

Breaking Down the Glass Walls of Language

— ARIEL DORFMAN —

THAT'S WHAT I'D LOVE to be able to remember: the moment when it happened. Or at least remember the days, the weeks, the way in which English crept into my brain, flooded into my life, hit me like lightning.

It's a memory denied to me, accessible only through others, *através de otros*, through the stories my parents told me later, when I was puzzling about my conversion from Spanish to English, when I searched out *los orígenes* of my love affair with the language of Shakespeare and Ogden Nash, Superman, and, well, Richard Nixon as well.

This I do know: it was February 1945 and snow was falling in New York when I arrived there, a toddler of two and a half, whose skin must still have recollected the sweltering Buenos Aires where he had been born, the Buenos Aires of Borges and Perón that he had only just left behind. Maybe that child was lodging a protest against the first of his many exiles or maybe the reasons were less metaphorical and a tad more medical. Whatever the explanation, the cold and undeniable fact is that I came down with pneumonia.

Recently, as part of a film based on my life, I managed to track down the hospital where I spent those three decisive weeks when I learned English. It was Mount Sinai, way up on Fifth Avenue in front of Central Park, and the woman who had been the head nurse for pediatrics in the 1940s was still volunteering there, though

now well into her 90s. She showed me photos of the children's ward, where young patients with my sort of contagious disease were secluded inside large glass-partitioned cubicles, isolated from any outside visitors, only in contact with doctors and nurses and other sick boys and girls. Today they would not segregate that infant. And today he would undoubtedly be surrounded by an array of Hispanics, Latinos, Nuyoricans, whatever you want to call them, today *mi idioma materno*, my mother tongue, Spanish, would be floating around everywhere. Indeed, today Anglo-speaking kids might emerge from that experience with a smattering of *castellano*, knowing how to say *hola* and *gracias* and *quiero más*. But back then it was English and only English wherever I turned, an immersion course *a la fuerza*. *Mi papá y mamá* were allowed to visit only once a week and then, always, they have told me, from the distance, from behind that glass wall watching their son cry and reach out for them. And then what did I do, what else could I do after they had mouthed an adios I was unable to hear, what alternative did I have but to survive, adapt and survive—motivated by the same needs that pressed humans to chance on language as they roamed the plains of Africa so many hundreds of thousands of years ago.

And that's how I learned this language in which I now write these words. Out of sheer necessity. I learned the vocabulary of sustenance and sleep and love from those who healed my lungs and fed me. From those who coddled me at night and played with me in the morning. Almost as if I had to give birth to myself in that hospital ward, midwife myself into a second language.

I must have felt betrayed by my Spanish syllables, by Cervantes and Darío and Sor Juana, even if I had no idea at that point that such future mentors of my literary tongue were awaiting me. And I must have felt abandoned by my parents, *pobrecitos*, my parents who loved me *más que el sol*. Oh, I must have planned my petty revenge.

Because I am told that when I left that hospital after that three-week stay, not only was my pneumonia gone. So was my Spanish.

I refused to answer when spoken to in the language into whose waters I had gently been cast, been swimming through, since my inaugural breaths on this Earth. "I don't understand," my mother says that I said, perhaps the first words she ever heard me pronounce in the language in which she would have to speak to me during the next ten years. Except that she never lost her accent, and I never had one, still can "pass" for American.

My forced conversion—like so many captives throughout history—is, of course, only part of the story. English did not come exclusively as a conqueror, merely as a threat. It was awaiting me in the years ahead and in the streets outside. It was the funnies on Sunday in the *New York Herald Tribune*. It was the legend of Babe Ruth's magical sixty home runs. It was the "Teddy Bears' Picnic." It was kindergarten's tales of wonder and two-plus-two-equals-four. And someday it would be William Faulkner and John Wayne, William Blake and Joan Baez, *The Sands of Iwo Jima* and "The Times They Are a-Changin'," and, of course, Ella Fitzgerald.

Later I would return to Latin America, fall in love once more with *el idioma de mi nacimiento*, even come, in a moment of extreme folly, to repudiate English because of its connections to the U.S. Empire that was subjugating *la América de Martí*—only to find myself buffeted by yet another exile, *décadas más tarde*, find myself once again back in the States, back in the land which first gave me the gift of its language.

Except that now, in this land which I have made my own, I am not alone in the quest to make that tongue my own. That initial experience of mine is being repeated and resurrected by millions of other Latino voices, all of us part of a gigantic migratory wave which will transform the language that rushed to my rescue during those dark days of 1945, all of us simply trying to survive. Here I am, more than half a century later, still seduced by those words I first heard, even if I can't remember them, the day I stumbled into that hospital ward and realized that my mouth and tongue and teeth would save me, could save me, from starvation and loneliness.

ARIEL DORFMAN (Buenos Aires, Argentina; 1942-) is the author of numerous works, including *Heading South*, *Looking North: A Bilingual Journey*, *The Last Song of Manuel Sendero*, *Mascara*, *The Nanny and the Iceberg*, and *Exorcising Terror: The Incredible Ongoing Trial of General Augusto Pinochet*. His works as a playwright and screenwriter include *Death and the Maiden*, and he has been active with a wide range of international organizations such as UNESCO and the French Académie Universelle de Cultures. He is a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and teaches at Duke University.