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## Home Abroad

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Home Abroad

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts  
in  
English

by

Sheila Madary

B.A. University of Dallas, 1999

December, 2011

I dedicate this thesis to my husband, Michael, and to my daughters, Adelaide, Cecilia and Eva. Thank you, Michael, for your patience, your help, and your love. Thank you, girls, for your insights. You are my treasures.

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## Abstract

Comprised of four essays, this collection of creative nonfiction focuses on facets of daily life and culture in Germany. The author recounts her experiences as she and her family assimilate into a foreign culture and adapt to using its language. The first essay tells of the family's unexpected but rewarding sojourn in Germany after losing everything to Hurricane Katrina. The subsequent essays display a broader range of experiences and cultural observations upon the family's return to Germany four years later. These include a narrative of the family's move to a small town in central Germany, an interview with a local asparagus farmer and an account of the author's children's efforts to learn German.

Creative nonfiction, German culture, Hurricane Katrina, asparagus, foreign language acquisition

## Preface: Opening Shuttered Windows

“Bravo...bravo...BRAVISSIMO!” are the first words I heard when I awoke in a room overlooking Lake Como. I had arrived the evening before at this villa to stay for a year as a foreign exchange student. The man’s voice sailed upwards; sunlight seeped through the slits of my room’s shuttered window. I heard the motor of his boat idling on the lake as I got out of bed and unhinged the dark green metal shutters. The scene I took in when I opened those shutters was familiar and foreign and beautiful: green-carpeted mountains reflected their color in the water they surrounded. I knew the meaning of the man’s words as soon as I saw him below in his boat, teaching a boy to waterski: praise issued for the boy’s brief time out of water. The disorienting moment as I opened my eyes and heard those words sticks in my mind as the first page in the story of several foreign adventures.

In each new place, I have experienced similar moments of opening shuttered windows, many of which have etched lasting memories in my mind and have become sources for these essays. Each of the essays I have included in this collection concerns times I have spent with my family in Germany, first in 2005-2006 and more recently from 2010 to the present.

*“Wunderschön”* recounts our first year in Germany, a time when difficulty gave way to serendipity. Our eventual return to Germany was just as fortuitous but, of course, different, especially in the sense that we moved back to Germany for work, and

we enrolled our children in school. During our second stay, we have set down more roots and participated in the local culture to a greater degree.

In "Mother Tongue" I have attempted to render not only the difficulty and magic of learning a language, but also the acute longing for home that one experiences in a foreign place. The experience of learning a language by being thrown into a foreign setting is singular; it promises a chance to re-experience both childlike wonder and humiliation. Learning a language by ear requires months of listening and watching, waiting for ears and eyes and nerve cells to make connections. As an exchange student, I sat in classrooms and kitchens as words passed like water over my ears; nothing made sense. Then, after combing conversations for weeks and months for some comprehensible sign, foreign words became familiar. An extremely frustrating experience became a rewarding one. As a mother, I have observed my three daughters go through a similar process, one that has been both fascinating and painful.

"White Gold" is an essay that I hope portrays some positive German characteristics, particularly, the concern for doing a job well and respect for the natural world. Similarly, I focused on the natural and cultural settings of the town where I live in "Drop Everything." My aim is to situate you, my reader, in the particular place of Stadecken-Elsheim and offer you a glimpse into my subjective experience here. Time and reflection have afforded me a chance to render my experiences in words and to offer you these memory etchings.

## *Wundershön*

Houston, August 29, 2005.

*The room is dark. I feel Cecilia's tiny hands, uncurled and slack. A drop of milk remains on the corner of her mouth; I have nursed her to sleep and I know I have a few hours before she stirs and roots. Adelaide, too, has finally abandoned her struggle against sleep and lies in the bed across the room. I am wide awake, finally allowing myself to think about our flooded house and devastated city. Michael and I have spent the day watching our two children and my college roommate's two children in her apartment. While one supervised, the other ascended the stairs to the computer screen which streamed the unfolding devastation in New Orleans. We have spent the day feeding and entertaining children, and furtively weeping in front of images of chaos. We've spent the evening eating and drinking with our hosts. This is my first moment of solitude. I mentally picture every room in our house in New Orleans. I open the buffet drawer in our living room. Inside I touch a pink felt and green-sequined partridge-in-a-pear-tree Christmas ornament that my grandmother made years ago. I turn and see my row of Faulkner books on our bookshelf. I pick one up and flip to the notes in the margin. I walk into my bedroom and peer into the closet. I see my black boots that I had splurged on in Florence four years before. I advance into Adelaide's room and see her toys, her bed, her unworn dresses hanging.*

*"Michael," I call out.*

*He lifts his head from his pallet on the floor.*

*"I can't sleep. Oh, Michael. What about Addy's toys, her room? What will I tell her?*

*What will we do?"*



*He hoists his elbows up to the edge of the bed and looks in my eyes. "Everything's gone and nothing will ever be like it was. Not many people get a chance to peer beneath the surface and explore life without anything. We're free. Try to lie still."*

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The water took everything. I had just started graduate school and had a teaching job that I finally liked. Michael was almost finished with his PhD in philosophy at Tulane. We knew we could not take our three-month-old and two-year-old daughters back to the city for a long time. Michael's parents, aunts and uncles, grandmother and our friends had lost their homes as well. Our lives were stripped of all of our identifiable markers—our belongings, our jobs, our plans. Nothing was certain.

We headed North after almost a week in Houston, stopping to stay with friends in rural Texas. Then we drove on, staying nights with my cousin's family in Tennessee, with an uncle in Kentucky, and with some college friends in Pennsylvania. When we reached New York State, September's cool air reminded me how far away our old life was already. We stayed at my parents' house on one of the Finger Lakes and considered our options for the future. While Adelaide dressed up as a princess, we filled out FEMA paperwork and looked for work. Once or twice a week, Michael escaped the frustrating idleness of unemployment to audit a class at Cornell; he drove forty-five minutes to Ithaca and read Kant in German with other graduate students.

One bright burnt-orange-and-red-leafed October afternoon, Michael attended a meeting held by a representative of the DAAD<sup>1</sup> at Cornell. At the meeting, he learned that the German government was offering ten Katrina-relief scholarships to scholars who were no longer able to study in New Orleans because of the devastation. The announcement was uncanny: the opportunity seemed tailor-made for him since he had been thinking of putting together a research proposal to study in Germany in the months before Katrina. In July, Michael had received a letter from the director of an archive in Freiburg that houses the unpublished works of Edmund Husserl. He had invited Michael to research the material which was central to his dissertation. Somehow, when we evacuated New Orleans, all of the family photographs I had packed in a brown paper grocery bag stayed in the house, but that letter from Freiburg was tucked in the trunk of our car. That hand-typed piece of paper was the key to launching our German adventure. By the end of the month, the DAAD had secured us a three-month student grant and a family stipend for the four of us to live in the heart of the Black Forest.

We searched frantically for a place to live and found an apartment to rent just a couple of weeks before we left. One evening I was scouring the internet for rentals in Freiburg and noticed a contact number with the same area code as that of my parents in New York. We called it and a professor from the German department of a small liberal arts college in upstate New York responded. She explained that they were looking to

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<sup>1</sup>*Deutsche Akademische Austauschdienst* or German Academic Exchange Service

sublet their vacant faculty apartment with fully-furnished living quarters and an office. What were the chances of finding someone through a foreign website residing fifty miles from my childhood home and who had the ideal place for us to live nearly four thousand miles away?

“Germamy! Germamy!” Adelaide exclaimed, jumping up and down in my mother's kitchen when we told her where we were moving. Then she asked us, “What is Germamy?”

Her concept of Germany became a forest where she might spot some trolls who spoke strange words. I, like Adelaide, had a vague picture in my mind of a faraway place: a mountain and a spindly Gothic spire stretching over red rooftops. We left in November with five suitcases, a toddler, an infant and nervous wonder.

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We lived in a little town called St. Georgen, about fifteen minutes by bus from the center of Freiburg. Our street was the hypotenuse of a right triangle. Besides houses, within this triangle were a church, two schools, a butcher's shop, a toy store, a farm, a stationery store and a convenience store. We rented the top two floors of a three-story house; our landlady and landlord, Eva and Wilfried Klonk, lived on the ground floor. Across the street were four- and five-story condominiums. The city sprawl had swelled out to provincial St. Georgen. Most families in our neighborhood lived in flats, so our house was unusual for its large garden. Tame grapevines climbed two stories of the white stucco house. The royal blue shutters swung on their hinges--

inward in the heat of summer and outward on glorious mornings. Wilfried's giant hand-carved wooden dragon watched over the back yard.

Over the course of what would stretch into a twelve-month sojourn, we shared the pleasure of Eva and Wilfried's garden. They worked tirelessly, tinkering, pruning, and trimming. They mulched wood from trimmed branches and spread smelly compost from their heap of kitchen scraps. When we arrived in November, winter was approaching, and the garden was mostly bare. Gradually, the garden revealed its beauty. After the snowiest winter on record, Wilfried alerted us to the first sign of spring. One morning, he pointed towards the ground, saying, "*Schneeglöckchen*" (snowbells). Adelaide crouched to see the tiny flowers--small white bells peeking out of the thawing earth. Spring revealed blossoms on the sprawling Japanese magnolia next to the front steps and offered delicious cherries from the trees in back. Summer brought us a trellis of raspberries and wild strawberries that dotted the ground cover on our way out of the gate. Fall delivered crisp apples from the back yard.

Nothing we saw resembled what we heard of from our family in New Orleans--no uprooted trees nor ash-colored grass, no heaps of rubble. St. Georgen was our paradise.

Over the months, Cecilia learned to crawl up the steep, creaky wooden staircase to our apartment door. Situated off a short corridor were two bedrooms, a living room with a dining room table, sofa, television, and shelves. The bathroom, at the end of the corridor, featured a gas-and-flame-powered water heater above the bathtub. For a hot shower, I turned the tap and waited as the gas-powered pilot flame erupted into a fire

in the metal box on the wall—inches from my body. The kitchen, though compact, was well-equipped and opened onto a balcony. The window above our sink overlooked the front sidewalk below—a good vantage point for observing small-town traffic and calling down a greeting. The apartment was small enough for our vacuum's cord to reach every inch of it from the same electrical outlet.

For work, Michael ascended a half-flight of stairs to his office. The office had a kitchenette, bathroom, and trundle bed. The ceiling slanted down to a picture window which offered St. Georgen's best view of Freiburg's mountain, *Schauinsland*, (literally: “look-into-the country”). We knew that once word of our extra sleeping quarters got out to our friends and family we'd have a steady flow of visitors. During each of the twelve months we lived in Freiburg, we had visitors. But when we weren't hosting our family and friends, accompanying them on the gondola ride to the top of *Schauinsland*, or sampling the offerings of the city's beer garden, or visiting the dark interior of the cathedral, we were adjusting to a new life in a new country.

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“Mommy?” Adelaide asked me one evening, days after our arrival. “Am I speaking German or English right now?” The two of us were out for a walk and some fresh air while Michael prepared a meal of sauerkraut with smoky bacon and pork chops. The air was crisp and the stars clearly visible. The wooded path we walked along circled a playground and a soccer field. A couple passed us holding several pine branches that would shield their plants from frost.

“You’re speaking English now,” I explained as she bounced on the balls of her feet. “German sounds different than English. You might not understand what people are saying at first when they speak in German.”

I resembled Adelaide--my world was new; my vocabulary was limited. I had taken two semesters of German in college, but most of it had dissipated in the six years since. What remained were some verb scraps, numbers up to twenty, various greetings and weather observations, and some vocabulary words that my mind had indexed according to sound rather than semantics—*schatz*; *schlecht*; *scheiss* (treasure, bad, shit).

A couple of mornings after we arrived, Eva left a note in our mailbox:

*Bauernmarkt, 9:00 - 13:00 Uhr.* After checking our dictionary for *Bauern*, we packed up the girls, grabbed the basket on the coat rack bench and headed to the church square to check out the market. Each Saturday thereafter began with a trip to the farmer's market to buy vegetables, fruit, fish, cheese, soft pretzels, even pear schnapps. At the market, ordering food was an exercise in public embarrassment. The farmers set up tables under green and white striped umbrellas and waited while our brains recalled a new word or as we stumbled over an awkward pronunciation. Often, I missed the luxury of American grocery stores where I could grab an item, toss it in the cart and push on to the next aisle without a word. One Saturday at the market, I drew a blank on the German word for garlic. I could only think of the word for leek: *lauch*, because I knew it had some relationship to the word for garlic. I pointed to the leeks on the table, garbling some German words that I thought amounted to—*like this but it's small and you use it to make sauces*. Miraculously, between the farmer and the ladies behind me in line,

they understood what I wanted: *Knoblauch!* Knob-leek—garlic is a knob at the end of a leek-like stalk. New German words cultivated relationships in my mind, between unrelated things, such as the many different vegetables in the cabbage family. In translation, brussel sprout means rose-cabbage and cauliflower means flower-cabbage.

German recycling baffled us for a time. We wondered what we should do when we ran out of trash can space. Our municipal trash can was 12 inches deep; our family of four shared that precious space with Eva and Wilfried. We recycled all of our uncooked food in a separate trash can and all of our plastic containers and bags, cardboard and paper in a large yellow recyclable trash bag. The unrecyclable stuff went into the deceptively tall but tiny municipal trash can. So, if perhaps house guests threw off our delicate trash-rationing balance, we bought a large red plastic bag at the stationery store for 14 euros—the tax and scarlet badge of shame for bad recyclers.

Adelaide turned three a week after we arrived. Someone must've whispered something to her about Black Forest cakes before we left home, so for her birthday, she asked for one. I stared back blankly in the bakery when Fraulein asked if I wanted a half or whole cake. Ignorant, I ordered the whole: a 10-inch-tall round mass of cream, chocolate, and schnapps-soaked cherries. It was the best cake Adelaide will ever have for a birthday.

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Just after Thanksgiving, Adelaide started kindergarten at the end of our street and around the corner. She attended five mornings a week and came home for lunch like most German school children. Adelaide's class was mixed with children ages three

to six. The children spent a lot of time playing outdoors. Often, I picked up Adelaide from school in her coverall mud pants and waterproof boots. On some mornings the class met in the forest nearby to go exploring and grill sausages on sticks over bonfires. After a few hot summer mornings, I arrived at the kindergarten to find Adelaide covered in wet sand in the vast sand pit out back.

The school was one of the only places where no one spoke English to us. I was grateful for the teacher's limited knowledge of English and for her patience with my German. Many times, I encountered "switchers"—Germans who'd switch immediately to English when I stumbled through a sentence. Adelaide had no choice. The children in her kindergarten knew nothing but German. For months she listened to German children chant, shout, sing, whine, play. After mornings of silence, she came home for lunch and played in her room. As I washed dishes in the kitchen or fed Cecilia in the living room, I listened to Addy speak German-sounding gibberish. Before she produced any phrases or sentences, she sang the words to songs. Then one day in March, she walked into the kitchen to issue this safety report: "*Die Cecilia hat eine Tasse im Mund.*" (Cecilia has a [toy] cup in her mouth.)

One day, the father of Addy's classmate, Karl, invited our family to share their German ritual of Sunday afternoon *kaffee und kuchen* (coffee and cake) at their house. Over waffles, whipped cream, fresh fruit, coffee, we tried to explain New Orleans mayor, Ray Nagin's recent Chocolate City remarks. Even with the advantage of speaking our native language with Karl's "switcher" parents, we struggled to explain New Orleans' history of racial tensions. Many of our friends listened earnestly to our



tales of frustration with our government's agencies or of our family's slow recovery at home.

The kindergarten and the playground near our house gave us access to engaging in the culture, and establishing a social life in this new world. We experienced our holidays and their holidays in new ways. In the first week of December, Saint Nicholas visited Adelaide's classroom. When I asked her how she liked the visit, she commented: "Good, he had a stick, a big hat with a cross on it and a white dress, but he spoke German." In February, we celebrated *Fastnacht*, the German version of Mardi Gras. Instead of watching masked revelers on elaborate floats throw plastic beads, we saw witches whisk young women away from the crowds in wheel barrows. Rather than hand-sewn costumes of bright feathers and beads of Mardi Gras Indians, we saw locals wearing ghastly hand-carved masks with crossed eyes, large white upward-curving tusks, and balding foreheads with long strands of colored hair. They frightened rather than dazzled the children.

The families we knew lived in equally small spaces, so we saw the same children going out every afternoon for a run around the church tower, a bike ride on the street or a trip to the playground. The playground and quiet streets were the stage for much of the action of our day. In the late afternoons, we met Beata, a Polish immigrant, and her daughter Alina. Beata was my only friend with whom I always spoke German. Perhaps her experience as a foreign language teacher or her jovial nature allowed her to understand my broken German. We had enough in common—we both had little girls who played together. Her melodious voice and rosy cheeks paralleled her enthusiasm

for life. On more than one occasion, Beata exclaimed, "*Freiburg ist wunderschön!*", and she encouraged us to experience many of the natural wonders of the area. An expert forager, she drove Michael and Addy to the forest one Sunday in autumn to hunt for mushrooms. With her help, they returned with massive porcinis to cook for dinner. In the fall, she was sure to take us to a harvest-time wine festival in the surrounding countryside.

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We managed to extend our three-month stay to twelve months through an extension from the DAAD and a grant from Tulane. Michael continued to stare at the tip of his pen pondering Husserl's ideas of perceptual constancy; Adelaide learned the words to German songs about caterpillars and fleas. I regularly escaped in the evening with my neighbor, Katja, to go to the movies. She taught me how to recognize quinces on trees and that fennel tea helps settle a child's tummy ache. Cecilia learned that a wave to the convenience store owner and "*Tschuß!*" meant bye-bye. The butcher and his mother learned that Cecilia's wave and fuss meant she wanted another lagniappe sample of *wurst*.

A week before we left, we celebrated the feast of St. Martin of Tours. In many German towns, children mark the evening of November 11 by processing through the streets at night with home-made candle-lit paper lanterns. The legend of the Roman-soldier-turned-bishop celebrates an act of kindness towards a needy man. Mounted on horseback, on his way through the city gate, St. Martin takes pity on a beggar, shivering

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<sup>2</sup>"Freiburg is wonderful!"

in the cold. Martin cuts his cloak in half with his sword and offers a piece to the man. At the kindergarten, the children learned about the legend through role-playing. One photograph I have shows Adelaide dressed up in a red cloak, wearing a cardboard helmet and brandishing an aluminum foil sword. Moritz, her classmate, kneels on the floor. Adelaide is about to take off her cape, draw her sword, cut along the Velcro strip sewn down the middle of the cloak and offer half to him.

*I carry a bottle of sparkling wine to the school. Seated in kid-sized chairs around a table with other parents, I assemble Adelaide's lantern that she has prepared. The children have collected fallen leaves on a walk and rubbed crayons onto wax paper, leaving the imprint of their leaves placed underneath the paper. Parents share a bottle of wine as they chat, glue, and hammer.*

*On the evening of St. Martin's day, the school's procession winds through residential neighborhoods. The children sing about Saint Martin, their lanterns, and the stars, songs that they've practiced for weeks. "Sankt Martin gibt den halben still, der Bettler rasch ihm danken will."<sup>3</sup> The air is cold; I speak to Karl's dad of our uncertain plans when we return to the U.S. "We're sorry to leave. We've had a wonderful year." The children walk deliberately with their lanterns that hang on hooks at the end of thin dowels, careful not to let their lanterns go up in flames. The procession concludes outside the church, and the crowd gathers. Children break soft, buttery pretzels with each other, sharing the tradition of Martin's generosity. Many acquaintances bid us warm farewells as the celebration ends. Even though, I have been here a year, I haven't a warehouse of German words vast enough to express my gratitude to the*

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<sup>3</sup>"Saint Martin gives him half [his cloak]; the beggar rushes to thank him; But Saint Martin rides away in haste."

*community we are leaving. Like the beggar, I want to rush to thank everyone who cloaked us with their culture and carried us away from trouble for a while.*

## Drop Everything

Perhaps you have caught yourself wrapped up in a reverie of dropping everything and moving to Europe. Your eyes turn momentarily away from your computer screen and your eyes glaze over as you see yourself sipping cappuccino at an outdoor café, hearing church bells in the distance, planning a weekend trip to Spain and generally having all that leisure time those Europeans seem to have. Perhaps though, in the midst of your reverie, you did not consider the logistics of moving yourself and maybe your spouse and perhaps your children over there. After all, pain-in-the-ass details should not be part of any daydream.

Last year, our family moved for the third time to Europe. While my husband's jobs as a visiting philosophy professor have brought us adventure, none of them has come with the perk of a relocation package. Each time we have undertaken an overseas move, we have had a month to pack, leave and look for a house to rent. On this recent move, my in-laws helped us pack our things in 60 boxes. We sent our belongings through a company that specializes in shipping goods to missionaries in the Third World. Fortunately for us, the company coordinated with a ship sailing to Hamburg. After three solid weeks of packing and liquidating our life, the next task would be to find a place to stay and eventually a place to live in or near Mainz, Germany.

It's not easy to find hotels for a family of five in Europe when you're on a budget. Fortunately, reports of rodents on [tripadvisor.com](http://tripadvisor.com) kept me from booking the only hotel

rooms that I could find in Mainz for families. So I booked us three nights in a tiny but impeccable apartment in the nicest part of the city. We would have three days in Mainz's *Altstadt* (old city). If circumstances had been different, we might have spent those days strolling the cobblestone streets, visiting a cathedral that dates back to 1000 C.E. or browsing the vast market in the cathedral square. Instead, in three days, we needed to figure out how we would move ourselves and three children into a house situated twenty minutes from Mainz in the countryside.

Just before we left the U.S., we discovered that most German rentals do not include a kitchen—no kitchen sink, no countertops, no appliances, just an empty room with a water hookup and some electrical outlets. So, the three days in the tiny apartment were filled with logistical challenges. Besides arranging for a kitchen, we also would be missing most of our household goods for several weeks—the container ship was still at sea.

I asked the landlord, when he met us at our temporary quarters, if he knew of any kitchen stores in Mainz. He recommended a place near the Rhine river, about a fifteen-minute walk from our apartment. So, we spent our first full day in Mainz searching for a kitchen store. With three young children, a fifteen-minute walk takes much longer. We stopped for coffee and soft pretzels, checked our map, asked for directions, and went with our best hunch, based on our rough comprehension of German. When we arrived at the store and sat down to look at a 10,000 euro kitchen, we tried our best to make a quick exit. The shopkeepers bid us farewell with a plastic

ball parting gift. (They couldn't sell us a kitchen, but we could at least do some free advertising for them.)

By this point, Cecilia, our middle daughter, was passed out in our stroller. We decided that the long walk back would be a bad idea, given that most of us felt jet lagged. We passed by a kiosk and asked for directions. Was there a bus headed towards the *Altstadt*? The Vietnamese cashier's accent was incomprehensible—I had no idea what side of the street to stand on to catch a bus back. I bought some sour gummy worms for the girls and suggested we find a taxi. Michael made for the hotel across the street while I headed to a park bench along the river promenade lined with linden trees. While Cecilia slept, the others chewed gummy worms. The effects of jet lag settled on my brain, and I gazed at flat boats carrying cargo up the Rhine. Twenty minutes later, Michael arrived in a taxi about 75 yards away. Relieved, I pushed the stroller as the girls ran alongside. When I reached the taxi, I saw the driver scolding Michael for not telling the dispatcher that the taxi would need to transport five people. He insisted that he could not fit us since he didn't have children's car seats and continued to complain in an abrasive tone. I told Michael that we should just catch a bus. The driver demanded his 15 euros--the meter had somehow racked up that sum before he took us anywhere.

In our rusty German and his broken English, an argument ensued. We refused to pay for a ride we never had; he insisted. "Let's go, Michael," I proposed as the driver threatened to call the police. When he took out his cell phone as if to dial, we took off

up the street and noticed a bus pulling in to a stop on the opposite side of the street. As we crossed the street, Adelaide glanced over her shoulder and yelled, “He’s calling the police!” She envisioned her parents thrown in jail by German police before we even had a chance to register with the local authorities. Breathless, we hopped on the bus as it closed its doors behind us. Ceci still slept in the stroller. Adelaide was crying. Eva looked out the bus window, singing to herself. Michael shook his fist—a sign of our small victory.

The next day, I found a used kitchen advertised online. A middle-aged woman was selling her deceased mother’s kitchen. It was barely used before she died, had dimensions to match our kitchen room, and she needed to empty her mother’s apartment by the end of the month. I took a bus and a streetcar to meet her that afternoon, paid her 200 euros and told her we’d be back in a week. The following day, we ordered mattresses and moved out of the *Altstadt*. On my way out of town, I bought a new refrigerator and caught a bus to our new place in Stackeden-Elsheim.

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If you were to take a bus to Stackeden-Elsheim, as I did on the day we moved there, you would head southwesterly from Mainz and see the cityscape shift quickly to countryside. Sleek white turbines on the crest of a hill might catch your eye, and as the bus would begin its descent into the Selz valley, a country church steeple would extend up into the horizon. If you took the bus in the springtime, bright yellow rectangles of rapeseed fields and neat rows of plum blossoms and cherry blossoms would zoom past



your window. You could make out a patchwork landscape of brown and green in the distance. The curious coexistence of rooftop solar panels and trapezoidal-beam-and-stucco half-timbered houses might strike you. Knobby fruit trees remind you that this is an old place, still connected to the land, where people still have a deep respect for nature.

The bus would descend farther into the valley, and the street would wind and dip, becoming steadily narrower and steeper. A sharp blind turn might give you pause as the bus barrels though. In the summertime, you would catch glimpses of geranium-and-wet-laundry-lined patios as you pass narrow alleys of grape-leaf-covered stone walls. Rows of grapes on steep undulating hillsides would greet you as your bus made its final descent into Elsheim. Then, the bus would pass through a narrow stretch, bordered by high concrete and stone walls, and negotiate a tiny roundabout hinge, despite its boxy dimensions.

Now, at the roundabout in the tiny town of Elsheim, the Catholic and Lutheran churches, tiny baroque gems, almost face each other. Here, the churchbells still ring every quarter hour all week long. Your bus would then curve towards nine o'clock and continue on to Stackeden. In early Fall, a machine might join traffic in front of the bus, one that looks like the offspring of a Star Wars chicken walker and a John Deere tractor. It is a grape-picking vehicle on its way back to a winery from the vineyard. After passing a couple of fruit stands and wineries and crossing the Selz River, the bus

reaches Stackeden where it pulls in to a rather significant bus stop for such a small town.

Through bits of coincidence, luck and plenty of work, this place became home to my family last August. The area is known to Germans as Rheinhessen; some in the tourism industry call it German Tuscany. This region's plentiful vineyards and fruit orchards have also earned it the moniker of German California. It reminds me neither of Tuscany nor of California: no Americans in rented villas, nor sprawling wineries that cater to white collars. Here, most wineries are small family businesses. Families are proud of their product and the awards their wines receive, but they do not seem eager to attract foreign tourists. Stackeden-Elsheim, a combination of two tiny towns that joined up thirty years ago, has three dozen wineries and just under 5000 residents. Growing grapes and producing wine is a craft, and most of the excellent wine made here is intended for domestic distribution.

On our first visit to a winery in this town, the vintner's wife, not quite forty and trim, met us with a smile and a handshake outside an arched wooden doorway. She invited our daughters to jump on their trampoline in their yard up across a tractor path. The girls happily agreed, so, while they bounced, we ascended spiral stairs to a tasting room in a tower above their wine cellar. We were the only tasters in the room. After she turned on the lights, she sat down with us at a rectangular wooden table.

With a fresh coat of lipstick, she flashed a nervous sort of smile--she was not accustomed to hosting foreigners. She asked us, as we scanned the tasting menu,

where we wanted to start, and whether we like dry, semi-dry or sweet wines. "Dry." She began cautiously with a slightly sweeter white to be sure we really liked dry wine. Then, she introduced the Blanc de Noir, a tingling-crisp rosé. "*Zum Wohl*," (Cheers) she offered as she raised her glass to her mouth. She took her time, tasting the wine with us. With a pucker- slurp, she only let the wine swirl around her taste buds. Patient with our fumbling German, she smiled, happy to see us enjoy the final product of her family's hard work and skill.

After sampling some reds, we walked outside to enjoy a stunning view, the hillside source of our wine and to check on the girls across the way. In this part of Germany, wine tasting is a family outing. Often on weekends in spring and fall, wineries serve food as well as wine. The outdoor setting usually includes a swing set for children or scooters to race down the driveway. In the midst of sorting out the details of settling ourselves in a new country, I had doubted our hasty decision to move; many times I have envied all of the happily-settled families I know. Then, I am reminded that we are fortunate to discover the beauty of this place.

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On a typical summer day at the kindergarten in Stackeden-Elsheim, you might see naked children covered in sand or splashing in a kiddie pool. In the fall, you might see them lining up two by two at the gate, preparing for a walk to observe signs of fall. A few hours later, you might see them paddling in a rectangular wooden box, filled with chestnuts they have gathered. (They would have already cracked the spiky shells

and delighted in their smooth shiny treasure.) Or, maybe the teachers and children would be out back stapling leaves to paper strips to create paper crowns.

On a winter day in this town, you might wake to the sound of metal blades gliding along snowy streets: children seated on Rosebud sleds; father or mother with lead in hand. They will schlepp their children all the way to school! You dress your child in her bulky snowsuit, boots, hat, scarf and gloves. Certainly, she will spend a good part of the morning outdoors. If it's simply too cold, you might find her inside learning to weave on a child-size loom.

In the spring, she might learn to recognize elderflower blossoms (she instructs you: "those there with the small white flowers; be sure there are no tiny black bugs on them.") Then, when it is time to pick her up, you might find her on a bench by the doorway eating elderflower pancakes—fried by holding their long stems and dipping battered flowers in a frying pan, then, dusted with powdered sugar. A couple of days later, she might be helping a teacher squeeze lemons to make elderflower syrup.

She might surprise you when she is able to identify a tree that you cannot as you walk her to school in the morning. On a warm afternoon, you might find children playing house in a fort of woven bamboo sticks and cloth scraps or sitting on a paper maché throne. No doubt, you would hear singing, clapping, crying, and the strum of a guitar.

Some mornings, you might have trouble getting through the crowded entryway—mothers chattering and a boy charging parents an imaginary entrance fee (he points to the door jamb, indicating the slot through which to swipe your imaginary credit card). At lunch, your child might tell you how she was busy that morning feeding dandelion leaves to horses and rabbits. She might be able to teach you the intricate folding pattern of a paper boat, or tell you how it felt on her fingers when she mixed raw ground beef with her bare hands as she made homemade hamburgers and kneaded the dough for burger buns. At Easter time, children leave the building to gather sticks for an Easter nest in a field. (The Easter bunny will fill the nest with treats the following day.)

Observing tadpoles in the local pond, photographing flowers, taking a five kilometer bike ride with their teachers, hiking in a forest—these are some typical activities for children in a state-run German kindergarten.

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If you wandered into a classroom at the local elementary school, you might see children sitting in a circle with their teacher, who is playing the guitar. The lights are dimmed and children sing heartily. In the middle of the circle are a lit candle, a hyacinth plant, and a bowl of marbles. When they are finished singing, they will begin their day with a lesson, the themes of which touch on the objects before them.

In our town, children are expected to walk to school alone when they begin school at the age of six. Seeing children at recess for the first time can be frightening: children run past onto the brick courtyard, almost knocking you down to retrieve a soccer ball; they climb and then hang upside down on monkey bars, give each other piggy back rides. They are generally left alone to make up their own games and sort out their spats. At noon or one o'clock, depending on their grade level, many children walk home from school for lunch. Others go to lunch at an afterschool care program. An all-day school day was introduced here last year, but most families still choose to have their children in the traditional half-day program. Many mothers work part-time or use their generous government-sponsored parental leave time to stay home with their young children. School children's afternoons are spent doing homework and then playing sports or playing with friends. Here, children have a good bit of unstructured time to daydream in their yards, play tag, build forts, play hide-and-seek or ride their bikes--a childhood not unlike those that Beverly Cleary depicts in her *Henry Higgins* / *Beezus and Ramona* books.

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Before we moved here, some family members were skeptical of our decision to uproot our daughters again. Many here, too, believed that our undertaking was too daunting. So far, the beauty of this place and the culture we participate in has told us that our journey is a worthwhile adventure.

## White Gold

The first time I saw the green wispy manes of asparagus, I thought I was looking at enormous dill plants. I had gone for a walk to explore my new rural neighborhood in Germany and passed a field filled with bushes--short green thready leaves on drooping willow-like branches. The plants ranged in height but some met me at chest level—at least four feet high. I stepped closer to the mounds of earth from which these green Muppet-hair plants emerged and looked underneath. Then I recognized the gangly green stalks dabbled with straw-colored triangles.

Germans love asparagus, particularly the more tender and sweeter version: white asparagus. Asparagus season, or *Spargelzeit* begins around the end of April and lasts traditionally until June 24, the feast of St. John the Baptist. White asparagus is ubiquitous in the German countryside and in the cities. Just when tree buds open up, farm stands appear along the roadside offering five different kinds of white asparagus.

The ropey roots of the asparagus plant span up to six meters underground. *Asparagae officinalis*, previously classified as a family member of onion and garlic, retains water and grows well in dry soil. In early spring, as the soil temperature rises, shoots grow from the root upwards towards the ground's surface. When the soil reaches a temperature range of 16-20 degrees Celsius, asparagus is ready for harvesting. During *Spargelzeit*, the shoots will grow seven centimeters per day, and when they reach a length of 20-21 cm, they will be hand cut, washed and sorted.

To obtain the white, tender and slightly sweeter version of asparagus, German farmers limit the plant's light intake, burying it like a treasure under mounds of soil. So, when you stand in a field of white asparagus before and during harvest time, you see nothing green--only row after row of mounded soil. The mounds cover the shoots and block their sunlight intake. Chlorophyll production is prevented, and the white tips barely peek up out of the soil when they are harvested.

One must put a lot of care and time into this plant in order to grow it, harvest it and cook it. *Spargel* is, for the most part, harvested by hand in Germany. It has earned the monikers, "king of vegetables" and "white gold" (Germans quip that *spargel* is royal by virtue of the fact that a person must bow down before each shoot in order to cut it out of the ground). The work is hard, and in Germany harvesting is performed in large part by guest workers from Eastern Europe—Romania, Slovakia, Poland. Armed with long metal pronged instruments and woven baskets, workers walk slowly between the rows. Their hand tools bore into the sandy soil until they reach the shaft. Then, their penetrating tool snaps the shoot from the root, and they toss the shoot into their baskets.

Last April, dozens of workers suddenly populated the deserted field at the end of our street. I jogged past the asparagus fields early in the morning and saw colored shirts and scarved heads in a rhythm: backs bending down, hands prodding soil, backs extending up again. I heard the sounds of a language more foreign than German. Despite the hard work, they seemed happy--joking with each other, laughing. Later in



the morning, I watched them clean and cut the shoots at the farm stand, their faces drawn; by half-past ten, they were exhausted from their early-morning labor.

Every spring, Rutsch, a third-generation asparagus farmer, converts his garage into a market where the seasonal workers wash, sort and sell the asparagus they have gathered in the field. By 2:00 each afternoon, Rutsch and his wife have sold their daily yield.

Rutsch tells me his philosophy, "*Lebensmittel sind mittel zum leben*" A literal translation sounds rather redundant: "Lifestuff is the stuff by which we live" Perhaps a better rendering would be—"Food is the means by which we live." He smiles easily, and he is proud of his work. Clad in rubber boots and apron, he sits down at a beer garden table on his patio to tell me about his business. His grandfather planted asparagus after World War II. Rutsch remembers mounding the soil over the asparagus by hand. "That was hard work," he says. Now, his son uses a machine to do the same job.

Rutch's son drives a tractor past our house every morning in May hauling a slatted trailer with a canvas roof. From my kitchen window, I catch a glimpse inside the trailer--green benches lined with cushions on either side of an aisle. Young women with dark hair, tanned faces and sweaty brows are seated on the benches. Between the two rows are stacks of green crates filled with freshly-cut white asparagus. The women in the cramped wagon have worked in the fields four hours and are on their way back to clean, cut and sort the fruit of their labor.

When I show up to talk to Rutsch, his *spargel* stand is busy. His wife doesn't smile. Her large hands don't match her petite frame and coiffure; her stern expression indicates years of hard work. Like many in this town, her look is wary, as if wondering how I ended up in her small world and why I want to talk to her husband. Rutsch's ruddy face, clear blue eyes and wide smile put me at ease. He tells me that he's pitching in this morning since some workers called in sick. I ask him if he minds if I just watch them. "No," he says, and goes on to explain what he's doing. He shows me the scrawny shoots that won't make it to anyone's dinner table and then tosses them in a heap of other muddy white sticks.

True to German character, there is a precise system by which white asparagus is sorted. Once they are cut, the shoots are classified according to their diameter size (bigger is better), whether their tips are closed tightly (a closed tip indicates freshness), and whether they are straight (crooked or spotted shoots are a sign that pests have thwarted their straight tendency). The European Commission has established three classes of white asparagus: Extra, Class I, or Class II. It also classifies asparagus according to color. At harvest time, some tips are already tinged pink or purple; such colors will earn the tips a lower class.

I learned quickly that one should approach the *Spargel* stand with a German mentality: plan ahead; make a decision; be resolute. If you resemble the curving asparagus shoot--are prone to waffling over details, struggle with spontaneous decisions, you will face a complex decision. Not only do you have to rehearse: *Guten*

*Tag. Ich hätte gern ein Kilo Spargel* (hello, I would like a kilogram of asparagus) a few times before you reach the wary-eyed farmer's wife, but you ought to decide how you want to prepare your asparagus. You might wrap up those white spears with some ham and stuff them inside crepes, or you might opt, after peeling and snapping a couple dozen of them, for the most traditional and straightforward dish—steamed asparagus, ham, boiled potatoes all topped with hollandaise.

In his knee-high rubber boots, Rutsch stands before a long rectangular machine, which extends from the driveway to the back wall of the garage. The main parts of this machine consist of conveyor belt, blade, and a long tray of water. A woman stands at the near end of the machine, tossing out scrawny, crooked stalks and keeping the robust shoots. Another feeds the muddy asparagus stalks onto rubber notches of a white conveyor belt. The machine shudders as a guillotine blade chops off thick, muddy ends. The ends fall into a large rubber pail, while the remaining tip and stalk continue on towards the five-foot-long water-bath tray. Three women await the chopped white stalks on the other side of the conveyor belt and guillotine. Their job consists of sorting the shoots according to their size and appearance. The women glance back over their left shoulders. What business could I have with their boss? They return my smile with an unaffected glare. They resemble secretaries filing bills as they deposit the clean shoots into their corresponding crates, which are propped at angles between the water bath and the concrete garage wall.

Every season for the past few years, Rutsch hires either an all-male or an all-female staff through a staffing agency. This year, he has an all-female staff from Romania; they bunk in a finished-off basement in Rutsch's house for the duration of the asparagus season. This year they will stop harvesting before midsummer's day. Rutsch explains that the season started early this year and if you harvest too long, you'll have bitter shoots the following year.

Asparagus isn't cheap. Prices range between 4 and 7 euros per kilo depending on the class you buy. The high price and the intensity of the labor have contributed to an increase in cheaper foreign labor. Asparagus is harvested in the third year after planting, so those who grow it do not see an immediate profit. While the fields require no extra watering since asparagus retains water, Rutsch spends a lot of money on water to clean the shoots once they are harvested—hence the rubber boots and water bath contraption.

Since the 1990's, many asparagus farmers have implemented a method of insulation to warm the soil by which they cover the mounded rows with plastic sheets. Presumably, the soil stays warmer, the shoots grow faster, and the farmer achieves a higher yield. Most asparagus fields I see in this part of the country are covered in plastic.

These long plastic sheets over the rows conjure up covered bodies in a morgue. From a hillside they look like long shiny legs stretching the length of the fields, and the sound of workers throwing off covers bit by bit as they progress down the row sounds like waves lapping against a sailboat. From afar, the workers' collective motion creates

an undulating visual effect; their colored shirts resemble people floating through water. Once the workers are finished cutting their shoots in a long row, a foreman blows a whistle as a dozen workers pull the sheet back over the mound in unison.

“I am an old-fashioned man,” admits Rutsch. He sticks with the old methods his father and grandfather used. He doesn’t use plastic covers since there are claims that they could be carcinogenic. “Our product should be good for our consumer without any question marks.”

Rutsch eschews harvesting asparagus with machines as well, a practice, he says, that will never be an issue. Harvesting by machine would diminish freshness and, he insists on selling fresh asparagus daily. While he admits that demand for his asparagus is not exorbitant, it is growing. He points out that people are becoming more educated about food. They are looking for freshness and are not only thinking about their wallets. Rutsch raises his eyebrows: “They have more nutritional awareness.”

In Germany the royal veggie is in high demand—its own 82,000 ton annual yield satisfies only 61% of domestic consumption. Is it the impressive nutritional value of asparagus that explains German *Spargel* fever? If you can get over to Rutsch’s stand before two o’clock, the asparagus you eat will have about 95% water content, only 20 calories per 5 oz., plus calcium, potassium, phosphorus, vitamins A, B1, B2, C, E and folic acid. Those tender, almost sweet-tasting tips will not have any fat or cholesterol—nutritional facts which are usually undone by their culinary companions: hollandaise, butter, oil.

Many customers drive over an hour to Rutsch's stand to buy fresh asparagus and wine. The fact that this town in Rheinland Palatinate has over three dozen wineries only helps the local asparagus economy. According to local tradition, *Spargel's* ideal companion is a crisp light white wine called Silvaner. Typically not regarded highly abroad, it is a mainstay in Germany. Neighbors and relatives pool their orders and make a couple of stops at a winery and at the local *Spargel* stand.

After a conversation started up between Rutsch, his son, and a delivery man, I could tell he needed to get back to business. We shook hands and stopped back in the garage for some "white gold." He wouldn't let me pay as he put a kilo of Class II asparagus in a bag. As I walked home, I let the contents of my fridge, catalogued in my head, determine our menu: crème fraiche, an onion, a couple of potatoes and some butter—asparagus soup and bread for dinner.

I pare some potatoes, chop an onion, and then peel asparagus for twenty minutes, taking off the thick outer layer at the bottom of the asparagus shoots. Without this layer, the shoot smells earthy and feels slippery. Four rods lie on the plate next to each other. One shoot with a pink-purple tip curves over the heads of the three others. My daughter delights in its odd shape and color.

After I've spent thirty minutes snapping and peeling, I consider whether Rutsch would survive as a farmer in America. Would he find customers who had the patience to peel a kilo of asparagus on a week night? Would he find anyone to make such a fuss over the color gradient, tip-tautness or wayward growth of her food? Would he find

people still connected to the rhythm of seasons, who smile as the gloomy days of winter  
fade in anticipation of these strange white shoots?

## Mother Tongue

2010, Stackeden-Elsheim, Germany

I turn the steel knob of the chest-high gate to the kindergarten. Little girls in sand-coated weatherproof pants, rain boots, and colorful neckerchiefs surround me. They issue their daily report about my five-year-old daughter, Cecilia. They speak in a garbled German-kid-dialect: I catch the gist, but I miss the details as they fly past my ears. Svenja, the self-appointed leader of Cecilia's entourage blurts: "*Heute hat die Cecilia Deutsch gesprochen!*" ("Cecilia spoke German today!")

"*Was hat sie gesagt?*" ("What did she say?") My interest is piqued. Cecilia has a sharp wit; her impersonations of adults are highly accurate; I expect she said something funny.

Svenja, almost six years old, possesses an uncannily straightforward tone. I see administration in her future. She replies, "Maya, Svenja, Jule, Hannah and Klara"--the names of Cecilia's entourage, a group of girls who had quickly befriended her. Something was better than nothing, and they appreciated her effort.

I see Cecilia lying prostrate on a boulder at the side of the school building. Her head lolls to the side. Eyelids shut, arms outspread in a posture of utter defeat, rain boots dangling above the ground. She appears to have shut off her senses to the impossible buzzing of sounds. Perhaps she plays possum to prevent an ambush of



children who might tickle her with hopes of hearing familiar words escape from her mouth.

I crouch to greet her and am met with dense lashes, which open to reveal chocolate-almond eyes. A lock of dark blond hair rests on her round cheek. Her stout frame and pudgy belly are outward indications of her appetite for life, her *joie de vivre*. In this foreign place, no one knew her particulars—her keen senses of taste and smell, her mellow nature, her love of sleep and her quick wit. Nonetheless, Cecilia had already exerted her magnetic force over children and adults alike.

After she changes out of her suspended rain pants and rubber boots, and having passed the checkpoint of clamoring children at the gate, we round the corner and are met with farewell cries from children in the back of the schoolyard: *Tschuß...bis morgen!* (Bye! See you tomorrow!). Immune to their calls, Cecilia tugs at a leaf protruding from the fence. I hear Svenja tell another child, *Sie muss nicht Tschuß sagen, nur wenn sie möchte* (She doesn't have to say goodbye, only if she wants to). Cecilia and I trudge towards home.

Most children here attend kindergarten from ages three through six and begin formal schooling thereafter. By the time the kindergarten children are five or six, they achieve a status among their peers not unlike seniors in high school. The so-called "Maxis" receive special privileges, keep tabs on teachers and younger students alike, and generally rule the joint. Cecilia is like an exchange student who has arrived in time for her senior year of kindergarten.

Before we moved back to Germany last year, Cecilia had expected to enter kindergarten in the U.S. after two years in two different preschools. She welcomed the prospect of joining her older sister's practices of wearing a uniform, sitting at a desk, spelling and sounding out words and calculating sums. Instead, she was tossed into the organized pandemonium of German kindergarten where she remained mute for nine months.

Despite her new friends' efforts, she did not want to learn their language. She knew that no one could force her to learn German. But her brain, like the roots of a plant absorbing water, took in every word and worked against her will.

Neuroscientists and developmental psychologists have many hypotheses about the mysterious subterranean process of how we acquire languages. One hot topic in neuroscience these days is the discovery of mirror neurons—neurons that fire as though an action is performed even when the subject is just passively observing that action. These neurons mirror that which they observe. Cecilia Heyes, a cognitive neuroscientist, writes, "Repeatedly observing or performing an action might contribute to mirror neuron development" (579). Scientists are still debating the nature of such a system, but it is an interesting hypothesis.

Cecilia learned to speak another language by quietly observing her peers and her teachers. Perhaps her neurons were busy mirroring the sounds they picked up. In a matter of months, in spite of her unwillingness, Cecilia's daily observations at the

kindergarten translated into fluency in a foreign language. She could not help herself from repeating the sounds her ears picked up and searching for meaning.

At home, German spilled out of Cecilia. After lunch, refueled with a full belly, she played a tape-recorded conversation that she held in her head all morning. All of the nonsensical strange-sounding words from the conversations buzzing in her head needed an out, and the words found a safe exit in her pretend play at home.

She relentlessly practiced German sounds like the guttural 'r' or the 'ch' sound. The former sound is one that the chewing gum "r" of American English has great difficulty negotiating. The latter is one of those German sounds akin to cats dislodging fur balls. Cecilia spent many afternoons in her room making these sounds as she built with Legos or dressed her dolls. During this initial period, she uttered reams of nonsense words and phrases that bore some German intonation or accent. She repeated these sounds, words and phrases as though she were directed by some inner force.

"Lalikomitikoh" she tells Eva, her three-year-old sister, whose threshold for tolerating nonsense is quite high.

"That means I'm six years old," Cecilia explains. Eva obliges, accepting this as the definitive translation. Gradually, the sounds become real words and phrases that, in turn, are strung into sentences. I hear the German equivalent of: "My first name is

Cecilia, my second name is Terese, my last name is Madary. So. Now then. Very good." "No!" she scolds her doll. "I know! Set this down."

She takes phrases and breaks them apart—"What does *auf die* mean?" she asks me. I am puzzled, not knowing what she means and inquire where she has heard that phrase. *Auf die plätze, fertig los!* (On your mark, get set, go!) She has asked me on several occasions to translate swear words or song verses or little scraps of prattle stuck in her head.

She sits on the sofa with our English copy of Richard Scary's *Best Word Book Ever* and "reads" to Eva. She narrates, "*und, so, rot, blau, kuhl*" (and, so, red, blue, cool), adopting the German pronunciation of Eva: *ayfa*. When she reaches a point where she cannot fill in the rest of her sentence with anymore German, she plugs in some English words to round off her story.

A couple of months after she started at the kindergarten, Ceci told me, "I can't remember the English word. All I remember now is the German word: *dick*." (German for fat). Though her remark was purely innocent, I marveled at her uncanny capacity for making me laugh. I smiled and replied that forgetting your language is a sign that you're learning another one really well. Then, I envisioned her someday innocently blurting out this German word in an American classroom. By this point, she was speaking in full sentences with a pitch perfect accent. She had even become rather playful with her second language—impersonating her teachers and putting on a fake, bad American accent. Despite her progress, she only dared to speak German in the

privacy of her home--in her own space where she could practice asserting herself in this new language

Rather than contain this language all within the private space of her head (as I was doing while I was learning German), she practiced speaking and singing aloud repeatedly in an imaginary world. Each of my daughters stuck to a rule that they had instinctively but firmly established. Neither of their English-speaking parents was supposed to speak German (Eva scolded me: "Don't 'peak German! Cause this a English famwy!") Two days after Adelaide started second grade here, her nervous teacher pleaded with me to speak German with her at home. I nodded, not knowing how to explain that my instinct recoiled from this suggestion. Even if my children permitted me to speak German with them, why should I pass on my bad grammar? The girls clung to their mother tongue as their home language for vital comfort. Our language was a familiar haven in a strange place.

When they walked into school or kindergarten, they went from one sphere into another, from the familiar milieu of English to the foreign terrain of German. Eva, our three-year-old, explained this dichotomy in these terms: "I 'peak German when I pwayin." German was the language of play, or the language of school, so the children insisted that we speak English with them. We were not part of their imaginary world. Their imaginary world was a place where they could push boundaries, but their home world needed to remain stable and familiar.

In his *Realist Vision*, Peter Brooks writes, “Play is a form of repetition of the world with this difference, that the world has become manageable. We are in charge; we control its creatures and things. The mode of ‘let’s pretend’ immediately transports children into a world of their own making. It is a world that can be wholly vivid and ‘real,’ though there can be a coexisting consciousness that it is only pretend”(2). Cecilia’s not-always-conscious pretending was a way of grappling with this foreign world into which she had been thrown.

One morning when she and I arrived at the kindergarten, I watched her sit down on the bench beneath her coat hook. Languidly, she extended her legs as two children vied for a chance to untie her shoes and place slippers on her feet. She used her position of deference to her distinct advantage. One child took her by the hand and escorted her from the foyer to a classroom.

Cecilia made for an ideal playmate—especially for girls who spend a lot of time acting like miniature versions of their mothers and teachers. She was their live doll who could be cuddled, tickled and dressed without any backtalk or contrary ideas. She became accustomed to giving in to other kids’ whims. Gradually, acquiescence drained her spirit.

A couple of weeks before Christmas, I saw her talking to colored spools of thread. After she named each color, she issued commands. “You, green, stay there,” She took out the red spool, tossed back her head, flicked her wrist, saying, “*Ach, meine*

*Gute!*" (Goodness gracious!). Without fail, each day for months, Cecilia participated in an imaginative rehearsal that laid the groundwork for accommodating a new language.

Michael Tomasello, an expert in cognitive linguistics, points out in his *Origins of Human Communication* that "vocal acts are by default public" (231). He offers this as an explanation to a question in evolutionary biology; namely, why eons ago, human vocalization took precedence over gesturing. Tomasello gives us some perspective on what our voices did for us once we started using them: perhaps we realized that voices can cover greater distances or penetrate dense forests; perhaps we needed to free our hands and eyes from gesturing; perhaps we needed to address a group, rather than gesture to individuals. At some point, we opted for this public means of communication, one that brought with it a human knack for eavesdropping (230).

As soon as I open my mouth and utter a sentence, whether in English or German, I betray my foreign identity. If the words don't come out fast enough, someone finishes my sentence, and if I don't react quickly enough to a question people think I've not understood, they resort either to gestures, or, worse, switch to English. I rehearse my lines as the dial tone turns into ringing when I call our pediatrician's office. When I stand in line for bread at the bakery, I repeat my order in my head so my public request will be properly understood. Simple daily errands and phone calls are sources of anxiety here.

Cecilia was both cursed and blessed by the fact that the children she played with every day knew no English. She lacked the crutch that hinders most Americans' foreign

language learning. Within a few months, Cecilia understood almost everything her friends told her. She quickly distinguished between English and German, so when her friends tried speaking “English” to her, Cecilia rolled her eyes at their Genglish. “Svenia and Julia say, ‘Thaylksjdashkdsjhfksj’ and think that’s English,” she explained in an exasperated tone.

The entourage was not easily discouraged. The girls worked out an unspoken plan to coax Cecilia into talking to them. I don’t suppose these five- and six-year-olds actually discussed the plan, but it was executed in a strangely similar pattern. Each entourage member asked at certain points—some more frequently than others—for a playdate at our house. I suspect they figured that Cecilia was more likely to talk to them in her own familiar space. Their hunches were spot on. In the space of her own room at home, Cecilia let her friends, one by one, hear her speak German. One day, after Christmas, Svenja, came over after school to play. After they played for a while in her room, they decided to paint at the kitchen table. “Oh, Ceci, it would be so nice if you would speak to me at the kindergarten too.” This process would be negotiated by Cecilia with her friends; I could worry, talk, bribe, but in the end I had to step back and wait.

I asked her, “Why don’t you want to speak?”

“Because I’m scared. I don’t want the teachers to hear me. I’m afraid they’ll laugh at me.”



I replied with my mantra, “The teachers won’t laugh, they will be happy, so will the kids, and besides, you’ll have more fun when you can talk to them,” but I could not convince her. One night before Christmas, after I finished a goodnight song, I asked her again. She lifted her head off her pillow and sat up. “Part of my brain says I can’t do it, but I know I can. My brain says I can’t do it and that makes me think I can’t.” She added, “I miss New Orleans; I’m going to be old when we go back.” Her chocolate-almond eyes reached their dew point; her lower lip trembled.

One morning, after we spent Christmas in Hannover with our friends and their families, she described this dream. “I dreamed that we were in a church in Hannover and Andreas (a minister and friend of our friends) was up at the front of the church. We were sitting in the front pew. You were all there with me—Daddy, you, Addy and Eva. Svenja and I were sitting up in front and you were behind us. I turned around and you were gone and when you weren’t there, I knew that I was going to have to speak German to find you.” She did not need my psychoanalysis: “I know why I have all those bad dreams. It has to do with not wanting to talk.”

I bribed her unsuccessfully. I insisted that good things would happen when she started talking. I tried to help, but my talking only seemed to stall her progress. One day, I met with Cecilia’s teacher, Anne, to talk about Cecilia’s progress. Anne, with blond bobbed hair, a nose ring, and freckles, has a wide smile and sparkly, clever eyes. She often wears baggy pants under simple hand-sewn pinafores. She possesses authentic German traits: self-confidence, straightforwardness, a quick wit.

When I thought about our conversation later, I thought of the scene in *Charlotte's Web* when Fern's mother turns to the family doctor for some advice. She's worried about Fern spending too much time in the barn talking to animals, so she asks Dr. Dorian:

"You don't think I need to worry about her?"

[The doctor asks] "Does she look well?"

"Oh yes."

"Appetite good?"

"Oh yes, she's always hungry."

"Sleep well at night?"

"Oh yes."

"Then don't worry," (White 110-111).

Anne, wiser than Dr. Dorian, added this piece of advice to our conversation:

"Give the problem back to Cecilia. It's her problem, not yours."

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*"Simply because I move about, leave my geographical location entirely, or change residence does not necessarily mitigate the impact of home, nor does it mean that I simply leave its geology*

*behind. It remains in my daily customs of eating, in the types of foods I prefer, my measure of distances, in my language” (Steinbock 234).*

It is a chilly Sunday afternoon. Michael is cooking sauerkraut and pork. Cecilia is drawing a picture of Snow White. Eva is listening to Debussy on my ipod. I am trying to finish a Turgenev novella for my online class in New Orleans. Weekends are so quiet. Eva breaks the silence, saying loudly, “Wish we go back New Orleans...we just did have so much fun there.”

Cecilia joins in, “I feel homesick all the time. I mix up the houses in my memory ‘cause we’ve moved so much.” Home was still far away; it was not the place we physically inhabited. I think of the impossible advice I gave Adelaide before bed one evening after she had had a rough day at school: “Try to be happy where you are, with what you have, right now. I wish you didn't say, I can't wait for five years from now so we can move away from here. I wish you were happy here.” But, then again, I have said that same phrase to myself at least once a week.

Later on, we sit down for Sunday dinner. Michael pours pinot noir made from grapes we see on the hillsides that surround our new home. For the girls he mixes homemade sodas: mineral water with strawberry and vanilla syrup. Roux-wine-gravy over pork and sauerkraut is his latest Creole-German fusion.

On Sundays, I remember that we are thousands of miles from our families, adrift in another world. Here, we stand outside and peer in at a community we partake in but from which we will always be distant.

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Winter and early spring were increasingly difficult as I saw Cecilia caught between her home and alien worlds. Pressure mounted as she knew that first grade was around the corner. She dreaded the thought of speaking to her new teacher. Regularly, I found her at pick-up time, standing by the kindergarten gates, arms crossed and hands curled up in fists over her mouth--a physical display of mental angst.

One of her closest friends, Maya, grew impatient, wondering why Cecilia was not going to speak to her when she knew very well how to speak. Maya backed off, and Cecilia mentioned that she had "broken up" with her friend. She was no longer included on Maya's birthday party guest list: the ultimate five-year-old censure. The day after the birthday party, I received word from the entourage. A mother called the news to me across the street as I approached the kindergarten gates: *Cecilia hat Deutsch gesprochen* (Cecilia spoke German). "*Es kommt nach und nach,*" ("Little by little, it's coming along,") Svenja added, nodding with her hands on her hips. On the way home, Cecilia was quiet. She smiled when I asked her how she felt.

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For Cecilia's sixth birthday, we drove her with the entourage to a park for a picnic. Michael and I listened from the front seats to the girls' chatter in the back of our minivan. One of the girls asks Cecilia where her older sister is; Jule responds before Ceci has a chance. "She's with my big sister." In German she says "*bei meiner grossen Schwester.*" I quietly repeat her answer, marveling at the grammatical feat this five-year-old has accomplished. (The preposition throws the second adjective into the dative case, but the first adjective requires the genitive case.)

"How can her brain put those adjective endings all in the right case so effortlessly?" I wonder aloud.

"It's like advanced mathematical computation." Michael shrugs as he negotiates the narrow street. Mark Twain had this to say about German adjectives: "I heard a Californian student in Heidelberg, say, in one of his calmest moods, that he would rather decline two drinks than one German adjective" (393).

Later that evening, I jokingly repeat Jule's perfectly-declined-noun-adjective combination to Michael. Cecilia breaks in, saying in a tone of mild derision, "Why is it so hard for you to say things?" Michael and I smile at each other. For as long as we live in Germany, she and her sisters will have an upper hand, knowing German better than their parents.

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After Sunday dinner, we get out our bicycles and ride them to the end of the street where a path begins. The late afternoon sun casts a golden hue on the hillside vineyards and the fields along the hem of the path. Continuing on to the next town, the bicycle path is void of traffic and noise. I ride next to Cecilia past swaying wheat fields. She confides, "I wish I could just fly around the whole world. Then, I could figure out where is a nice place to live." A few meters on, she adds, "I miss our old house."

I brake slightly as we enter a curve and return, "What do you miss about the old house?"

She peddles faster. "I only had to cross one street to be at my grandparents' house. Now I have to take a big airplane over an ocean to see them. Why didn't they have to move away like we did?" I try to explain the concept of retirement to her and that her parents still have to work for a long time. That's why we had to move—to work here. "Someday you might miss this place," I add.

Cecilia peddles ahead of me on our way back home, trying to catch her sister. She kicks her leg out into the brush. Then, she peddles fiercely ahead, right up behind Adelaide's rear fender. Then, she takes a hand off her handle bars and lets out a screeching laugh.

Someday she will miss this place, these fields, this shining afternoon; she will continue to long for a familiar place, impervious to change.

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## Vita

Sheila Madary was born in St. Paul, Minnesota and raised in Skaneateles, New York. She received her Bachelor's degree in English, with a concentration in Elementary Education and Italian, from the University of Dallas in 1999. In 2000-2001, she studied Italian literature as a Rotary Ambassadorial Scholar in Urbino, Italy. After teaching middle school English, adult education and developmental composition classes, she entered the M.A. program in 2005 at the University of New Orleans. Shortly thereafter, she moved to Germany before returning to UNO as a full-time student.