

“Tammet’s intriguing cases of linguistic idiosyncrasies expand our notions of what it means to be human.” —Amy Tan

EVERY WORD

IS A BIRD

WE TEACH

TO SING

Encounters with the Mysteries and Meanings of Language

DANIEL TAMMET

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
Thinking in Numbers and *Born on a Blue Day*

CONTENTS

Cover

Title Page

Copyright

Dedication

ONE [Finding My Voice](#)

TWO [The Language Teacher](#)

THREE [You Are What You Say](#)

FOUR [A Poet Savant](#)

FIVE [Cuecueiuca](#)

SIX [A Clockwork Language](#)

SEVEN [The Man Who Was Friday](#)

EIGHT [Icelandic Names](#)

NINE [Dead Man Talking](#)

TEN [An Englishman at L'Académie Française](#)

ELEVEN [OuLiPo](#)

TWELVE [Talking Hands](#)

THIRTEEN [Translating Faithfully](#)

FOURTEEN [A Grammar of the Telephone](#)

FIFTEEN [Conversational Human](#)

Acknowledgments

About the Author

Also by Daniel Tammet

Praise for Daniel Tammet's *Every Word is a Bird We
Teach To Sing*

Newsletters

In loving memory of my father

One

FINDING MY VOICE

Though English was the language of my parents, the language in which I was raised and schooled, I have never felt I belonged to it. I learned my mother tongue self-consciously, quite often confusedly, as if my mother were a foreigner to me, and her sole language my second. Always, in some corner of my child mind, a running translation was struggling to keep up. To say this word or that word in other words. To recompose the words of a sentence like so many pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. Years before doctors informed me of my high-functioning autism and the disconnect it causes between man and language, I had to figure out the world as best I could. I was a misfit. The world was made up of words. But I thought and felt and sometimes dreamed in a private language of numbers.

In my mind each number had a shape—complete with color and texture and occasionally motion (a neurological phenomenon that scientists call synesthesia)—and each shape a meaning. The meaning could be pictographic: eighty-nine, for instance, was dark blue, the color of a sky threatening storm; a beaded texture; and a fluttering, whirling, downward motion I understood as “snow” or, more broadly, “winter.” I remember, one winter, seeing snow fall outside my bedroom window for the first time. I was seven. The snow, pure white and thick-flaked, piled many inches high upon the ground,

transforming the gray concrete of the neighborhood into a virgin, opalescent tundra. “Snow,” I gasped to my parents. “Eighty-nine,” I thought. The thought had hardly crossed my mind when I had another: nine hundred and seventy-nine. The view from my window resembled nine hundred and seventy-nine—the shimmer and beauty of eleven expanding, literally multiplying eighty-nine’s wintry swirl. I felt moved. My parents’ firstborn, I had been delivered at the end of a particularly cold and snowy January in 1979. The coincidence did not escape me. Everywhere I looked, it seemed, there were private meanings writ large.

Was it from that moment—the sudden sense that my meanings corresponded to the wider world—that I first had the urge to communicate? Until that moment, I had never felt the need to open up to another person: not to my parents or siblings, let alone to any of the other children at my school. Now, suddenly, a feeling lived in me, for which I had neither name nor number (it was a little like the sadness of six, but different). I eventually learned the feeling was what we call loneliness. I had no friends. But how could I make myself understood to children from whom I felt so estranged? We spoke differently, thought differently. The other children hadn’t the faintest idea (how could they?) that the relationship between eighty-nine and nine hundred and seventy-nine was like the relationship between, say, *diamond* and *adamant*. And with what words might I have explained that eleven and forty-nine, my mental logograms, rhymed? A visual rhyme. I would have liked nothing better than to share with my classmates some of my poems made of numbers:

Sixty-one two two two two eleven
One hundred and thirty-one forty-nine

But I kept the poems to myself. The children at school intimidated me. In the playground every mouth was a shout,

a snort, an insult. And the more the children roared, the more they laughed and joked in my direction, the less I dared approach them and attempt to strike up a conversation. Besides, I did not know what a conversation sounded like.

I renounced the idea of making friends. I had to admit that I wasn't ready. I retreated into myself, into the certainties of my numerical language. Alone with my thoughts in the relative calm and quiet of my bedroom, I dwelled on my number shapes, on their grammar. One hundred and eighty-one, a prime number, was a tall shiny symmetrical shape like a spoon. When I doubled it—modified its shape with that of two, which was a sort of “doing” number—it equated to a verb. So that three hundred and sixty-two had the meaning of “to eat” or “to consume” (more literally, “to move a spoon”). It was the mental picture that always announced that I was hungry. Other pictures that rose up in me could morph in a similar way, depending on the action they described and whether it was external or internal to me: thirteen (a rhythmic descending motion) if a raindrop on the windowpane caught my gaze, twenty-six if I tired and sensed myself drifting off to sleep.

My understanding of language as something visual carried over to my relationship with books once I became a library-goer and regularly tugged large, slender, brightly colored covers down from the shelves. Even before I could make out the words, I fell under the spell of *The Adventures of Tintin*. The boy with the blond quiff and his little sidekick dog, Snowy. Speech in bubbles; emotions in bold characters and exclamation marks; the story smoothly unfolding from picture to altered picture. Each frame was fit to pore over, so finely and minutely detailed: a mini-story in itself. Stories within stories, like numbers within numbers: I was mesmerized.

The same understanding, the same excitement, also helped me learn to read. This was my luck, since reading had

not initially come easily to me. Except for the occasional word of comfort the night after a nightmare, my parents never read me bedtime stories, and because the antiepileptic medicine I was prescribed at a young age made me drowsy in class, I was never precocious. I have memories of constantly falling pages behind the other children, of intense bouts of concentration in order to catch up. My delight in the shapes of the words in my schoolbooks, their visual impression on me, made the difference. One of the books, I remember, contained an illustration of a black-cloaked witch, all sharp angles, astride her broom. To my six-year-old imagination, the letter *W* was a pair of witches' hats, side by side and hanging upside down, as from a nail.

Back in those days, the mid-eighties, it was possible for a teacher to give her young charge a repurposed tobacco tin (mine was dark-green and gold) in which new words, written in clear letters on small rectangular cards, were to be brought home for learning. From that time on I kept a list of words according to their shape and texture: words round as a three (*gobble, cupboard, cabbage*); pointy as a four (*jacket, wife, quick*); shimmering as a five (*kingdom, shoemaker, surrounded*). One day, intent on my reading, I happened on *lollipop* and a shock of joy coursed through me. I read it as *1011ipop*. One thousand and eleven, divisible by three, was a fittingly round number shape, and I thought it the most beautiful thing I had yet read: half number and half word.

I grew; my vocabulary grew. Curt sentences in my schoolbooks' prim typeset; lessons the teacher chalked up on the blackboard; breathless adjectives on crinkly flyers that intruded via the letterbox; pixelated headlines in the pages of Ceefax ("See Facts"), the BBC's teletext service. All these and many more besides I could read and write, and spell backward as well as forward, but not always pronounce. Only rarely did words reach me airborne, via a radio or a stranger's mouth. (I watched television for the pictures—I was forever

lowering the sound.) If I surprised my father talking to the milkman at the door, or my mother sharing gossip with a neighbor over the garden fence, I would try to listen in—and abruptly tune out. As sounds and social currency, words could not yet hold me. Instead, I lavished my attention on arranging and rearranging them into sentences, playing with them as I played with the number shapes in my head, measuring the visual effect of, for instance, interlacing round three-y words with pointy four-y ones, or of placing several five-y words, all a gleam, in a row.

A classmate called Babak was the first person to whom I showed my sentences. He was his parents' image. They were thin, gentle people who had fled the Ayatollah's Iran several years before for the anonymity of a London suburb; they had recently enrolled their son at my school. Babak was reassuringly unlike the other children, with his thick black hair and crisp English and a head both for words and numbers. In his backyard one warm weekend, sitting opposite me on the grass, he looked up from the Scrabble board to read the crumpled sheet of lined notepaper I was nervously holding out to him.

“Interesting. Is it a poem?”

I sat still, my head down, staring at a spot between the numbered tiles. I could feel his inquisitive brown eyes on me. Finally, I shrugged and said, “I don't know.”

“Doesn't matter. It's interesting.”

This was also the opinion of my headmaster. How exactly my writing reached him remains, to this day, something of a mystery to me. I was ten. The class had been reading H. G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds*; and, in a state of high excitement induced by the graphic prose, I had been rushing home every day after class to the solitude of my bedroom to write—cautiously, to begin with, then compulsively. Of this story, my first sustained piece of writing, my mind has retained only fragments: winding descriptions of labyrinthine

tunnels; outlines of sleek spaceships that blot out the sky; laser guns spending laser bullets, turning the air electric. No dialogue. The story inhabited me, overpowered me. It quickly exceeded every line of every page of every pad of notepaper in the house. So that the first my teacher heard of it was the afternoon, after class, when I blushed crimson and asked whether I might help myself to a roll of the school's computer printout paper. I could, but in exchange I had to confide in her the purpose. The following week, softly, she asked me how the story was coming along. She wanted to see it. I went away and brought back, with difficulty, the many pages filled with my tiny, neat hand to her desk. She said to leave them with her. I hesitated, then agreed. Did she, upon reading the story, decide to urge it upon the headmaster? Or did the headmaster, visiting the teacher or simply passing by, happen on it? However it came to him, one morning during the school assembly, breaking from his usual headmaster patter, he announced that he was going to read an extract from my story to the hall. I hadn't expected that. Not without so much as a word of warning from my teacher! I had never seen the headmaster read aloud a pupil's work. I couldn't bring myself to listen along with the other students. Out of nerves and embarrassment, I put my palms to my ears—it was one of my habits—and fixed my eyes on the whorls of dust on the floor. But after the assembly, children who had never so much as given me the time of day came up and greeted me smilingly, tapping me on the shoulders, saying "Great story" or words to that effect. The headmaster would have awarded my story a prize, he made a point of telling me later in his office, if only he had had such a prize to give. His encouragement was a fine enough substitute, which I treasured. So I was crestfallen when I had to move on to high school soon afterward and, in lieu of deploying my imagination to compose new stories, was made to regurgitate umpteen examination-friendly facts. The talent peeping out from

under my shyness and social bewilderment I would have to nourish more or less on my own, I realized, foraging for whatever extracurricular sustenance I might find.

It was among the bookcases of the municipal library that I spent most of my adolescence, as fluent by then in the deciphering of texts as I remained inept in conversation. These years of reading, I see now, were a way of apprenticing myself with voices of wisdom, the multitudinous accents of human experience, listening sedulously to each with my bespectacled eyes. Growing in empathy book by book, from puberty onward I increasingly set aside the illustrated encyclopedias and dictionaries in favor of history books, biographies, and memoirs. I pushed myself to go further still, intellectually and emotionally, into the fatter novels of Adult Fiction.

I was afraid of this kind of fiction. Afraid of feeling lost in the intricacies of a social language I had not mastered (and feared I never might). Afraid that the experience would shake whatever small self-confidence I had. A good part of the fault for this lay on my high school English classes and their “required reading.” If Shakespeare—his outlandish characters and strange diction (which we read in a side-by-side translation to contemporary English)—had fascinated me, Dickens had seemed interminable and Hardy’s *Jude the Obscure* very obscure indeed.

But in the municipal library I had the freedom of the shelves. I could browse at my ease. The works I looked at were not the thematic or didactic stories told by wordy, know-it-all narrators that examiners use for their set questions. They were shorter novels by living writers: artfully concise personal reflections on modern life (ranging from the 1950s to the year just past) written by and for a socioeconomic class that was not my own. But for all that, they were approachable. Partly I went to them for the past readers’ marginalia—for the crabbed, scribbled words of agreement or

annoyance or wonder, which imparted unintended clues to the meaning of a particular sentence or paragraph. Also for the creases and thumbprints and coffee stains on the pages, reminders that books are also social objects—gateways between our internal and external worlds. And partly for the characters' dialogue, their verbal back-and-forth clearly set out and punctuated, integral to the story. So this is how people talk, I would think, as I read. This is what conversation looks like.

And some nights, I dreamed I watched the dialogic patterns converted into my number shapes:

“Twelve seventy one nine two hundred and fifty-seven.”

“Two hundred and fifty-seven?”

“Two!”

“Four. Sixteen.”

“Seventeen.”

When I was nearing matriculation from high school, Frau Corkhill, who had been my German teacher for several years, began inviting me over to her house for late-afternoon lessons in conversation—more in English than German.

I sorely needed such practice. Outside of the family, where so much can be meant and understood without even needing to utter a word, I was able to say little that didn't come out sounding clunky, off-topic, or plain odd. For templates I relied mostly on the dialogues I had studied in the library novels; but such schemas, however many I studied, however well performed, would only ever, I came to realize, get me so far. I was almost a young man: the urge to communicate had begun to take on a new charge. One day, in history class, the sight of a new boy brought my thumping heart into my throat, and my attraction compelled me to try to converse with him. I talked and talked, happy to be anxious, but what had looked so good and persuasive on the page of a novel fell flat in my strangled voice, which was unpracticed and monotonous. The courage I'd mustered

vanished into mortification. More than mortification. Seven hundred and fifty-seven (a shape which I can only compare to a ginger root): an acute feeling—arising from immense desire to communicate, aligned with a commensurate incapacity to do so—for which English has no precise equivalent.

Frau Corkhill was a short and stout and red-haired woman, at retirement age or thereabouts, and the object of much sniggering from some of the pupil population for her various eccentricities. She ate raw garlic cloves by the bulbful. She wore flower print dresses and fluorescent socks. She merely smiled a bright red lipstick smile and gazed up wistfully at the ceiling when any other teacher would have bawled an undisciplined student out of the room. Such behavior was, in my view, neither here nor there. She doted on me. She was like a grandmother to me. She seemed to intuit the invisible difficulties against which I had fought all through my childhood. I remember the day she gave me her telephone number, an attractive medley of fours and sevens, shortly before I was to change classes. The first three digits after the area code became my nickname for her. Before long, I called and accepted her invitation to the house. Every week for the next year, I rode the red double-decker the twenty or so minutes to her door.

These lessons-slash-discussions with Frau Corkhill were the highlight of my week. She was a woman of infinite patience, a professional at making light of others' mistakes, at correcting by example rather than by admonishment. Her home was a space in which I could talk and exchange without fear of being taken for a conversational klutz. We sat in the living room next to a bay window overlooking the rose garden, on high-backed chairs at a table dressed in a frilly white cloth, a tray and china tea set in its center, like a scene out of a library novel.

We talked about the school, about whatever was in the news. Sometimes we changed language, English to German

and back again. Frau Corkhill's English was unique, her accent part German and part Geordie (*Corkhill*, her married name, is a common surname in northern England). Strange to think, I had not noticed people's accents before. Strange to remember my surprise when a classmate informed me that my pronunciation of *th* was off (my Cockney father's fault). I had not known to notice.

But now, talking with Frau Corkhill, I understood how many Englishes must exist. Hers, mine: two among countless others.

In writing the story of my formative years in the words I had back in 2005 (I was twenty-six), with feeling but without confidence or high finish, I found my voice. The international success of *Born on a Blue Day* began a conversation with readers from around the world. Where some British and American critics saw only a one-off "disability genre" memoir, the account of a "numbers wiz," German and Spanish and Brazilian and Japanese readers saw something else, and sent letters urging me to continue writing. Many referred to a closing chapter in which I recounted a public reading I had given at the Museum of the History of Science, in Oxford, in 2004. The subject of my reading was not a book, not the work of any published name, but a number: pi. Over the three preceding wintry months, like an actor analyzing his script, I had rehearsed the number from home, assimilating its unstinting digits by the hundreds of hundreds, until I knew the first 22,514, a European record's worth, by heart. On the fourteenth of March, I narrated this most beautiful of epic poems, an *Odyssey* or an *Iliad* composed of numbers, in a performance spanning five hours, to the hall. For the first time in my life I spoke aloud in my numerical language (albeit, necessarily, in English words), at length, passionately, fluently. And if, in the early minutes of my recitation, I worried that the small crowd of curious listeners might comprehend about as much as if I were performing in

Chinese, shake their heads, turn their backs on me and leave, all my fears quickly evaporated. As I gathered momentum, acquired rhythm, I sensed the men and women lean forward, alert and rapt. With each pronounced digit their concentration redoubled and silenced competing thoughts. Meditative smiles broadened faces. Some in the audience were even moved to tears. In those numbers I had found the words to express my deepest emotions. In my person, through my breath and body, the numbers spoke to the motley attendees on that bright March morning and afternoon.

The numbers also spoke through the printed page to my far-flung readers, came alive in their minds, regardless of the translation that conveyed them. My lifelong struggle to find my voice, my obsession with language, appeared to them, as it did to me, like a vocation.

I'd written a book and had it published. But it remained unclear whether a young man on the autistic spectrum could have other books in him. No tradition of autistic writing existed (indeed, some thought *autistic author* a contradiction in terms). I had no models (though, later, I made the discovery that Lewis Carroll—possibly—and Les Murray, the Australian poet and Nobel Prize candidate, to name only two, shared my condition), no material. I was on my own.

But then another reader's letter arrived. It was in French, a language I had studied in high school, from a young Frenchman named Jérôme, who would, in time, become my husband. Through months of thoughtful and playful correspondence, Jérôme and I fell in love. For him, for his country and language, I chose willingly to leave the country and the language I had never felt were mine. We moved to Avignon, then north to Paris, settling among the bistros and *bouquinistes* of Saint-Germain-des-Prés.

Before Jérôme, I had largely given up on literature. Novels and I had long since parted company. Now, though, in our

apartment, surrounded by our books (Jérôme owned many books), we sat together at a brown teak table and, taking turns, read aloud from the French translation of Dostoyevsky's *L'Idiot*. My voice when I read, as when I had recited the number pi, seemed at once intimate and distant: another voice in mine, enlarging and enriching it. And, as with pi, I understood and became enthralled.

Reading a Russian work in French, I was not invaded by the feeling of foreignness that the pages of English novels had roused in me. On the contrary, I felt at home. I could, at last, read unencumbered by my self-consciousness, solely for the pleasure of learning new words and discovering new worlds. I could read for the sake of reading.

Dostoyevsky's reputation, a powerful intermediary between his work and modern readers, would once have daunted and kept me away. But Dostoyevsky's language proved to be picture perfect. A case in point is the character General Ivolgin, the smell of whose cigar provokes a haughty English lady traveling with her lapdog in the same compartment to pluck the cigar from between his fingers and toss it out the train. Yet the general just sits there, seemingly unfazed by the lady's behavior. Quick as a flash and ever so smoothly, he leans over and chucks her little dog out after his cigar. I remember my voice, in the telling, interrupted by my own shocked laughter, and how my merriment communicated itself to Jérôme and had him in stitches.

It wasn't only Dostoyevsky who could so affect us. In the following months we laughed and gasped over Isaac Babel's short stories. Kawabata's *Le Grondement de la Montagne* (*The Sound of the Mountain*)—the tale of an old man's ailing memory—brought tears to my voice. The visual music of *Paroles* by Jacques Prévert reverberated in my head long after I closed its covers.

Then, one day, as if removing the stabilizers from a child's bicycle, Jérôme ceased to accompany my literary

reading. I did not wobble. And, after devouring both tomes of Tolstoy's *Guerre et Paix*, I tried the Russian master's *Anna Karenina* in English, and the heroine's passions, Levin's and Kitty's foibles, Vronsky's contradictions all affected me so greatly that I clean forgot the apprehension of my former reading life. Something had worked itself in my head. All literature, I finally realized with a jolt, amounted to an act of translation: a condensing, a sifting, a realignment of the author's thought-world into words. The reassuring corollary—reassuring to a novice writer like myself, just starting out: the translatoresque of bad prose could be avoided, provided the words were faithful to the mental pictures the author saw. I had more than one book in me. And each of my subsequent books—a survey of popular neuroscience, a collection of essays inspired by mathematical ideas, a translation/adaptation into French of Les Murray's poetry—was different. Each taught me what my limits weren't. I could do this. And this. And this as well. All the time that I was writing, I was also studying in my after-hours with the UK's distance learning higher education institution, the Open University. In 2016, at the age of thirty-seven, I graduated with a first-class honors bachelor of arts degree in the humanities. I published my first novel that same spring in France.

I have not yet written my last English sentence, despite ten years spent on the continent and despite the increasing distillation of my words from French. That choice, renewed here, is an homage to my British parents and teachers. A recognition, too, of the debt I owe to a language commodious enough even for a voice like mine. English made a foreigner of me, but also a writer. It has become the faithful chronicler of my metamorphosis.

Two

THE LANGUAGE TEACHER

Everything I know about teaching a foreign language, I learned in Lithuania.

It was 1998. I was nineteen, unready for university, full of wanderlust and good intentions. I enrolled in a government-run volunteer program that sent young men and women overseas. I could have been sent to Poland to nanny little Mateuszes and Weronikas or to a clinic in Russia short of file finders or to wash dishes in a hotel who knows where in the Czech Republic or to the British embassy in Slovenia, whose front desk needed manning.

Instead I was dispatched to Lithuania, to the city of Kaunas. I couldn't speak a word of Lithuanian. My innocence of the language didn't seem to matter, though. A young Englishman with passable French and German (Lithuanian bore no relation to either) was apparently sufficient for instructing the job-seeking inhabitants eager to learn English.

I remember taking the airplane from London to the capital city of Vilnius. The thrill of takeoff. To feel airborne! No one in my family had ever flown before. "Head in the clouds," my father had sometimes said of me. And now his words, once a mere expression, had come literally true.

The nations of the former Soviet Union were shown to us in Western newscasts as uniformly gray, dilapidated, Russified. But the Lithuania I arrived in, only a few years after

Moscow's tanks had slunk away, had reason for optimism. The population was youngish, new shiny buildings were sprouting up here and there, and, despite fifty years of foreign occupation, Lithuanian habits and customs had lived on.

It took time to adjust. Little shocks of unfamiliarity had to be absorbed. October in London was autumnal; in Kaunas, the cold reminded me of a British winter. Snow was already in the offing. And then there was the funny money, the *litas*, in which my volunteer stipends were paid. But strangest, in those first days, was the language, so unlike the sounds and rhythms of any other language I had heard. An old man in my apartment block stops me in the stairwell to tell me something keen and musical—what is it? Children in the street sing a song—what is it about? Unintelligible, too, were the headlines and captions the inky newspapers carried. They looked like a secret code. How I wished to work out the cipher!

A code breaker. But the Lithuanian learning kit the program's staff had given me was small. In less experienced hands, the kit—really a pocket dictionary and phrasebook—would have seemed futile; there was nothing an imagination could fasten onto. I knew better. I sat at my apartment desk, opened the dictionary, about the size of a deck of cards, and flicked the wispy, nearly transparent pages to the word for *language*: *kalba*. As words went, it struck me as beautiful. Beautiful and fitting. Suddenly other words, in other languages, swam in my head: the English *gulp*, the Finnish *kello* (“bell”). Less the words than the various meanings behind them: *gulp*, a mouthful of air; *bell*, a metal tongue. In this way, *kalba* I understood intuitively as something of the mouth, of the tongue. (Like *language*, whose Latin ancestor, *lingua*, means “tongue.”)

Fingering the pages again, hearing them crinkle, I turned them at random and read *puodelis*, cup. If *kalba* was a word to

were soporific beyond any teacher's skill or enthusiasm. If I continued to work from them, as the volunteer before me had, whatever remained of the women's hopes of speaking serviceable English might have been crushed for good. I resolved to drop the book. To teach differently. How? I did not know. Even so, my attitude was that I would find another approach in time for the next lesson.

I racked my brain to find a more natural, more enjoyable, method.

It came to me late that evening at my apartment while I sat in an armchair reading from the little Lithuanian-English dictionary as had become my habit. I was up to the letter O when the entry *obuolys* ("apple") made me stop and put the book down. I closed my eyes. Suddenly I recalled the moment, ten years ago, when I discovered the existence of non-English words, that is to say, other nations' languages.

Back in east London, exceedingly shy, almost housebound, I had gotten to know one of my kid sister's girlfriends, who lived a few doors down. The blond mother of this blond girl was Finnish (I had no idea what *Finnish* meant), and, to teach her daughter the language, one day she gave her a bright Finnish picture book. The gift, as it turned out, went unopened; the girl had no interest in words my sister and her other friends would never have understood. She left the picture book with us.

Cover-wise it looked like any other unthumbed picture book, but once inside I sat astonished. On every page, below the colorful illustration of an everyday object, a word that didn't quite look like a word. A word intended for another kind of child. Finnish!

Of all the impressions this book made on me, the red apple accompanied by the noun *omena* left the deepest. There was something about the distribution of the vowels, the roundness of the consonants, that fascinated. I felt that I was seeing double, for the picture seemed to mirror the word and

vice versa. Both word and picture represented an apple by means of lines.

The next day, on my way to the center, I stopped in at a grocery store and bought a bag of apples. When the women filed into the classroom and saw the pyramid of red and green apples on my table, I said, “Yesterday some of you said you knew no English. That’s not true. You know lots of English words. You know *bar*.”

“*Baras*,” Aida said.

“Right. And *restaurant*.”

One of the women at the back shouted, “*Restoranas*.”

“Yes. And *history, istorija, and philosophy, filosofija*.”

Birutė, sitting near the front, said, “*Telephone*.”

“*Telefonas*. You see? Lots of words.” I turned to the apples.

“*Taksi*,” someone said.

“Yes, well, the list is long. What about these on my table?”

The women replied as one, “*Obuoliai!*”

Apples.

I told my students about the picture book, and the story of the red apple. Birutė translated for me. I said, “If you can draw an apple, you can learn the word *apple*.” After I had asked them to take out their pencils and paper, I went to lift and give out the pile of fruit; but I misjudged the gesture and heard the hapless apples slip from my grasp and roll off along the floor.

Women’s laughter.

I bent down and picked up the apples and put one on each of the student’s desks. I was laughing, too. But concentration quickly replaced the levity. Heads were lowered; brows were creased; pencils were plied. A quarter of an hour or so later I told the students to stop. Their drawings ranged from colored-in circles to Birutė’s delicate sketch, complete with shading.

“When you put pencil to paper you don’t draw the apple as such, you draw its shape and texture and color,” Birutė

translated. “Each aspect is proportional to the drawer’s experiences. So one apple might be round like a tennis ball; a second, glossy as plastic; a third, baby-cheek red.” I said the word *apple* was another form of drawing. “You draw *a-p-p-l-e*.” As I spoke, I wrote the letters in red on the whiteboard. “An initial *A*, consecutive *P*’s, an *L*, and a final *E*. Your imagination can play with them as it plays with shape and color. Mix them around. Subtract or add a letter. Tweak the sound of *P* to *B*.” In the way that an apple can make a sketcher think of a tennis ball, or plastic, or a baby’s cheeks, an *apple* can bring to an English mind a *stable*, or a *cobbler*, or *pulp*, I explained.

Then I told the women to take out their dictionaries and find other *apple*-like words.

Birutė’s face lit up: she understood. Her pen, busy with words, ran quickly across the sheet of paper. The others wrote more tentatively. Empty lines glared at the women with least English.

“Turn the pages of your dictionary in the direction of the letter *P*,” I encouraged. “Look for possible words in combinations like *P* something *L*, or *PL* something, or *P* something something *L*, and so on. Or turn to the front and search for words that begin *BL*. Or think about how English words handle a pair of *P*’s or *B*’s, how they push them to the middle—*apple* and *cobble*—or out to the extremes—*pulp*. Birutė, can you translate that please?” Birutė repeated my words, but in Lithuanian.

When the students had finished writing down their findings, they took turns reading them aloud to the class. One lady came up with *bulb*; another, *appetite*; a third, *palpable*. A fourth in the corner, relishing the sudden attention of the room, shouted, “Plop!” Just the sound conjured apples falling out of trees from ripeness.

“Apple pie,” Aida suggested suddenly.

I nodded. On the whiteboard appeared *apple pie*.

Out of her store of words, duly put to paper, Biruté joined in: “Pips. Peel. Plate. Ate. Eat.”

I was delighted. She had let the language think for her.

We stayed with the exercise for the following lessons. We found *car* in *chair* and *wet* in *towel*, and *window* brought us, word by word, to *interview*; and as the students’ vocabularies filled out, so did their confidence. The mood in the classroom lightened; betterment seemed only another lesson away. Even those with the least English found themselves writing and speaking more and more. Enthusiastic students don’t make good dunces.

Some English words, my students and I decided, are diagrams. We looked at *look*—the *o*’s like eyes; and at how the letters in *dog*—the *d* like a left-looking head, the *g* like a tail—limned the animal. We admired the symmetry, so apt, of *level*. Other words are optical illusions: *moon*, after you have covered the first or third leg of the letter *m*, turns night into day: *noon*. *Desserts* is a mouth-waterer of a word, or a mouth-dryer, depending on which direction—left to right, or right to left—the reader takes it in. Still other words are like successive images in a flip book. See how the *T* advances:

Stain

Satin

Saint

I spent a whole lesson explaining a type of word I might have classified as impressionistic. They are the words that most sway the eye, tease the ear, intrigue the tongue. Those that give off a certain vibe just by their being seen and heard and repeated. Consider *slant*, I said. I wrote the word on the whiteboard. Did Biruté know it? No, Biruté didn’t know it. None of the students had read or heard it before. That could have made them tetchily impatient, but it didn’t. With my new teacher’s nerves abating, and Biruté translating, I felt

sure I wasn't in any danger of losing the room. I was in complete command. So I said, "Let's stay a few moments with *slant*. What kind of a word picture is *slant*? Do its letters, their corresponding sounds, give the impression that the word refers to something light or heavy? Or to something opaque? Shiny? Smooth?" (Part of teaching a language is educating your student's guesses, taming them.) Opinion in the class was divided. A good many of the women, though, said the sight and sound made them think of something negative rather than positive, something on the heavy side. I went to the spot on the board beside *slant* and continued writing: *sleep*, *slide*, *slope*, and *slump*. What did they all have in common? Visually, and audibly, lots. The words were the same length; they had the same onset—*sl*; they closed on a *p*, *t*, or *d*. And their meanings? I raised my left hand to eye level and lowered it. *Sleep*: a stander or sitter lies down. *Slide* and *slope*: a descent. *Slump*: a company's stock plummets. The words formed a polyptych, a series of interrelated pictures. *Slant*, then? The women raised their hands and lowered them. "Like this," I said, raising my left hand again and lowering it diagonally: my hand, a translator of *slant*.

With the forefinger of my left hand I drew a circle around my nose and mouth. "Smell," I said. "Smile." I smiled. "Smirk." I made a face. "Smoke." I brought an air cigarette to my lips. "Smother." I clapped a palm over my mouth. "Sneeze." I pretended to sneeze. "Snore." I pretended to snore. "Sniff," I said, sniffing. "Sneer," I said, sneering. Another polyptych in words.

"Snail," Birutė said. "What about *snail*?"

"Like tongues," I said. "Tongues with shells." And added, once the laughter had subsided, "Of course, not every word fits into a particular frame."

But many did. Our imaginations, during part of the rest of the lesson, painted in *thumps* and *stomps* and *bumps* and *whomps* the colors of a bruise. Next, the broken, kinetic lines

happiness, happiness. As the Lithuanians say, thanks for the poppies, but I would like bread. I almost gave up.

But chance intervened. I had wandered out to the dust-collecting reaches of the library. I stumbled on a slim volume—very old to judge by the worn, flaky cover—by a poet named Kazys Binkis. Suddenly my imagination woke up. Clouds that sauntered like calves along fields of sky; forests in May colors; recipes in which thoughts were measured out in grams—I instantly decided not to hand in my pass. “Was there perhaps a bilingual edition?” I asked one of the librarians. I was thinking of using it in my class. The sallow, gray-haired librarian (he didn’t look like he had ever tasted a snowflake) shook his head. He pointed at a remote bookcase—foreign literature; *foreign* here meaning English, mostly—where I found an anthology of British and American poems and checked it out with the Binkis. The library’s poetry section henceforth kept my students and me in texts.

I was coming out of the classroom one afternoon when I heard the director’s door open, heard my name called in her stentorian voice, and her jewelry jingle as she stepped back inside her office. It wasn’t the first time that the director had asked a staff member into her office, but until now, if her voice resounded in the center, it was never with the curiously accented syllables of “DAN-i-el.” When I tapped at her door and went in, she was at her desk leafing through the English textbook. The impressive perm made her head look very big. She said, “I hear strange things about your class. I don’t understand. What a secretary of bees? What does it mean?” My students had steadily been working through the library’s anthology, and in the past few lessons we had been looking at the poems of Sylvia Plath. “Here is the secretary of bees” is from “The Bee Meeting,” I explained.

“But there no such thing. No such thing as secretary of bees.” Incomprehension aged her. She was suddenly all frowns and worry lines. “It not correct English. The center

has textbooks to teach correct English. See?” Her ringed finger tapped a sentence on the page in front of her. “Here. Like this.” She read aloud from the textbook: “John’s secretary makes coffee in the morning.” She read the sentence as crisply as a prosecutor putting her case to a court. “Why not use this sentence instead?”

“John’s secretary makes coffee in the morning.” It was a grammatical sentence. But then so was “Here is the secretary of bees.” And without any of the textbook’s blandness. Only the latter induced the students’ attention. I spoke carefully.

“The textbook’s sentence is, shall we say, factual. It contains a lot of facts. There is someone called John; John has a secretary; the secretary makes coffee; the coffee is made in the morning. One fact after another and another. They make no pictures. Everything is simply assumed. The world is the world. And in the world Johns have secretaries, and secretaries make coffee, and coffee is drunk in the morning.”

“What wrong with that?” the director demanded. Her accent was Russian.

“Memory—for one thing. Lots of facts go forgotten. No fact, no word. The student’s language becomes full of gaps. Whereas the other kind of sentence is different; it doesn’t assume anything. It’s not a fact; it’s a picture. The students can imagine what a secretary of bees would look like. And imagining, they understand and remember better.”

As I spoke, I sensed that the director and I had irreconcilable differences concerning how a language ought to be taught. Even so, she heard me out. I said that each word in a textbook, being a fact, could mean more or less only one thing. A word in a poem, on the other hand, could say ten different things. When Plath writes of hearing someone’s speech “thick as foreign coffee,” *coffee* here means so much more than it does in the hands of John’s docile secretary. The line stimulates the reader’s interest. *Thick* and *foreign* are lent an aura of unfamiliarity. Questions begin to multiply. How