North Sea used to speak a West Germanic language, or groups of dialects of West Germanic, somewhat mutually intelligible. When the Romans arrived, unearthing the bedrock and establishing cities, they founded one on the Waal river called Noviomagus, a Celtically derived term for a new market or field, which became Nijmegen. We biked there in the summers, past orchards, across the Rijn by ferry and the Waal by bridge. That trip was sore thighs and the exhilaration of moving through great open spaces, the city's contours slowly starting to loom.

Downtown, I loved the smell inside the oldest churches—an ashen, patchouli damp. We stopped for gelato, which was called *italiaans ijs*. Dutch was historically like that; the culturally unknown was given its own descriptive, compound Germanic term. The word raccoon, for example—which is listed in Webster's Collegiate Dictionary as arising from "[ärähkun (in some Algonquian language of Virginia)]"—is *wasbeer* in Dutch, meaning washing-bear, for its habit of moistening its food.

> submarine: *under-sea-er*
> hospital: *sick-house* hospitality: *guest-freedom* thyroid: *shield-gland* dictionary: *words-book*
> ruminant: *re-chewer* nitrogen: *suffocating-substance* oxygen: *sour-substance* concussion: *brain-shaking* binoculars: *far-lookers*
> constellation: *star-image* anemia: *blood-poverty* peninsula: *almost-* [archaic form] *island* protein: *egg-white* marsupial: *pouch-animal* liquid: *flowing-substance*

The major linguistic influences on West Germanic included Old Norse, the Latin that the Romans—also people of many dialects—used as their administrative and liturgical language, and the French of later rulers. Germanic scripts had been runic, and were reserved for spiritual ceremony, but the Romans provided a mundane alphabet of the now-familiar twenty-six letters.
After their rule, the languages parted into separate predecessors of modern English, Dutch, and German.

To speak and write in English from a Dutch background is therefore to have a temporally translucent perspective. Underneath the stream of contemporary English, older words, like river stones, remain in blurred view.

Running water is a living force that refracts, displaces, distorts; sometimes, a sort of sideways drift has taken place among the words, so that the known Dutch term has an English counterpart that no longer means the same thing.

A *penseel*, for instance, is not a pencil, but a paint brush, the kind Vermeer would have used—different from a *kwast*, with which one would paint a house.

A *spreeuw* is not a sparrow, but a starling.

A *tuin* is not a town but a garden.

Lint is ribbon.

A *brief* is a letter, the kind that comes in the mail.

A *stam* is not a stem but a tree trunk.

Fabriek is not fabric but a factory.

A *vest* is a cardigan.

A *dier* is an animal.

Afval is not offal, but garbage.

A *blad* is not a blade but a leaf, and also a sheet when referring to paper. To *huil* is not to howl but to cry.

A *geest* is not so much a ghost as a spirit, and is also used for genie, which English has adapted instead from the Arabic *jinni.*

A *fles* is a bottle, which probably has something to do with a flask. A *rozenbottel* is a rose hip.

And in a very strange confluence, an *eekhoorn*, which is pronounced almost exactly like acorn, is a squirrel.

Boom, a tree. *Tree*, a step of the stairs. Stairs, a *trap.* Trap, a *val*, which also means fall, perhaps because of those archaic traps, holes dug on forest trails and covered with sticks and leaves. The season of fall, *herfst.*

When I write poems, I am still drawn to the Germanic inside the English. There is the familiarity of resemblance—the electric current that runs between my first namings, uttered as a toddler, to the present motions of a pen on the page; those are the words that retain an immediacy and emotional weight. My poetic vocabulary, then, has something to do with allowing myself to feel the language, or performing Kafka's imperative on myself: that the words be an axe to the frozen sea within me.

I am not alone in favoring the Germanic; in a British study, the one hundred English words in most common daily use were all Germanically rooted. English words of Latinate origin remain broadly associated with scholarship, sophistication, and abstraction, whereas Germanic words often register as concrete, blunt, and trusted. My inclination represents an abridged version of a vast, slow process.

In a sense, my poems take the form of spectral piano scores. The Dutch is the left hand, the bass clef, but I am the only one who hears it clearly. English is the melodic right hand, the one that others hear. When my left and right hands are

in tune, I am speaking from something deep and elemental, from my ground, from generations long before me.

When the right hand departs and does its own thing, dissonant or incongruous, then I am improvising. I allow myself to drown the left hand out. Then the phrases get abstract, or playful, or theatrical; on some lucky days, the feeling is that great, unanchored freedom of leaving the ground.

When I write a Dutch poem, that is also my left hand writing, but in a different sense; I feel scrawling and uncoordinated. What has happened would have been unimaginable to me as a child; my Dutch is no longer sure of itself. I write in searching, disoriented trajectories, not in control of the medium. The resulting poems appear primal and strange to me, but the truth is that I don't possess an astute, contemporary idea of how they read. Handwritten and shadowy, taped to my wall, they speak to me as possible omens of English work.

ii

I once received a small wooden box that seemed flawlessly made. Holding it now makes me think of the poems of Ida Gerhardt, the Dutch poet and classicist whose life spanned most of the twentieth century. The dovetailed corners, flush edges, the little click of the closing lid—they are the material equivalent of her verses, assembled with the same proficiency that she brought to meter, diction, pacing, and rhyme.

But the box alone does not convey the compressed power of her work— not the way that I use it, for stones, and small notes from friends. If it could hold a fragment of turbulent weather instead, a torrent of rain or a gale, that would be a Gerhardt poem. Her craft resonates with her own religious upbringing; the forms are Calvinism's stern restraint, a spiritual framework tight as a quatrain, through which great forces and concepts pass.

Although she lived for years in voluntary exile, Gerhardt's writing was so *Nederlands*, so utterly intimate with the Dutch language and landscape, that I find it resistant to translation. She left almost no room between structure and subject. *After the dark-bronze striking of the hour* is my rendition of what she wrote of a church tower's bell. In another poem, she repeats the phrase *Wij geven de waterstand*—the radio's standard report of the water levels in her region. The Dutch monument to her poetry is in the ideal spirit: two plaques on the edge of the Merwede river inscribed with her poem "Text on a River Beacon" and embedded in the ground beside an actual, operating beacon. Out past the words, the view is of river and sky—"*een lucht van geweld*," she once wrote of an impending storm over her town: "a sky of violence."

Much of her writing had ominous undertones, but she also wrote a poem that is still widely invoked in the Netherlands for comfort after a death: "De Gestorvene" ("The Deceased," in the singular). The speaker declares that they would travel seven times around the earth, if necessary on their hands and feet, to greet "that one" who would be "standing there laughing and waiting." As an adolescent, I loved its merger of the almost unbearably grand emotion with the practical detail—lines that translate something like,

"clothes in tatters/what would it matter."

De taal slaapt in een syllabe en zoekt
moedergrond om te aarden.

Vijf jaren is oud genoeg.
Toen mijn vader, die ik het vroeg,

mij zeide: 'dat is een grondel',
—en ik zàg hem, zwart in de sloot—

legde hij het woord in mij te vondeling, open
en bloot.

Waarvoor ik moest zorgen, met
mijn leven moest borgen:

totaan mijn dood. —*Biografisch*
I

The language sleeps in a syllable and
seeks motherground to earth.

Five years is old enough. When
my father, whom I asked,

said to me: "that is a gudgeon,"
—and I *saw* it, black in the creek—

he laid that word in me as foundling, open
and exposed.

For which I had to care, with
my life secure,

unto my death.
—*Biographical I*, translated by Sadiqa de Meijer

I've translated Gerhardt's lines as straightforwardly as I could, but the result fails to convey their music. The original work has a rhyme scheme—a_1 a_2 b b c_1 d c_2 d e e d, with the first numbered pair signifying assonance, and the second a semi-rhyme—and nothing has come of the hours that I've tried to reproduce it,

because I can't reconfigure the closing line, on which things hinge; it has to end with death.

In English, death has a rare sound, and the only ordinary word that rhymes with it is breath, which is a rather lovely grouping. But the Dutch *dood* is common, it can rhyme with bread and gutter and boat and Jew and nut and whistled and lead and lap and bump. Death won't rhyme with "creek" or with "naked," the literal meaning of the word I translated as "exposed," which I chose because "open en bloot" form a customary phrase, like "open and exposed."

Furthermore, "Biographical I" doesn't simply have a rhyme scheme; it has a complex sonic landscape, with subtle inner resonances that amplify its meaning. I can't articulate exactly the significance of how the long *aa* sounds in the first two stanzas, in *taal* and *slaapt* and *syllabe,* and *aarden* and *jaren* and *vader* are a foundation for the short *a* sound that occurs only in that third stanza of epiphany, of the father's words and the speaker's seeing, except to say that something in the structure had to declare that instant, to mark it as immediate and formative.

It's true that Gerhardt is mythologizing her own task in this poem—as a designated guardian of the word, the profoundly Dutch word that lives in the water (and is a vowel away from *grendel*, the latch or bolt of a door)—but I admire that, because no one else would have done it for her, this notoriously uncompromising woman, who was reclusive, covertly lesbian, and whose poetry was not widely acclaimed until late in her career; she was from an era where she had to fight even to have her name on the cover of her first collection, as the publisher wanted to list it only on the title page.

And so, when I say that I get this poem, that it speaks to me on a mysteriously foundational level of where my own work originates, I know that I am staking a vicarious claim in that mythology, and I won't apologize. *Five years is old enough*; but unlike Gerhardt, I do not write in the language that I was given then.

This complicates the undertaking.

Sometimes I translate my own poems, in either direction (I was going to write "forward or backward")—a private exercise, the taking apart of a gadget, to see what happens when I reassemble it.

One of my English poems contained the word harbor, which for me conjures a generic image; there are ships, docks, and gulls, but it is nowhere that I can name. When I replaced it with the Dutch word *haven,* the picture was immediately distinct. The *haven* was the river harbor of our former town, a charmless place of silos and concrete piers, where St. Nicholas arrived on a boat each year in November, with his cohort of *Zwarte Pieten*—white people shamefully performing in blackface, speaking an invented Dutch. *Haven* was a bicycle ride on an overcast afternoon, during which my youngest brother sat in a seat on my father's handlebars. I was being somewhat reckless, biking in a slalom between the moorings, near the sheer drop to the water. My brother told me to stop, and then he repeated himself so desperately that I suddenly knew he loved me.

The word was a route to that epiphany, while harbor was not; it is only the mother language that remains resonant with the primacy of experience. That knowledge frightened me. How could I write in a language that would never channel my earlier selves? But I am not in it alone—I'm doing what millions of

others also have to do: making a life in the other tongue, writing and speaking as if to strike new sparks of contact between English and myself.

For this, there may be a method embedded in Gerhardt's own advice to translators; of her translation of Lucretius's "On the Nature of Things," she wrote (translated here by me), "The translator will, against the sonorous Latin verse, constantly experience a certain *patrii sermonis egestas* (inadequacy of the mother tongue). No other option remains for him [sic], except to listen attentively—ever more attentively, more sharply—until that listening puts their own language to work."

English is not my mother tongue, but it has adopted me. If I listen closely enough, against the soundscape of my former language, it will start to work.

That deep listening isn't only to speech—although there, too, it is an essential and subtle process. I used to give private Dutch lessons in Canada and would have students practice the three diphthongs: *ui*, *eu*, and *ij*. Some made them sound entirely alike, and I mistook this for a difficulty in pronunciation. I'd demonstrate, exaggerating the shaping of the mouth. Then one day a young boy said in frustration: "But they sound exactly the same!" I realized then that the trouble was in the tuning of the ear.

Past the words, there is the listening to place. To the sea winds that blow inland, speaking the hollow, quickened syllables of flames, and blow over the dunes where they rustle the sharp-bladed grasses, or sweep in elongate, accordion forms over the den of a fox. To the foghorn of a ship, a sound in which one of Alice Munro's characters hears "a cosmic boredom." To the raucous, whirlwind descent of a flock of gulls.

Gerhardt put it like this (my own translation): "If I in this land/might have a spell *alone*/then the water's edge/would surely write the book for me." Reading that, I daydream of orchestrating a ghostly meeting between her and Mary Oliver (a fellow admirer of Lucretius), who said simply, "Listening to the world. Well, I did that, and I still do it." iii

The month is May.

I have not lived in the Netherlands for twenty-seven years. I haven't visited in a decade.

> *Er is geen tijd. Of is er niets dan tijd?*
>
> There is no time. Or is there nothing but time?

This is the closing line of "Eb," by M. Vasalis. In the city of Leiden, along the Doelensteeg, the poem is painted on the outer wall of a house. I am 5,745 kilometers away from that tribute, near Lake Ontario, and this morning I will read her text out loud as a contribution to an art exhibit. I want to do it because I like the project's premise, and the artists are kind and curious, and seeing the movie *Pina* about the dancer Pina Bausch has left me with a latent wish to try performance. My quiet first objective is to accept the camera's gaze without armor; meaning, in this case, I do not make any effort to evoke feminine beauty.

I wear no jewelry, leave my hair alone, and alter nothing of my face—I don't even look in a mirror to see if I have a remnant of breakfast in my teeth.

It's not an ordinary reading. The poem, in this context, is only a vessel for sound. I will be filmed as I slowly read the words, elongating and repeating the vowels and consonants, shifting their sequence and their pitch, playing with them until they lose their meaning and are simply sonic elements of Dutch.

We're in a large rehearsal room, with a view of the lake and an island. One of the artists stands behind the camera, while the other holds a fuzzy microphone high over my head. As I start to speak, I'm only making sense to myself—or not entirely; I feel the presence of a ghostly audience, millions of strangers with whom I have this lexicon in common. I sense the potential for a lie—if I had the skill to utter a plausible, faux-Dutch, no one would know— but the requested degree of performance is enough for me; I read the poem. I can't seem to undo the words from their meaning:

Dit is de tijd die niet verloren gaat:

This is the time that is not lost:

Ik ben een oceaan van wachten,

I am an ocean of waiting,

My mind, in between the usual distractions and preoccupations, goes to some unexpected places as I repeat the lines.

I'm on the immense beach at IJmuiden, my words obliterated in the wind. After Vasalis died, her family released her unpublished poems in a collection called *De oude kustlijn* (The old coastline). She had chosen the title herself, based on her father pointing at some seabirds flying in a line and explaining that in the altered landscape, they still followed a former coast.

Then I'm in a plastic chair in my first Canadian classroom, watching the teacher write on the board; all the sounds that I was trying to supress or eliminate then, I'm now setting free in this high-ceilinged room, as if for no other reason than to resurrect them.

"Never erase, it doesn't really work," my favorite art teacher said to me once, and fortunately, she was right. So the sound of Dutch persists like a faint carbon shadow in my English. It deepens after I've spoken to my mother, or when I'm breathlessly eager to recount something, or when I speak of anything that happened *over there*. Very rarely, people guess my linguistic origins—once it was a man who had asked for spare change, and then heard me apologize and wish him good luck.

Slowly, I let go of coherence. Even in a setting where no one understands the words, it feels like a vulnerability. Now I am no longer wearing the virtue of articulateness; I could be a bleating sheep. I think of my mother and her Dutch immigrant friends; how even after decades, the vowels in their English remain so *Nederlands*, especially the *a* that occurs, for example, in sad, or lack, or basket.

Sedt, lek, bah-skit. Perhaps they avoid that long, brassy, forceful *a* not because they cannot form it, but because the making of that sound, its open-mouthed resonance, is to a Dutch sensibility an undignified vocalization.

My syllables break down, and the effect is estranging. If this is my mother tongue, then why do I feel so constrained? For the first time, I hear what others have said of Dutch: it sounds harsh, guttural, staccato. I collide with the dead ends of consonants, the brief percussion of *t*, the choking *k*. The vowels, I find, are made to be short and contained—drawing them out, or fluctuating pitch, reveals their lack of fluidity. Standing there, half tongue-tied, the sounds that usually enliven me start to seem arbitrary and broken.

It reminds me of something that would happen occasionally in the years after we immigrated. In crowded places, like at stores or parties, where I was surrounded by people speaking English, the language would abruptly sound foreign again; it would take a few seconds to recover into comprehension.

Consonants are the body; vowels are breath. Breath in Dutch is *adem*, from the Sankskrit word for eternal self, or soul. The older meanings of the English term are steam, exhalation, and odor.

We shape the air using our mouth, tongue, and throat in particular, repetitive ways. It is possible, then, that our languages shape our faces; surely, they define an everyday expressive range, a sort of muscular vocabulary. And if that is a dance, then the Dutch choreography is terse, emphatic, and controlled.

"I loved to dance because I was scared to speak," Bausch said of her German childhood.

I was vocal with familiar people as a child, but I deeply distrusted speaking to strangers. One afternoon, left for a haircut while my mother rushed to get groceries, I peed in the chair; a familiar silence had come over me, and I couldn't bring myself to ask for the bathroom. What silenced me was the disruption that I could cause in the fabric of things. My fluency in Dutch was unexpected, and was often subject to interrogation or praise, neither of which were benign.

Recently, I learned of linguist and logotherapist Manuela Julien, who works with Dutch children from immigrant homes. She teaches the families, who are often implicitly or otherwise discouraged from speaking their first language, that a thorough grounding in the mother tongue actually improves their children's ability to learn Dutch once they start attending school. Julien objects to the stigma inherent in the term *taalachterstand*, or language- behindness, which is used in her field to refer to these children's partially bilingual states.

Between my own experience and the circumstances that Julien's work addresses, admittedly situated three decades apart, what's missing is a place of belonging for Dutch children of color; speaking Dutch too well was an incursion, while not doing so remains a pathology.

The artists' exhibition is called the *Golden USB*; it presents samples from a catalog of everything on earth, for the purpose of interstellar trade. At the gallery, the looped video of my reading is an item in the catalog, called "The Reproduction of Vibratory Patterns, Pitches, and Types of Sounds Found in the Dutch Language." The screen is large, and my face enormous. A woman stands in front of it and watches, then turns to her friend to say, "What the hell!?" I force myself

to watch myself. I look almost devotionally earnest. I'm wearing a black shirt, and the fragments of sounds that my mother ingrained in me.

There is a Dutch word for a sense of inner, private amusement—*binnenpret*—on the way home, I feel this about the manner in which the project takes my childhood transgression to its limits; I am the intergalactic representative of the language that I wasn't supposed to speak or love. In the film, it has been reduced to pieces, momentarily defused.