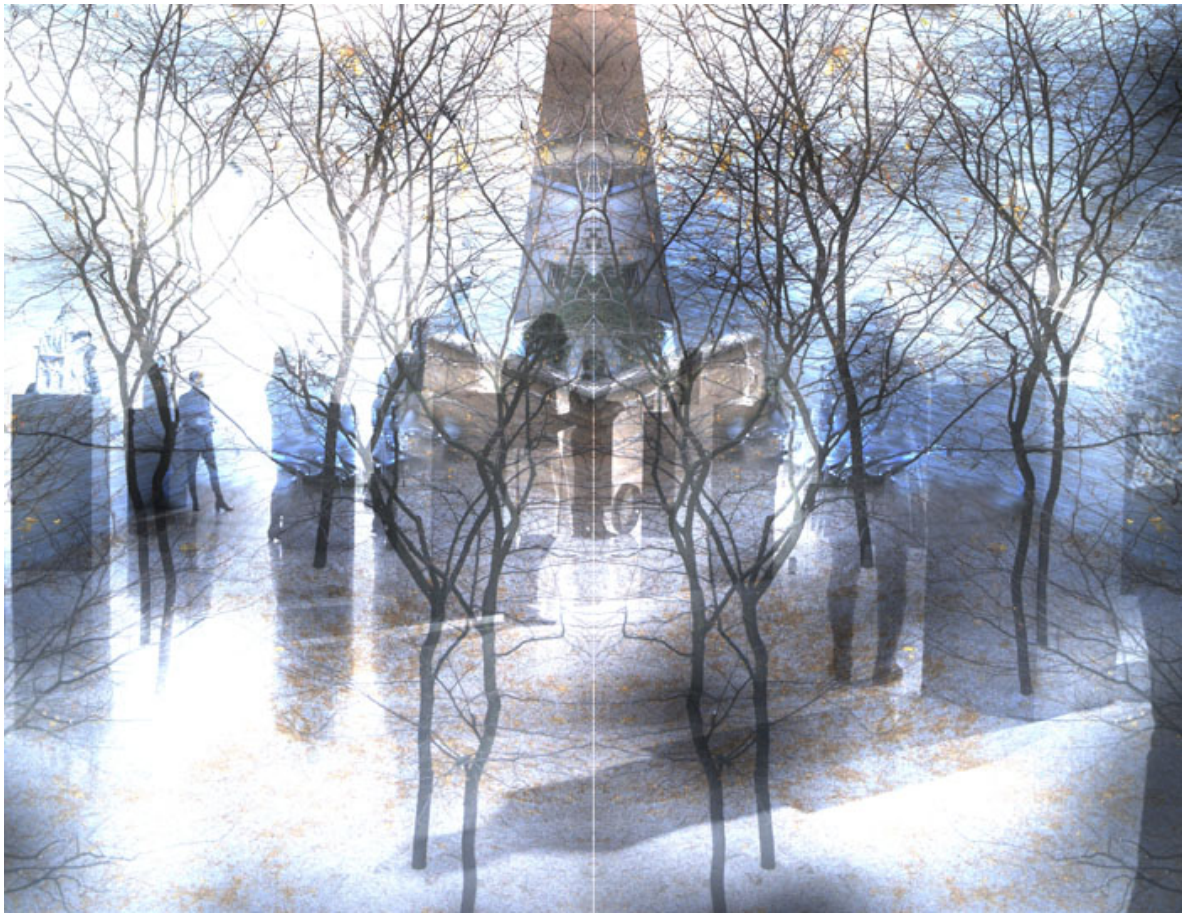
ESSAY

The Fog

by Filippo Bagnasco



"Wood song" by Patricia Falkenburg

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German terrifies me. The best piece of advice about writing I've ever found is to start with a true sentence, and I couldn't start with a truer one. German terrifies me.

I always think of my life as being pretty easy. When I face difficulties I tend to brush them off or to minimize them to nothingness. It's easy to pretend. In my mind everything is smooth and simple and uncomplicated. Point A and point B are connected by a single, straight line and all I have to do is walk it. For example, I rarely stop to think about the fact that right now I live in a foreign country where people speak a foreign language that has nothing to do with my mother tongue. For the past eight years I have been living abroad and pretending I wasn't. Unfortunately, despite my misplaced instincts to brush aside the whole ghastly business of being an immigrant, life has found ways to shake me up and force my eyes open. I realized the hard, inescapable foreignness of my surroundings when I first moved to Austria.

The best way to describe how I felt is to imagine a thick and unyielding fog. The kind that materializes from nowhere and makes you wonder whether the world hasn't completely disappeared, rather than being temporarily blocked out. It relentlessly surrounded me every time I left the house. I didn't want it to be there. Other people acted normally in their everyday life, with no fog surrounding them; why was I supposed to be different? I also didn't want other people to know that I carried this fog around with me, that it condensed in from nowhere and separated me from them. It made me feel different and ashamed. I hated it. I felt it was my duty to be like everybody else, to blend in and go about my everyday life like everybody else, without silly impediments. I didn't want the fog to be there.

It made seeing harder, it made hearing harder, it made dealing with other people harder. Every time I left the house I felt hindered in my movements, bogged down in my thoughts, my freedom diminished. I couldn't interact with the world around me the way I wanted to. I was handicapped. A misfit. At the same time, something inside of me — call it pride or call it timidity, they are the same to me — refused to accept what was happening, and I retreated in shame.

I wasn't used to being in that situation and I didn't know what to do. Never before had I lived in a country where I couldn't speak the language. I had been on holiday in foreign countries plenty of times, but that was different. A tourist is not supposed to know the language, a tourist is not supposed to know anything, that's why they are a tourist. In Canada it was also different. When I moved there, my English was everything but perfect, but, first, it was good enough to allow me to easily deal with everyday life. Second, I love English and this gives me confidence; using and hearing it gives me pleasure. While attending university in Canada, I did feel the occasional pang of shame, especially during American literature

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class or creative writing class, places where knowledge of the language is explicitly at center stage and where I was surrounded by native speakers. In these situations I rarely spoke in front of the class, unless explicitly called out. These were exceptions though. English made me feel at home.

German was a different story right from the beginning. I moved to Austria knowing nothing of the language. I was in for a shock, but somehow it didn't bother me. I tried to mentally postpone the consequences of that shock as long as I could, and to this day I still haven't dealt with all of them.

The truth is that I was excited to move to the other side of the world once again, to cross the Atlantic Ocean once again, to be back in Europe. My plan was to move to this new country and quickly and effortlessly learn the language. In my mind it was all easy, point A to point B: sign up for a class here, pick up a book there, try some basic conversation with the local barista and voilà, absolute German fluency. I even planned to do my academic studies in German. Wishful thinking. I suppose this was my way of dealing with the fact that, on the face of it, the whole experience was going to be frightening, destabilizing, and unpredictable.

My motto, stolen from Bruce Chatwin, was: "Change is the only thing worth living for." Change felt good and right on its own. It was exactly what I wanted; it was one of the reasons I had moved to Canada in the first place. Burn up your old life and start afresh. Of course these things never go quite as planned, but I didn't see the difficulties. I looked the other way. I thought difficulties were for other people. Reality couldn't deprive me of my cosmopolitan dreams. The world was my playground and I wanted to play. As I've since learned, my mistake was to stop at the polished surface of transnational life, meticulously engineered for maximum allure and pleasure. I didn't want to bother and touch it, to get my hands dirty and open it up to reveal its delicate, arcane, greasy and foul smelling entrails. I should have continued reading that Chatwin quote, he knew the score: "Ulcers and heart condition follow."

My first few months in Austria were exciting, daunting, and confusing. Everything that happened outside the four walls where I lived was charged with fear. I remember the first times I went to buy groceries on my own. I moved through the store like the protagonist in a horror movie who's trying to close in on the villain. I quickly scanned labels for clues about the content of those colorful plastic wrappings, looking over my shoulder lest someone approach me unseen and, god forbid, ask me a question. Lining up for checkout was like walking up to the gallows. I prayed that the cashier wouldn't talk to me and once there I looked everywhere but in their direction. When I was actually asked something, I always answered with a quick shaking of the head and then paid by card, because the card always

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knows, because the card doesn't need to understand numbers spoken once and then lost in the cold supermarket air.

With time I became a Jedi master of reading facial expressions and tones of voice. I learned to glean from these signs the kind of answer that was expected from me. The answers I offered back were invariably yes or no and they were entirely based on what I read on my interlocutor's face. They decided the answer to their own questions, not me. If they looked assertive and positive, my answer was yes; if they sounded skeptical or unsure, my answer was no. Easy, right? I learned to over-read the noes compared to the yesses, because a yes usually needs a follow-up and I wasn't able to provide those. When then I realized that one was required, I quickly walked my answer back and changed it to a no, making it sound like a hopeful question rather than an answer. My sudden switchback was usually met with expressions of bemused confusion. I practiced the art of tightrope conversation and every mistake could be fatal: sway too much this or that way and the precipice of shame opens up underneath you.

I resolved to admitting my ignorance of German and to asking with the smallest and most hopeful voice I could muster up, "Englisch?" only in otherwise desperate situations.

I still can't explain the shame. I just wanted to seamlessly fit in and I couldn't. Nobody expected me to speak perfect German, or even any German, and I knew that. I had just come from abroad, like many other people in the city, and a period of adjustment was normal, no matter how long.

From my perspective, the problem was that the others didn't know all of this. I didn't walk around with a label that read, "I just moved here and I can't speak your language." I felt an inescapable necessity to make people believe I was a local, that I was one of them. I didn't want to disrupt other people's lives with my ignorance. I felt like I wasn't allowed to be an outsider and I didn't want to be one anyway. I wanted my bright cosmopolitan dreams to be real. I wanted to belong right away.

I remember telling myself to do like the Americans do. In my mind, Americans travelled all over the world and spoke English with everybody, no matter where they were, without even first asking. Sometimes I managed to do that. I even felt proud that my English was better than almost everybody else's. But it was all pretending, it was all a ruse at my own expense. I didn't feel proud, I felt out of place. I felt guilty forcing people to speak English and, unlike the Americans of my imagination, I always first asked people whether they spoke English. The American way didn't work for me.

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During my first winter in Austria, I took a German class. It proved to be a draining experience. They call this kind of class ‘intensive,’ and they are not kidding. On paper it didn’t look particularly tough to me. A mere five hours a day, five days a week, for three weeks, plus a couple of optional afternoons. I wanted to learn quickly in order to shake that stupid fog off, and the more I learned the better.

After a couple of days I started to physically dread it. I knew that it was the kind of work and effort my German needed, but the pressure to be good enough, to know enough, to show that I was learning fast enough was starting to take over. It’s silly, I know. I was there to learn. I was actually paying, and not little, to be taught, and all the teacher expected from me was to show up. It wasn’t supposed to be easy, but it wasn’t supposed to be a punishment either. On top of the dread there was the drain on my mental energies that learning German demanded. I didn’t want to admit it, but my brain was working harder than I expected to memorize those words and those grammar rules. I wanted to do more with my days than just trying to learn German, but I couldn’t.

The class was useful though. If possible, it made me fear the language and my ignorance of it even more, but it also managed to polish that ignorance a bit. I did learn some. I mastered new words, I learned to put together short sentences. With time, I got used to expressing a few needs and other bits of thought. Nothing too sophisticated, clearly, but the beginnings of autonomous communication. The thing that the class failed to do was to help me appreciate the language. I’ve never managed that.

German has never given me pleasure or satisfaction the way English does. It has never felt mine. It has always been something borrowed that I try not to misuse too much and I always use English instead whenever I can. Walking around the city, sitting in cafés, strands of conversation in English immediately attract my attention, like sudden sweet music in a world of cacophony. A balsam for my abused ears and soul. Safe, familiar islands barely emerging from the ocean that constantly threatens to swallow me whole. In that ocean, with time, I have learned to float, never to truly swim, like a shipwrecked sailor, on an ill-conceived voyage around the world, holding onto a worm-eaten barrel, exhausted and waiting to wash up on a white, sandy beach. But I’m mixing metaphors now. I started with the fog and I’m going to finish with the fog.

Years have come and gone, my life has actually gotten easier, not like I wanted or expected, but the way life does: rolling on, by the inch, without telling you that it’s changing, while it inevitably is. But, despite everything, the fog is still there. It has become thinner and easier to dispel, but it’s always hanging on at the edges of my life, a permanent veil constantly threatening to drop. I fear that it will never go away. I’ve learned to live with it and I still

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pretend it’s not there when I think I can afford to. I don’t love the fog and I wish it wasn’t there, but at least I don’t hate it anymore. You learn to make friends with what you can’t avoid. I only hope that with time it will get thinner and thinner, more and more evanescent, all but reduced to a vestigial haze. Then, the sun will finally freely shine through and illuminate a wonderful and unexplored world for me. I’m looking forward to that day.

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