ESSAY

New Words, New Worlds

by Alina Zollfrank



"Sunflower Yellow" by Vanesa Erjavec

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It snoozes on the bookshelf, slightly dusty and, upon further inspection, as battered as I remember. The soft, sunflower-yellow cover is warped and has detached from the spine; only traces of adhesive remain. The seams are jagged. Loose pages, many out of order, all of them subdued with a once-brown, brittle rubber band, form a sticky whole. When I run my thumb across the edge to let them fan open, they whisper back tenderly. How many times have I flicked through and further softened the paper? Uncountable. But the palm-sized Englisch-Deutsch dictionary smells the way it did decades ago, and on the inside cover, my hastily scribbled notes — many of them only a smudge of gray now — speak volumes.

I was aghast.

Desperate to escape the confines of a small East German town with upward-skewing age brackets, I had just survived a rough transition from middle to high school. We'd gone from walking, shouting in Monday peace demonstrations and dashing away from Russian tanks to settling into a new world order of capitalism, Levi's, Deutsche Mark, and school curricula that were swapped out over the course of just one summer. By September, our teachers replaced headshots of Generalsekretär Honecker with those of Kanzler Kohl and pivoted from preaching about lifting up everyone equally and supporting struggling classmates to applying a ruthless elbow system. Stern faces urged us to now outperform our best friends and rise to the top of the pack, to shove others out of the way if necessary. Amidst this chaos, and to improve my worth in the new free-market economy of the united Germany, my parents consented to an exchange year in America. Except, I ended up in the San Francisco East Bay, not in a small East Coast village, as intended. Except, I fell in with the wrong crowd, as many teenagers do.

There we were, first day of the 1993-94 year, first period. The off-to-the-side building hovered like an afterthought by the concrete courtyard. The massive, modern classroom left me shocked. Many of the guys were clad in woodchopper flannel shirts, baggy beige chinos, and chunky, thick-soled suede boots. Jeans still reigned, as did overalls, and waist-hugging shirts. We were a colorful bunch, and within a week, I would have my nickname: *la gringa*. The one light-pigment face in this ocean of nationalities. I'd wear it like a badge of honor while I sat ramrod-straight in the American school desk, paper and pen at the ready, little dictionary in my hand, poised to absorb all the grammar, wisdom, and intellectual challenges the teacher would bestow upon us. I'd flip through and frantically look up unfamiliar words from readings and our teacher's presentations, jot down phrases, match them with translations, study them at bedtime. I wanted to be fluent, make the most of this year and my

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parents' investment, to return well-rounded and worthy.

I carried the trusty dictionary everywhere, including the school bathroom because God forbid someone talk to me in the toilet and I couldn't understand what they were saying. That little yellow thing, at the time still creaky with newness, was my safety blanket. While I was freshest off the boat (or cross-Atlantic flight) in first-period Sheltered English class, I discovered that *sheltered* had many meanings. First, I understood the definition of shelter as protective housing, especially when bombs were being dropped. Given my grandparents' oral accounts of air raids on Dresden, this made me somewhat uneasy. As time galloped on, I learned that *sheltered* transcended printed terminology. The quiet soul from Somalia who could barely keep her eyes open during class worked night shifts as security at Oakland International to help her family stay sheltered. A lanky, perfectly manicured Filipina grew up on the nearby Navy base, sheltered from realities outside of her adoptive family. She shared a wide, welcoming smile with her brother who, with his congenial manner and commitment to learning, made me feel at home, and thus, sheltered, when I sat next to him. *Las gemelas*, almost indistinguishable to me in those early days, were protective of each other and their Peruvian upbringing. They would take on anyone who messed with their younger cousin at school. The most beautiful girls I had ever met, they manifested wisdom wrapped in Inca poetry and volleyball uniforms and invariably hung out with the two Mexican guys in class who strutted in full of bravado. Those *cabrones* sharply whistled when I displayed my oh-so-European outfits. They shielded each other and themselves from too much work by sitting back in their seats, just-so, wide-legged, wide-pantsed, as if nothing could touch them. The two Farsi speakers, however, only chatted with each other, caps drawn low to hide their eyes, body language that howled at others to back off. I found out later they knew what it was like to lose all shelter in a war and start over. And then there was the other exchange student. The first person I ever approached this side of the ocean. Since landing in the City by the Bay, I'd been soaking up *Star Trek* on VHS because I was terrified to answer the phone in my host family's home, too tired to carry on conversations, too chicken to answer when that glorious, glorious American invention — Round Table Pizza — was delivered to our door. But I had my dictionary. And I had Jean-Luc Picard, the only person whose English I could understand and who would help my mind escape while growing my vocabulary.

My first day as an exchange student at high school, I had to move beyond the USS Enterprise. My host mom — the epitome of worldly, social, and optimistic — was a little

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startled when I'd been placed in twelfth-grade sheltered English; her interpretation of the word was *less-than*. Placement probably had to do with the fact that I was shy and insecure, and, upon meeting with the guidance counselor, had mentioned, crimson-cheeked, that "My English iz not werry good." The counselor had believed me. So, here I was, twenty minutes early, nervously pacing in front of the classroom I'd managed to locate. It was locked and no one in sight. I felt odd because punctuality had been inoculated into me since birth. The next person to approach and staunchly plant themselves a few feet away towered in intimidating black boots, wide shoulders braced by a leather jacket all the guys in my hometown would have given their right kidney for. Mirrored sunglasses covered her — I assumed it was a she — eyes; a glossy, onyx curtain framed her face. She walked like a cowboy, or what I imagined a cowboy walked like based on the Yugoslavian and Czech movie productions I'd grown up watching about the American West.

I prepared the sentence over and over in my head until I thought I had it right. Finally, I whispered in her direction: "You are also here for the Sheltered English?" She turned her head in slow motion and said, completely void of smile, "Ahem. Could you repeat question?" I could. My overuse of articles mashed well with the lack of hers. This is how I met my best friend for this exchange year, an artistic powerhouse from South Korea whose dad was a renowned movie maker. It would take me months to extract information about her family and work past the idiosyncrasies of her life. She'd deliberately left her bubble to learn about the world on daddy's dime, except she did so a little too much, too drastically.

Upon her return to Korea, as I would find out years later, mom locked her in her room for months with one daily cup of rice and lots of water to force her to *lose all that American fat and become a good, respectable Korean girl again.* Talk about shelter.

We didn't know that yet. We were all busy learning how to introduce ourselves and acting out scenes from Wilder's *Our Town* in front of the class (some of us with more gusto than others, some of us utterly confused by what was happening in this story of dead people who could just hang with members of the opposite sex and not get in trouble). Sandra Cisneros' *Mango Street*, an eye-opener about family and belonging, and the first book I ever read completely in English, ironically started my blazing love affair with all things Latino. That book made the Peruvians and Mexicans in our class come alive and share about their homes (their *real* homes), their families (their *back-there* families). I ate it up, all of it. By that point, the yellow dictionary had migrated to the bottom of my backpack, below the water bottle, squished white bread with bologna, and notes from fellow students. I was absorbing

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anecdotes and dialogue, and I didn't need to translate every word to do so. I fell in love with words and with stories and with everyone in that class. And I loved it when our teacher decided our group needed to get to know California better and appointed my Korean friend and me to accompany her to Costco (*uh-wow-so-big!*) to shop for a three-day class camping trip to Yosemite.

Yosemite, a not-so sheltered experience. Some of us had never seen snow before. Some of us had never slept away from parents before. Some of us had slept outside before, but not by choice. Some of us didn't know evergreens. Some of us used this trip to liberally break rules, explore sexually, drink in the shadows of Ponderosa pines. And some of us (no names mentioned) got in trouble for not locking their survival stash of chocolate in the bear-proof metal box the park rangers insisted we use. I don't remember if I took my dictionary on that trip. It was a trip of connection, of out-of-breath hikes up the sparkling Bridalveil Fall, of learning about the sticky magic of s'mores, and of fully seeing each other, even in the dark. My classmates jested for days that I was the only person visible once the sun set behind the Sierra Nevada Mountains. We were actually joking now, in English.

Before the end of the school year, one of us would drink themself into a stupor and end up overshooting an East Bay road, comically getting a brand-new sports car stuck between two trees but escaping unscathed. One of us would learn how to fill out college applications. One of us would have to accept they'd be a parent before New Year's Eve. One would refuse to be accompanied everywhere by her male relatives and forge an independent female identity. One of us would lend another lunch money. One of us would take a blind date to prom and change their life's trajectory. One of us would lose their beloved cat and rally half the neighborhood in desperate search. One of us would stop showing up for class. Several of us would graduate with proud, proud parents, cousins, grandparents, aunts, and uncles in the audience shouting in various languages. And every one of us had gathered up new perspectives wrapped in friendship.

The inside cover brims with inscribed notes to myself about whom to ask what, cultural tidbits, pep talks to give myself permission to break some rules and meet new people. The book divides my life into two epochs: the printed, preordained, straight path of before, and the scribbled, swirling saunter of bountiful encounters after. God, I love this dictionary. I scan it again on my treasure hunt for cherished terms. *Flabbergasted. Magnificent.*

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Serendipity. Sheltered.

My favorite words, though, can’t be found in this worn edition. They’ve been blown all across the nation, the planet, and are doing their beautiful thing.

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