

# Finding My Voice in a New Language

*A Dutch writer reinvents herself in America*

The huge elm lay on its side in front of my house like a capsized ship. It was still alive, still breathing, saturated with enough water to last maybe a few days. But after Hurricane Sandy, there was a hole in the sky where it once stood.

I reached my hand into a gash in the trunk, as if to comfort the tree. I understood about being uprooted. Just a few months earlier, I'd moved from my native Holland to America. I'd looked forward to this new life and its possibilities. I'd reveled in the notion that my children would be bilingual, at home in two cultures.

I wasn't prepared for what the loss of my native language would mean for me.

"What do you do?" new acquaintances asked.

"I'm a writer."

"Ah, a writer. How interesting. Can we read you?"

"Well, no, you see, I write in Dutch."

I found myself staring at my novels stacked in the redwood bookcase I shipped across the ocean. A museum of my past. I was the total of all those words. But who was I now if my words did not exist here? It seemed that I'd left my real self in a small country far away.

I wasn't totally without my bearings: I'd studied English since elementary school. Yet in conversations now, I often elicited a certain polite-puzzled look.



I knew that look. I once had an aunt with a tendency to say something other than what she meant. Seeing my expression, she'd ask: "I used the wrong word, didn't I?"

I'd nod: "You asked if I gave water to the fish."

"Well, you must agree, they have a lot of water already," she laughed, making a joke out of what I later learned was called aphasia.

Now, at times when I spoke, I felt as if I'd had a stroke. I did everything I could to avoid Dungleish, the unintentional but often funny mistakes Dutch make in English. I had to stop myself from saying nonsensical things such as "let's fall with the door in house," which is what we say in Dutch when we mean "skip the nonessentials."

Trying to write in English was

even worse. It required more than knowing the correct words to name things, the right prepositions, the difference between "come" and "get." Writing is about sending a message, with all the nuance I intend. I wondered about tone and voice, the landscape upon which readers and I needed to find common ground. I struggled to express myself in a way that would establish a shared intimacy with my readers. I felt vulnerable, and worried about being misunderstood.

I wrestled with a story about an old man in Amsterdam who invited me into his home after I found his keys. I tried a literal translation of a line I would write in Dutch: "You are sweet," he says, and it's not an attempt to seduce me." Everything was wrong about that English version. "Sweet" was not what he meant. I then tried "adorable," but that didn't capture his words either. And "seduce" was too strong — it was different from what I experienced, a dark and subtle effort to draw me into his world. Eventually I decided on a metaphor for the ambiguous emotions his invitation inspired in me: the flickering blue light on the canal at dusk. But that, too, was difficult. The Dutch have several words to describe their long light at the end of the day; Americans use only two: dusk or twilight.

Even Vladimir Nabokov, who so

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seamlessly moved from Russian to English, complained that his English, “this second instrument I have always had, is however a stiffish, artificial thing, which may be all right for describing a sunset or an insect, but which cannot conceal poverty of syntax and paucity of domestic diction when I need the shortest road between warehouse and shop.” Would I be able to reinvent myself with this artificial instrument?

Long before I became a writer, I embraced words as central to my identity and my understanding of the world. One morning, when I was about five, I was sitting in my pajamas at our kitchen table in Holland when my father walked in, looking like Don Draper before he drank too much, freshly shaven, reeking of aftershave. “Good morning,” he mumbled to neither me nor my mother, who was stirring oatmeal in her pink morning coat.

“Daddy,” I said, beginning a story I wanted to tell him. But he didn’t hear or see me. He flipped open the newspaper and dissolved into a world walled off from me by letters, words and sentences — a separate world that made him smile, frown and sometimes laugh out loud.

After he left for work, I told my mother that I needed to learn to read, right away.

“Well, then,” said my mother. “Let’s begin.” She gave me a pencil, put the newspaper in front of me,

and told me to underline a word — “a group of letters between two white spaces.” Then she had me write that word on a blackboard.

Soon I could catalogue the things around me — real and imaginary — and give them meaning. I invented new words I carefully recorded in a little lined notebook. Under F there was “frimpel,” the soft but distinct sound of my cat’s nails on the carpet. A “fruppet” was an exquisite imaginary porcelain teacup that my friends and I could drink from at the same time. Then there were “frollos,” purple powdered sugar cakes only to be eaten by 10-year-old girls. And in tiny letters in a corner of a page I scribbled “faal,” a hard plastic doll that did not want to be touched.

Decades later, I found myself at my own kitchen table in the middle of a sleepless night. For the previous year, my infant daughter had been sick with the deadliest form of leukemia. We were told there was no treatment, that she had no chance.

Yet she recovered. I felt like I’d opened the window after a long winter and was squinting into the sun. My child would have a future. We would have a future together. But what that future would look like wasn’t obvious. I’d quit my job as a therapist when my daughter was diagnosed, and I couldn’t see resuming that old life, as if nothing had happened.

Lost in my thoughts, I began to doodle on a piece of paper. I wrote my daughter’s name. Then my name. Again and again. Something happened between me and the pen and the paper. I could not stop writing. I wrote about my child first, then about myself as a child. Then I started creating other stories. A novel. Another novel. I had a voice, an identity. I was a writer.

Or at least I had been then. And now, in America?

A poet once told me that she saw the actual writing of words as an afterthought. More important, she said, was the time spent staring out the window, seeing things as they are, not even knowing their names.

Each day since moving to America, I had stared out the window at that elm — or was it an ash? Did it matter?

Truly seeing is forgetting the name of the thing one sees. Here was a whole new world for me to discover and name, once again.

Every once in a while, one is offered a chance to understand oneself in a different way. This was one of them. As I reached into the wounded heart of my tree, I knew that I could re-root myself in this culture and the words would follow.

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