Fear is my Fuel

By *Madeleine Stratford*

I am not bilingual, like other Canadians, but quadrilingual. I speak and write in French, English, German, and Spanish. Obviously, not all four languages are equal. French, my mother tongue, comes first, closely followed by English, its sister from another mother, so to speak. German and Spanish came into my life later, but also more or less at the same time: I like to think of them as adopted, heterozygous twins. I often slip or code switch. Keeping my languages in check requires constant efforts.

I was born in the Eastern Townships, a region of southeastern Quebec founded by loyalists, just north of Vermont. I have a French name and an English surname, but we spoke French at home. My English roots supposedly date back to my great-great-great-grandfather. My father's father, James, used to say that our ancestor, William Stratford, was an Englishman who enrolled in the Spanish Marines, sailed to the States, deserted, fled to Canada, married a Quebecer and that our family spoke French from then on. It sounded like fiction, but Grandpa had not gone to school long enough to know about Europe or Spain, so we all believed him.

I learned English very early on, when my parents decided, one day, that we would go to St. Patrick's, an Irish Catholic church in Sherbrooke. I must have been four or five when I discovered Sunday school, a concept that did not exist in Francophone churches. For me, it was a revelation that had nothing to do with religion or catechism, and everything to do with culture, communication, and language. It was then, as a five-year-old struggling with a budding form of acquired bilingualism, that I became aware that different languages expressed thoughts in different ways, and that these were not always equivalent, not completely anyway. I had barely learned how to express my thoughts and needs, how to understand and be understood, when I suddenly met new people who spoke otherwise and discovered words that sounded different, mysterious. I was confronted with the renewed, painful, very real urge to communicate… at any cost. I was frightened, yet elated: in my mind, language was sacred, and thus terrifying… and ardently coveted.

At the time, I was far from suspecting that I would one day recreate the work of others, both in French and in English. I also did not know that I would feel the same anguish, the same urge to understand and be understood again at 16, in my first German-language class. A straight-A student all the way through high school, I panicked. The teacher kept repeating things like "Wie heiβen Sie?" and "Wie alt sind Sie?", strings of mysterious syllables that sounded like questions, but how could I possibly know? For the first time in years, I decoded nothing – nothing for sure. I felt completely lost. When I came home that night, I burst into tears, convinced that I would never be able to speak German. I went on to fight through my fear of the unknown, just as I had done as a child.

Fear drove me then, as it did a couple of years later when I enrolled – by mistake – in Introduction to Spanish Literature. I had meant to register in Introduction to Spanish Culture (which was taught in English, no less!). The previous year, my Spanish teacher, impressed with my progress, had given me a novel by Isabel Allende. I laboriously deciphered a few pages until I just gave up, convinced that I could never finish the first

chapter. The night of my first class, I was so nervous that I spilled orange juice all over the professor's notes. Despite my fear of Spanish fiction – and of being killed by my professor – I lived through the whole semester, and was eventually able to read that Allende novel over the winter holidays.

My linguistic journey has been marked by fear, and so has my experience as a literary translator. I translate people who are never me, texts that are never mine. My life is necessarily different from my authors'. This is why I carefully choose whom I translate. Their age, gender, sexual orientation, religion, or the colour of their skin bears no weight in my decision. I need to feel an affinity, a pull, something I can hold on to for dear life. Sometimes I feel the need to get in contact with my authors, or even meet them in the flesh. Sometimes it is not possible, because they prefer not to be involved, or because they are no longer around to help. Whenever I sign a new contract, I know what I am getting myself into. I am always fearful, yet determined, just as I was as a child, a teenager, and a young adult, still unsure, still learning. Fear keeps me focused. Determination keeps me going. Translation is scary, and it should be. It is a responsibility. It is a calling. It is a noble craft.



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