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Authors

Carpenter, Aaron
Cho-Polizzi, Jon
Tawada, Yoko

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Peer reviewed

“Night Bioscope”¹

by Yoko Tawada

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Translated by Aaron Carpenter and Jon Cho-Polizzi

A man stood before me, he pointed with his pointer finger approximately at the place where his heart probably lay and said:²

“She.”³

My funny bone twitched; I was confused.

“Are you feminine?”

“No, not anymore.”

He was once a woman, covered with countless, tiny clitorises. But now he had removed any bumps from his skin so that he could become a man completely.

“Were your fingernails colored before? Were your lips painted? Your hair dyed?”

“No, no, no...”

He breathed hastily. He wanted to speak especially fast, to outpace my questions. In doing so, he used a double negative:

“I haven’t never done that.”

“But you did just say ‘she!’”

I clung to my hope. At this moment, however, he was preoccupied by an entirely different kind of problem: a grammatical, a personal problem.

“Please use the informal you, I only know the informal form.”

I didn’t like being informal with people I hardly knew. But when I was asked so directly, I couldn’t say no.

“What do you do in this city?”

I asked him.

“I work in a *winkel*.”

He works in a *wrinkle*? He was right. Most workplaces are a kind of wrinkle. A store was a wrinkle; I don’t know why, suddenly I stood in a colonial import shop. Behind the counter, I saw colorful boxes and cans. On one label was a picture of a Dutch woman in traditional garb. Their skirts were swollen like pears. She stood behind the counter and looked at me. Luckily, a clear allocation of roles had been defined: He was the store owner, and I was his customer.

“I’d like some meat.”

He took a can from the shelf and placed it in my hand. There was no picture on the label. I saw the letter Y with green skin lying across a red and blue stripe. Who was this Mrs. Y with her legs spread? I studied the text on the other side of the can and jumped at

¹ From the collection *Übersetzungen* (Konkursbuch Verlag 2002).

² Line breaks and punctuation from the original are retained whenever possible.

³ The original German *die Mann* creates a tension between the feminine definite article and the masculine noun (making the masculine subject feminine).

the word *tot*, “death,” followed by the date 7/23/2000. If I ate the contents of the can, I would be dead by this date at the latest. My expiration date. I gave the store owner the can back. “But I’ve never wanted to not keep breathing.”

“Certainly not with this lovely fall weather,”

the store owner agreed with me immediately, looked through the little window into the blue sky and said:

“Tasty!”

It was an agonizing game for me to meet new people at a party. At first, they try talking to me about the weather, what happened during the day, or about books. Regardless of whatever else we talk about, in the end, they always asked me the same question:

“And what language do you dream in?”

Expectation shone in their eyes, but I didn’t know what they expected from me.

“Unfortunately, I don’t know that. It is a language. Yes, it is certainly a language, but a language that I’ve never learned; therefore, I don’t understand my own dream-language.”

One time, I tried to reproduce my dream precisely, but the others interrupted me and asked:

“Was that German or not?”

“Yes, I think that it was also German, at least there was something German about this language for me. But really none of the words were completely German: A different German.”

It was at a birthday party in 1998. A high school teacher asked me again what language I would dream in. I talked about my dreams. I admitted that I didn’t know what language my dreams were in. A man—he was the husband of someone, I didn’t know whose anymore—pressed his cigarette against a white saucer and said the language that I described was clearly the German language, but totally deformed. The language assumed this deformity because in my head it was constantly being suppressed by my powerful mother tongue. Apparently, it was disgraceful that two grown-up sisters had to share a tiny room inside my head.

Dinner was finished. People bid each other farewell. A camel stood outside the door waiting for me; I could ride it home.

“Here, your camel-horse,”

said the man. He always knows where I am. I didn’t want to let him know that I had never sat on a horse before in my life. I twisted myself and tried to sit on the uncomfortable, bony, warm, clammy back. I tried to hold onto the neck of the animal. But the neck moved like a snake; it got longer and longer, grew higher and higher, and the head was already hovering in the air.

“Hold tight!”

a familiar voice yelled at me. But I couldn’t hold on to the neck of the animal. The animal was certainly no camel, nor was it a horse. We stood at an intersection. The intersection had produced a third thing: a giraffe.

It was at another birthday party. White-haired women, children at play, and book friends. In the kitchen, I chatted with a Dutch woman. It must have been early December 1999. Because she was a psychoanalyst, we came to the topic of dreams. I described my dreams, remarking:

“But I don’t know what language shaped these dreams.”

“That is Afrikaans,”

the woman said at once. It was so simple for her to answer this question that she didn’t even have to think about it for a second. She explained to me the gender and genius of words in Afrikaans: “*die man, die vrou, die kind*”: Everything is feminine, thus everything can be “tasty.” Not just a mango, but also a Sunday, the weather, or a feeling can be tasty. As if we could discern everything with our tongues. Lick a book clean before buying it. Lick the winter air, swallow the voice of a singer, devour a salty memory, savor a new blouse.

It was my first lesson in Afrikaans. The word *tot* means “until” and *winkel*, “store.” But how could I dream in Afrikaans? I had never learned this language, and I had never been to Africa.

A sofa, four white walls, a stain on the carpet.

“Who are you?”

“I am a woman who dreams in a language she doesn’t know.”

“Are you possessed by the devil?”

“No.”

“Do you believe in reincarnation?”

“No.”

“A written character can randomly become identical to another written character through a complex displacement,”

the analyst said to me.

“Suppose someone writes you a letter with water-soluble ink. The mail carrier stumbles in the rain, and the letter falls to the ground. The address gets damp, the letters change, and another name appears. Suppose there is a person with this name. This person doesn’t have to have anything to do with you but gets the letter.”

That was the analyst’s theory. My dream-language could be Afrikaans just by coincidence. But I didn’t believe in coincidences. I must unknowingly at some point have taken a trip to South Africa, I just had to remember when and how that happened.

When could that trip have taken place?

In 1996, I spent Christmas on a boat floating on a canal in Amsterdam. At night, the bed rocked, I half awoke and heard strange voices from the street. I could understand a bit, but then the language veered away from me again, made a puzzle of itself, transformed consonants into a breeze, or opened at an unexpected point. Sometimes harsh, sometimes erotic, the clear details developed further without selling their meaning. An annoying language. If you wouldn’t make yourself so interesting, I could understand you. Disguise and mask yourself. What was this game about? Or maybe I was still dreaming and that was why the words seemed so mysteriously askew. I stood up and left the ship. Two young women stood there talking with each other. Between sentences, they stroked each other’s hair. It wasn’t a mystically disguised language; it was simply Dutch.

In the summer of 2000, I booked a trip to Cape Town. The language in which I'd dreamt needed visiting. I did not know a lot about South Africa. But what did come to mind was a photo that I had seen in a textbook as a child. The photo showed two doors for public toilets. On one door was written "For Whites" and on the other "For Others, except Japanese." We could use neither the one toilette nor the other.

I didn't have the courage to ask the teacher why it was in the interest of Apartheid to keep us from relieving ourselves. But fortunately, a classmate asked how we should understand this photo. This pupil was strangely mature and cocky. The teacher did not understand his question correctly and told us that South African politicians had declared the Japanese Whites to save the economic relationship between both countries.

"Ah, then they aren't real racists. They only think about money," the boy said disparagingly.

"Otherwise, they would've rejected such a compromise, even if they would've starved because of it."

At that, the teacher said we should, if anything, be ashamed of the Japanese government who wanted to keep their intense relationship with the Apartheid government alive. This relationship had been extraordinarily intense: No other country bought as much from South Africa as Japan. Platinum, diamonds—all the underground treasures lured people toward an unfathomable joy. "You are not non-White, yeah?" A double negative is often seen as a stylistic mistake, though a realist can hardly dispense with them.

The man was also no longer not-masculine. The double negative as a new mode of personal description in a passport. It would state then, for example: not a non-feminine person, not non-Asian heritage.

As a university student, I saw South Africa on the television. The crowds throwing rocks, the bulldozers that rammed buildings, police who ran around with clubs held high. Later I saw Mandela smiling on TV. At the time, people often talked about him. I recall a farmer in Lower Saxony who also spoke of Mandela. I was eating soup in a village tavern, I wanted to keep driving, but my car was completely dead. A farmer who was drinking beer in the tavern helped me get the motor working again. Afterwards, I invited him for another beer, even though he'd already had enough. He drank and drank, and I didn't know when I should take my leave of him. After a while, his eyes became strangely dull and gray. Suddenly he railed against Mandela and fell to the floor. I was shocked. Why would this person—a respectable farmer somewhere in the middle of Lower Saxony—support Apartheid in South Africa? His friend took him home. I haven't been back to that village since.

"What language do you dream in?"

a woman asked me again. She had a watch from Omega.

"In Afrikaans, of course."

Omega was offended for some unknown reason.

"Why is that? Have you worked intensely with Afrikaans? Have you lived in South Africa for a long time?"

"No, I've never been there before."

“That amazes me. People dream in the language of the country where their soul lives,”

the woman told me in a preachy tone. I answered cheerfully:

“I have many souls and many tongues.”

Change countries, confuse the sound “L” with “R”: a land, a rand. Rand is the South African currency. I stood in front of the bank at the Hamburg Airport and saw the as-yet-unseen country advertise itself as a currency on the board. Exchange currency, change numbers; most of the time you can’t exchange precisely. In this case, change comes back into my hand, the leftovers.

I lay five hundred Marks in a little tray under the glass separator and waited excitedly for the South African bills—more precisely, for the portrait that could be seen on them. What could the faces of this country look like? Probably Mandela on the two hundred Rand bill, Nadine Gordimer on the hundred, and maybe a hero from the Boer War on the twenty?

The bank employee lay the bills down for me. They were as soft as washed handkerchiefs. The colors of peach, mandarin, and the fall sky blended on them. On the two-hundred bill there was a leopard; on the hundred, a buffalo; on the fifty, a lion; and on the twenty, an elephant. Thus I exchanged Carl Friedrich Gauß, Annette von Droste-Hülshoff, and Clara Schumann for four-legged beauties.

The door between the waiting room and the plane is called a “gate” in this country. You are requested to go to Gate so-and-so and step out into a foreign country.⁴

In the waiting room, someone had forgotten the *Times* on the bench. I browsed through it and read that the economic value of the English language was worth £5,455,000,000,000. They had added the earnings together of companies in which English was spoken, trying to calculate the value of a language in this way.

The taxi took off. An empty, white Sunday highway running across a flat country. You don’t expect anything from a flat country. You use the word flat pejoratively, without knowing what the disadvantages of flat things are. “That is the *Cape Flats*, the Blacks and the Coloreds were forced to resettle there,” the taxi driver said when he noticed my curious stare.

Suddenly, a giant dining table loomed into the air, *Table Mountain*, then disappeared again. Then there was nothing again, the flats seemed inconspicuous, nothing cultivated, nothing used, no nature. Where did the city begin?

Soon something popped up. It sprang into my eyes: right next to the freeway, many boxes of scrap metal and wood, homemade huts, hundreds, thousands, colorful, a garbage palace, frightening, fascinating. What do you call something like this? The television taught us: slums, refugee camps. Somehow, the coalescence of individual pieces also reminded me of the big cities of East Asia. A kind of organic chaos.

“Awful,”

grumbled the taxi driver.

A strange feeling, as if I were already long dead. There was no longer a me, just my phantom. It was clear to me that no one could see me anymore, as my skin had become

⁴ The German here creates a tension between the words *Ausgang* [exit] and *Ausland* [foreign country].

transparent. I was still only that which I saw. A naked man ran along the freeway: antelope legs, black back painted with flecks of white powder. His movements were not superfluous, still, they were different from an athlete's, they were somehow possessed.

“They're crazy,”

the taxi driver used the plural form, even though we only saw one man.

“That's an initiation ritual,”

he added, as if asking for my forgiveness.

I woke up. My skin was not transparent, I merely sat in a taxi that was bringing me from the airport to the city center. I was in transit, like always, nothing more.

A city popped up, high-rises and dead streets, I thought of downtown Los Angeles. No people, just cars. They drive without noise, a deathly stillness, not a gunshot to be heard.

“Do you know someone in the city?”

the taxi driver asked me.

“No, not yet. I'm alone.”

It wasn't true that I didn't know anyone in Cape Town. In the hotel room, I pulled my notebook out of my suitcase. There was the number of Mrs. Taal,⁵ who was a teacher at a language school.

I dialed the number, the plastic body of the apparatus rattled. Mrs. Taal had a deep voice. We made an appointment for the next day. I was to wait for her at the train station in front of the ticket window.

A wooden bench lay before my eyes. Apparently, it was the next day already, I should probably wait for Mrs. Taal there. But the backrest said “*SLEGS BLANKES*,” so the bench was just for the *Blankes*, and I sensed several eyes around me. I didn't know if I had the right to sit on the bench. Who were the people who were designated ‘Blankes?’ *A blank space*, a hole, still undescribed, free. Can someone have a skin color that resembles a blank sheet?⁶

Besides, the word sounded like “black.” Maybe the word meant black, and that would mean that only Blacks could sit on the bench.

A man in a police uniform stood with his arms crossed next to me. He looked Portuguese, I thought, but in reality, I had never been to Portugal and didn't know what people there looked like.

“What does ‘Blankes’ mean?”

I asked the policeman in a deliberately naïve tone.

“*Blankes* are, for example, Afrikaners.”

he answered.

“And who are the Afrikaners?”

I asked in order not to do anything wrong.

“The Afrikaners are former Dutchmen.”

“Why did the Dutch become Afrikaners?”

“If they had referred to themselves as Europeans, they would've had to leave Africa and return to Europe.”

⁵ *Taal* is Afrikaans for “language.”

⁶ *Ein unbeschriebenes Blatt* can also be translated idiomatically as ‘a dark horse’ or ‘an unknown quantity.’

“Ah, yes.”

The policeman examined my shoes and asked:

“Are you from Cape Malay?”

“No, I’m not Malay.”

“Most people from Cape Malay are also not Malay.”

“Rather...?”

“They are Muslim Asians that the Dutch brought along. Most came from India. Do you have a passport?”

“I have a Japanese passport.”

“Ah, so then you are one of the *Blankes*.”

Mrs. Taal taught English and Afrikaans. She said it’s cheaper to learn English in South Africa than in the USA or England. You could, for example, calculate exactly how many Rand the lessons cost per adjective.

“So, how well do you speak English?”

she asked me.

“I don’t want to learn English here; I want to sign up for the Afrikaans for Beginners Course.”

“What do you want to do with Afrikaans?”

“I want to work as an interpreter.”

“Lovely. And where?”

“In my own dreams.”

There are hardly any obstacles to learning this language, Mrs. Taal declared in the first lesson, and there are many reasons for that. For example, in Afrikaans, all words are feminine; some are of the opinion that they are genderless. There must always be multiple genders. If there is just one gender, it’s no longer a gender. In any case, there is no other gender than this one, therefore, you’ll have no problem speaking.

Time began to flow regularly and orderly as each date corresponded to a chapter in the grammar book. There was something curative about a language school; one could perhaps develop a model for living from it.

Once, Mrs. Taal told us that in Afrikaans the diminutive form is very important. It’s not about whether something is actually small or not. If you have affection for something, you can apply this form. To love means to make your beloved small, she said. For example, you could turn “*wurm*” [worm] into “*wurmpie*.”

One day, Mr. Tolk,⁷ a young colleague of Mrs. Taal, came into the classroom and told us about the sightseeing project he oversaw.

“Tomorrow, we’re visiting a woman who lives in a famous township. Who would like to come along?”

The neighborhood stretched out an unimaginably vast distance; it didn’t resemble a ship, even though it was called ‘township.’ It reminded me more of a sea. It occurred to me that I had seen a township from the taxi on my first day. The sight awoke a feeling of

⁷ Tolk is Afrikaans for “interpreter.”

guilt in me, it was like noticing a rash on your own skin that you should have shown to a doctor a long time ago.

I sat alone with Mr. Tolk in the car. The car drove through two rows of little houses that reminded me of food stalls at a fair. The alleys, covered in khaki-colored sand, looked like private interiors. Children played there quietly, barefoot. Some of them noticed Mr. Tolk and called out “Hello.” We got out, Mr. Tolk stood in front of a little house and called out, “Vicky!” The door opened.

Vicky was one of the women who supported Mr. Tolk’s sightseeing project. His intent was to convey a different image of townships than the one in the foreign press which only portrayed it as hell. Because everyone in hell is guilty, and besides, hell knows no change.

Mr. Tolk talked about forced relocation under the former regime. Many people who were classified as “Black” or “Colored” had to give up their homes and move to the worst neighborhoods. Jews were also victims of Apartheid, but not in the same numbers as the others because Israel was economically important to South Africa, he added.

Vicky’s house was made up of small, wooden boards. You could maybe compare the method of building a house in the township to a snake shedding its skin. New arrivals built their living quarters first with cardboard that they collected from the street. Then they saved money and little by little bought wood, bricks, or panes of glass, and replaced the cardboard with the new materials.

Vicky showed me the living room, the bedroom, and the kitchen. They were small, but put together they were bigger than the apartment that I had grown up in. In the living room stood a glittering, metallic stereo system. Vicky had recently bought it with money she had saved up.

She turned the radio on. A young, male voice streamed out of it. At first, he spoke English, then he began—without a noticeable break—to speak Afrikaans, then seamlessly went back, no, it wasn’t English anymore, what were these words? Afrikaans of course, no, again no, something totally different. The clicks were so crisp, the clicks were hollow and light like a Kalimba.

“What’s that clicking?”

Vicky laughed and told me it was the Xosa language, the language of the tribe of the same name. Vicky belonged to the Xosa tribe. When she enunciated the word “Xosa,” the consonant “k” came out of her mouth together with a clicking sound. The throat formed “k,” while the tongue clicked. I try to produce the click-k with my mouth, too. But my tongue tripped immediately and stayed stuck awkwardly at the back of my teeth. Vicky laughed again.

A naked lightbulb hung down from the low ceiling. There was no electricity here five years ago. Now you could pay a given amount and use the electricity, Vicky said, it’s a good system because when the prepaid amount is exhausted, the light just goes out without pulling people into the darkness of debt.⁸

A thin, light-blond man slunk into the house without knocking on the door. His shirt was washed-out, his thin hair grew past his shoulders, he wore sneakers, probably an American. His sad face grew bright when Vicky noticed him and went over.

⁸ There is a tension here in the German between *Schulden* [debts] and *schuldig* [guilty] as it appears in the discussion of Hell (above).

“This is my little brother, John. Of course, he’s not really my brother, but he visits me every day.”

The quiet man squatted in a corner of the room and said nothing.

Vicky was a single mother like most women here. She worked for a food project organized by the church. She was a Christian, this she mentioned on her own. Every week, the church gave her money so she could cook for the children without parents. Her dishes were made of only soy, rice, and vegetables because otherwise the money wouldn’t have been enough to feed every child. She ate together with the kids.

“If you were a millionaire, would you eat something else other than soy, rice, and vegetables?”

I asked Vicky. She looked into my eyes curiously and asked if I, too, ate soy, rice, and vegetables every day. When we went back into the living room, Mr. Tolk talked about his childhood during Apartheid. At the time, he was classified as “Colored”; he wasn’t light enough to belong to the ruling class. Today he wasn’t dark enough to belong to the governing class, he added ironically: Many people say “Colored” isn’t really Black, just painted. But Mr. Tolk worked as a volunteer for the current government.

Earlier, when he was still a child, he roamed the city with his older brothers, throwing stones at police helmets. His right hand had been small, but it already had good aim. When Mandela came to power, he found it hard to hold just pens or pencils with the same hand. Pens were too light; one needed patience.

“Please ask Vicky any questions that you still have,” Mr. Tolk said to me, looking at his watch. I asked hurriedly, as if it were my last chance:

“Are there shamans in this country?”

Vicky laughed surprised and answered proudly, of course there were. They cured illnesses or spoke as oracles. They would cast pieces of bone on the ground and tell the future from them.

In the evening, when I returned to the hotel, I wanted to record everything that I had heard from Vicky in my journal. I was interested in what a shaman was called in Afrikaans. But I had only a small dictionary. My search for the word ‘shaman’ failed. There was no word between ‘shame’ (*jammer* in Afrikaans) and ‘shoot’ (*skiet* in Afrikaans).

Mrs. Taal continued teaching her language. She handed her language over to us, under us, and through us. She handed out the death sentence to the moths flying around her room. Her mouth opened: an engine room with turbines, tallies, tongs, and tongues.

A, a wind came from the stomach, E, he sneered at the opponent, calling him names and protecting himself with a fool’s mask. I, in horror she ran to the left, and he ran to the right. O, the whole body became a hole. U, then the dance music began. B, the lips came together just to separate again. C, a snake hissed in the attic. D, feet stamping on the ground. F, the draft of air carried the smell of an unknown animal. G, the motor running in the throat. H, fire-breathing. K, calciferous. L, luxury hotel. M, mediocre. N, newly-built side street. P, police parking space. R, restaurants offered game meat. S, soaring taxes. Tea drinking. Living in your own mouth house.

We learned from Mrs. Taal, the language teacher, fed from mouth to mouth. We had to understand her, we had to disassemble her. We mutilated the base and branch of her sentences and fell mute. I was exhausted, the others also grew quieter. Some even fell asleep. Only one of us was still able to learn and read the first practice text aloud.

Exercise 1

Mustn't be worried not.
 It is Ben and Rita their luggage.
 Ben is Rita to pick up gone.
 She has her hair let colored.
 She sips-sips on the peach schnapps.
 We are all hunger.
 She sips-sips on the snake.
 She mustn't not do it.
 I did not understand what she had not said.
 It's not not worth the effort.
 She doesn't not speak our language

The lesson began every morning at 8. Mrs. Taal was always punctual; we were always linear. We learned words, we comprehended concepts, and we always translated interlineally.

Exercise 2

Enjoy it
 It's tasty
 It's murder
 I am shame
 Excuse me, ma'am
 What do you think of my crime?
 I mustn't not kill
 Not unfortunate
 But you are damned lightning!
 Bloody bitch!
 Fly into in your mother!
 The battery is floppy
 It's your fault
 Are you also floppy?
 No, I'm in the hook

I grew lazier each day; my mouth produced a lot of unnecessary saliva and the desire to speak rusted behind my teeth. Mrs. Taal shot me critical looks or tapped me on the shoulder so that I didn't fall asleep, but it didn't help. In the mornings, I was already exhausted; in the afternoons, I could hardly keep my eyes open. In the evenings, I went to bed early. My sleep was shallow. My breathing, too light.

In my dreams, I often heard a voice. It spoke a language that was no longer—or not yet—Afrikaans.

“Too bad, I shot you like a buck. A buck is an object of desire. Do you want to eat some game meat? A bag full of cubed meat. You’ve won so much. It was worth it to play, wasn’t it?”

Had I won something? Unfortunately, the bones are already gone, the shamans took them. They throw them onto the ground to read the writing in the bones. Too bad. A pity. Because there’s marrow in those bones. I could have sucked the marrow out of that bone, down to the last drop. Now it’s too late. No marrow, no money.⁹

The entertainment district was in the harbor area. You could go for a walk there in the evenings, too, sit in a café, or go to a movie. But I had neither the money nor the strength to get there by taxi in the evening, and it was impossible to do anything by my hotel.

“You may not leave the hotel after sundown. Only the three meters to a taxi you’ve called, but not one step further,”

a hotel employee told me on the first day.

One more week of language lessons, and then I would fly back to my everyday language. I was uneasy, as though I had an operation before me. Evidence of unknown changes was becoming visible here and there. My hands, for example, looked different than before. Particularly the word “hands” as the plural form of hand seemed more impure to me than ever before.

One day, not Mrs. Taal, but another teacher came to the classroom. She looked almost exactly like Mrs. Taal, but it wasn’t her. You had to look closely at her face, otherwise you wouldn’t notice the small transformation. Apparently, I was the only one who noticed this change. The others were sunk deep in their textbooks or stared out the window bored. I was afraid that the new woman had noticed how unsettled I was. Clearly, one shouldn’t have been surprised by her.

In class, there was a German student. When I exchanged words with him, it was like awakening suddenly and exiting my dream. Actually, I wasn’t interested in the origins of the other students. Everyone was learning Afrikaans; the same language came out of each mouth. But one day, by chance, I saw several hundred Marks in this young man’s wallet. They struck my eye like a message. I asked him in German what he thought of the new teacher. He smiled sheepishly but didn’t answer.

On one of the busiest streets there was a restaurant with “game meat” written in English outside in front of the door. The leaflet read that one could eat a dish of mixed crocodile meat here. What was meant by a dish of mixed crocodile meat? What was mixed with what and what was the result? I didn’t have the courage to eat there. But the German student had been there once before.

“What does mixed crocodile meat mean?”

“I don’t know. There were many different kinds of meat, and I didn’t really want to know what was exactly what. Maybe baby meat mixed with adult meat, or saltwater croc mixed with freshwater crocodile, or foreign and domestic products. I really don’t know. In any case, it isn’t the local cuisine, but a fantasy food for foreigners.”

⁹ *Kein Mark. Kein Rand.* A word play with the double meaning of *Mark* as bone marrow [*Knochenmark*] and money [*Deutschmark*], and *Rand* signifying both ‘edge’ as well as the South African currency.

He suggested that we eat together in the evening. But he didn't want to go to the game meat restaurant, but a fish place instead.

We agreed to meet in the restaurant at 8. I got there early, ordered a cup of tea, and waited for him. At twenty past eight, he still wasn't there; at eight-thirty, Mrs. Taal arrived in his stead.

"I'm sorry to have kept you waiting so long,"

she said. I didn't trust myself to ask her whether we had even agreed to meet.

On the revolving counter lay little plates of food, the first dish was white rice filled with yellow radish and rolled in black seaweed, the second was red tuna fish rolled in white rice, the third was a yellow slice of omelet laid on white rice and bound with black seaweed, the fourth was red caviar on white rice, the fifth was a brown mussel on white rice, the sixth was a slice of snow-white squid on less-white rice, the seventh was vanilla ice cream rolled in seaweed. That was supposed to be the dessert. The plates had different colors: green, yellow, red, white, and blue, just like the South African national flag, and each color had a fixed price.

Mrs. Taal carefully touched each plate with elegant movements of her fingers. Her profile unsettled me. Maybe the first and the second Mrs. Taal were really the same person? How did it even occur to me that she had been switched with someone else one day? We spoke about movies, pets, and Mandela.

When we were finished eating and got into a taxi, it occurred to me that the whole evening she hadn't asked the question that everyone else always asked me.

The text that we read in class the next day told of a taxi driver who was driving alone outside of Cape Town at night and saw a corpse lying on the side of the road. It was a girl, half-naked, around 12 years old, her white dress was smeared with blood. The taxi driver didn't touch the corpse and tried to call the police by radio immediately. But it was broken, so he had to drive to the next village to make the call. When the police eventually arrived, the corpse had vanished without a trace. A few months later, a traveler at the same spot saw a corpse which—according to his description—looked exactly like the one the taxi driver had seen. It, too, disappeared immediately; the police didn't catch a glimpse. They founded a commission to investigate this mystery. Eventually, they discovered that about 100 years before, a girl in the neighboring village had been murdered. Her corpse was never found, and the culprit hadn't been arrested because he was an important landowner. When the designated people dug up the side of the road at the spot where the corpse had been seen, they discovered human remains.

The bigmouth was chattering. The tongue that misfired would be removed. But not to worry, every student had multiple tongues behind their lips. I was suddenly also a child and forced into only speaking Afrikaans. If I said something in another language, I was punished. No, I wasn't really a child anymore and the bad times were over, but the language lessons had turned me into a child. An adult could probably better understand the grammar, but a child learned the invisible veins and nervous systems of the language.

The other children had great potential too: too great. The new teacher therefore began with style exercises, the tongue had to learn to stylize. Happy studies, the evil rule was over, we even wanted to make real sentences voluntarily, we could sometimes even

speak without mistakes, but then the sentences became distorted again in our mouths. The murdered girl sat in our classroom, she interrupted, even though she wasn't part of the class. Whenever the girl opened her mouth, we all spoke incorrectly. The girl wanted to tell us her story of the encounter with her murderer. We were confused, and hastily built sentences that were twisted, jumbled, and full of holes. It was satisfying. Because a correct sentence was usually meaningless. The teacher was annoyed and yelled at us: "Why can't you speak properly? What's wrong with you?" We tried to oblige her, but we failed. Maybe it was because we found ourselves somewhere else, and transmitted the sentences from there interlineally, we translated from the never spoken language into one which did not exist, one which would not stop narrating the story of the murder.

"I can't sit in class all day. Let's drive to the beach to see the whales,"
said a student.

"Be quiet!"
said another student.

Just a few more hours of studying, I thought, then I will abandon this child-role and fly back to Hamburg.

"Please read the next practice sentences!"
the teacher ordered me. Suddenly, I felt a new tongue in my mouth, it was cold and tiny.

Exercise 3, a Dialogue

A: *GESONDHEID IN DIE ROUNDHEID*¹⁰

A: Do you feel lust to dance?

B: No thank you. I'm on the pill

A: I am very sweet for you.

Your place or to mine?

B: Not to-day no.

A: How long will it make?

B: Same, just, short, the other day, not much longer, always, sometimes, often, rarely. Never!

A: Your place or to mine?

B: I don't feel tasty, no.

A: I hold from you.

B: I must introduce.

A: How long will it make?

B: It is here wound.

...

A: *GESONDHEID IN DIE ROUNDHEID*!! Thank you. It was tasty to visit here.

¹⁰ Afrikaans in the original, similar to the toast "Cheers!" [literally "health in fullness"]