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Document A

My mother believed you could be anything you wanted to be in America. You could open a restaurant. You could work for the government and get good retirement. You could buy a house with almost no money down. You could become rich. You could become instantly famous.

5 “Of course, you can be prodigy, too,” my mother told me when I was nine. “You can be best anything. What does Auntie Lindo know? Her daughter, she is only best tricky.”

America was where all my mother's hopes lay. She had come here in 1949 after losing everything in China: her mother and father, her family home, her first husband, and two daughters, twin baby girls. But she never looked back with regret. There were so many ways for things to get better.

10 We didn't immediately pick the right kind of prodigy. At first my mother thought I could be a Chinese Shirley Temple. We'd watch Shirley's old movies on TV as though they were training films. My mother would poke my arm and say, “*Ni kan*” — You watch. And I would see Shirley tapping her feet, or singing a sailor song, or pursing her lips into a very round O while saying “Oh, my goodness.”

15 “*Ni kan*,” said my mother as Shirley's eyes flooded with tears. “You already know how. Don't need talent for crying!”

Soon after my mother got this idea about Shirley Temple, she took me to a beauty training school in the Mission district and put me in the hands of a student who could barely hold the scissors without shaking. Instead of getting big fat curls, I emerged with an uneven mass of crinkly black fuzz. My mother dragged me off to the bathroom and tried to wet down my hair.

20 “You look like Negro Chinese,” she lamented, as if I had done this on purpose.

The instructor of the beauty training school had to lop off these soggy clumps to make my hair even again. “Peter Pan is very popular these days,” the instructor assured my mother. I now had hair the length of a boy's, with straight-across bangs that hung at a slant two inches above my eyebrows. I liked the haircut and it made me actually look forward to my future fame.

25 In fact, in the beginning I was just as excited as my mother, maybe even more so. I pictured this prodigy part of me as many different images, trying each one on for size. I was a dainty ballerina girl standing by the curtains, waiting to hear the right music that would send me floating on my tiptoes. I was like the Christ child lifted out of the straw manger, crying with holy indignity. I was Cinderella stepping from her pumpkin carriage with sparkly cartoon music filling the air.

30 In all of my imaginings I was filled with a sense that I would soon become *perfect*. My mother and father would adore me. I would be beyond reproach. I would never feel the need to sulk, for anything.

35 But sometimes the prodigy in me became impatient. “If you don't hurry up and get me out of here, I'm disappearing for good,” it warned. “And then you'll always be nothing.”

Every night after dinner my mother and I would sit at the Formica kitchen table. She would present new tests, taking her examples from stories of amazing children that she read in *Ripley's Believe It or Not* or *Good Housekeeping*, *Reader's Digest*, and a dozen other magazines she kept in a pile in our bathroom. My mother got these magazines from people whose houses she cleaned. And since she cleaned many houses each week, we had a great assortment. She would look through them all, searching for stories about remarkable children.

40 The first night she brought out a story about a three-year-old boy who knew the capitals of all the states and even most of the European countries. A teacher was quoted as saying the

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45 little boy could also pronounce the names of the foreign capitals correctly.

“What’s the capital of Finland?” my mother asked me, looking at the magazine story.

All I knew was the capital of California, because Sacramento was the name of the street we lived on in Chinatown. “Nairobi!” I guessed, saying the most foreign word I could think of. She checked to see if that was possibly one way to pronounce “Helsinki” before showing me the answer.

50 The tests got harder – multiplying numbers in my head, finding the queen of hearts in a deck of cards, trying to stand on my head without using my hands, predicting the daily temperatures in Los Angeles, New York, and London.

One night I had to look at a page from the Bible for three minutes and then report everything I could remember. “Now Jehoshaphat had riches and honor in abundance and ... that’s all I remember, Ma,” I said.

55 And after seeing my mother’s disappointed face once again, something inside of me began to die. I hated the tests, the raised hopes and failed expectations. Before going to bed that night I looked in the mirror above the bathroom sink, and when I saw only my face staring back – and that it would always be this ordinary face – I began to cry. Such a sad, ugly girl! I made high-pitched noises like a crazed animal, trying to scratch out the face in the mirror.

60 And then I saw what seemed to be the prodigy side of me – because I had never seen that face before. I looked at my reflection, blinking so that I could see more clearly. The girl staring back at me was angry, powerful. This girl and I were the same. I had new thoughts, willful thoughts, or rather thoughts filled with lots of won’ts. I won’t let her change me, I promised myself. I won’t be what I’m not.

65 So now on nights when my mother presented her tests, I performed listlessly, my head propped on one arm. I pretended to be bored. And I was. I got so bored that I started counting the bellows of the foghorns out on the bay while my mother drilled me in other areas. The sound was comforting and reminded me of the cow jumping over the moon. And the next day I played a game with myself, seeing if my mother would give up on me before eight bellows. After a while I usually counted only one, maybe two bellows at most. At last she was beginning to give up hope.

70 Two or three months had gone by without any mention of my being a prodigy again. And then one day my mother was watching the *Ed Sullivan Show* on TV. The TV was old and the sound kept shorting out. Every time my mother got halfway up from the sofa to adjust the set, the sound would go back on and Ed would be talking. As soon as she sat down, Ed would go silent again. She got up, the TV broke into loud piano music. She sat down. Silence. Up and down, back and forth, quiet and loud. It was like a stiff, embraceless dance between her and the TV set. Finally she stood by the set with her hand on the sound dial.

75 She seemed entranced by the music, a little frenzied piano piece with this mesmerizing quality, sort of quick passages and then teasing, lilting ones before it returned to the quick, playful parts.

“*Ni kan,*” my mother said, calling me over with hurried hand gestures. “Look here.”

80 I could see why my mother was fascinated by the music. It was being pounded out by a little Chinese girl, about nine years old, with a Peter Pan haircut. The girl had the sauciness of a Shirley Temple. She was proudly modest, like a proper Chinese child. And she also did this fancy sweep of a curtsy, so that the fluffy skirt of her white dress cascaded slowly to the floor like the petals of a large carnation.

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Document B

Native Command: Is Your Language Really Yours?

Translators traditionally and now almost by iron rule translate from a foreign language into what is called their mother tongue. In translation studies jargon this is called L1 translation, as opposed to L2 translation, which is translation out towards a learned or other tongue. But what exactly is a mother tongue?

5 We all start with a mother and it seems obvious that we first learn language in her arms. The language that your mother speaks to you is therefore what you are 'born into', which is all that can be meant when instead of 'mother tongue' we call it a native language.

10 It is an axiom of language study that to be a native speaker is to have complete possession of a language; reciprocally, complete possession of a language is usually glossed as precisely that knowledge of a language that a native speaker has. In spite of the obvious fact that speakers of the same language use it in infinitely varied ways and have often quite different vocabularies and language habits at the levels of register, style, diction and so forth, we proceed on the assumption that only native speakers of (let us say) English know English completely and that only native speakers of English are in a position to judge whether any other speaker is using the language 'natively'.

15 We also know, from observation and self-observation too, that native speakers make grammatical and lexical mistakes, and find themselves lost for words from time to time. In what is now a conventional view of language use, the slips and stumbles in the speech of a native speaker are themselves part of what it means to possess the language natively. Teachers of foreign languages are expert in distinguishing between mistakes that language learners make and those that are characteristic of native speech; and for a native speaker of any language, there are some kinds of errors made by others that sound not just wrong, but not native. But let us put these practical and effective uses of the distinction between 'native' and 'non-native' aside. Other, much more difficult issues are involved in using terms like 'mother' and 'native' to name the way we are more or less at home in the language we call our own.

20 We do not have to learn our mother tongue from a mother. It can be acquired just as effectively from siblings, from an au pair or from the kids next door. What matters for normal human development is that there be a language available in our immediate environment in infancy, for no child invents a language by itself, without input from outside. We acquire our first language from whatever sources are available in our infant environment. Some children do it faster than others, some acquire wider vocabularies than others, but all children normally achieve communicative competence within a relatively narrow time-band, between the ages of one and three. But the language that is acquired in those early stages of development may or may not turn out to be the one in which as adults we feel most at home. Great numbers of people the world over are not particularly skilled users of the language taught to them by their infant environment. In many circumstances, formal education replaces the infant language with one that goes on

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40 to be used in adult life as the operative means of communication. From the disappearance
of Latin as a spoken language in around the sixth and seventh centuries CE until the age
of Descartes, Newton and Leibniz, no mother ever spoke Latin to her child, and no child
was ever born into a Latin-speaking home. However, Latin was learned by young males
45 of the higher social classes throughout Christianized Europe for well over a thousand
years. Throughout that long period Latin was the language in which all educated
Europeans operated in thought, formal speech and writing, for purposes as varied
philosophy, mathematics, science and religion. The language was taught by means of
writing, and it was also spoken – in schools, monasteries, churches, chancelleries and law
50 courts – as the verbalization of a written idiom. All speakers of Latin in the period of its
use as the primary form of communication had at least one other mother tongue, but these
vernaculars were not used as tools for elaborated thinking or expression. But if a clear
distinction can be made between the language learned from your mother and the language
in which operate most males in Western Europe between 700 and 1700 CE, the very
concepts of ‘mother tongue’ and ‘native speaker’ need to be looked at again.

55 Examples of the difference between ‘first learned language’ and ‘operative
language’ can be found almost anywhere. I can find several in my own family. My father
learned to speak in Yiddish, the language of his mother and of his environment in
London’s East End some ninety years ago. Once he started going to school, he acquired
English. There is no question that he could soon do far more with it than he ever could
60 with his mother tongue. Similarly, the mother of my children spoke Hungarian as an
infant, but acquired French when she moved to France at the age of five. Neither of these
cases involved the loss of the mother tongue. Newton, Descartes and Leibniz also
remained everyday speakers of their ‘native languages’, respectively, English, French and
German.

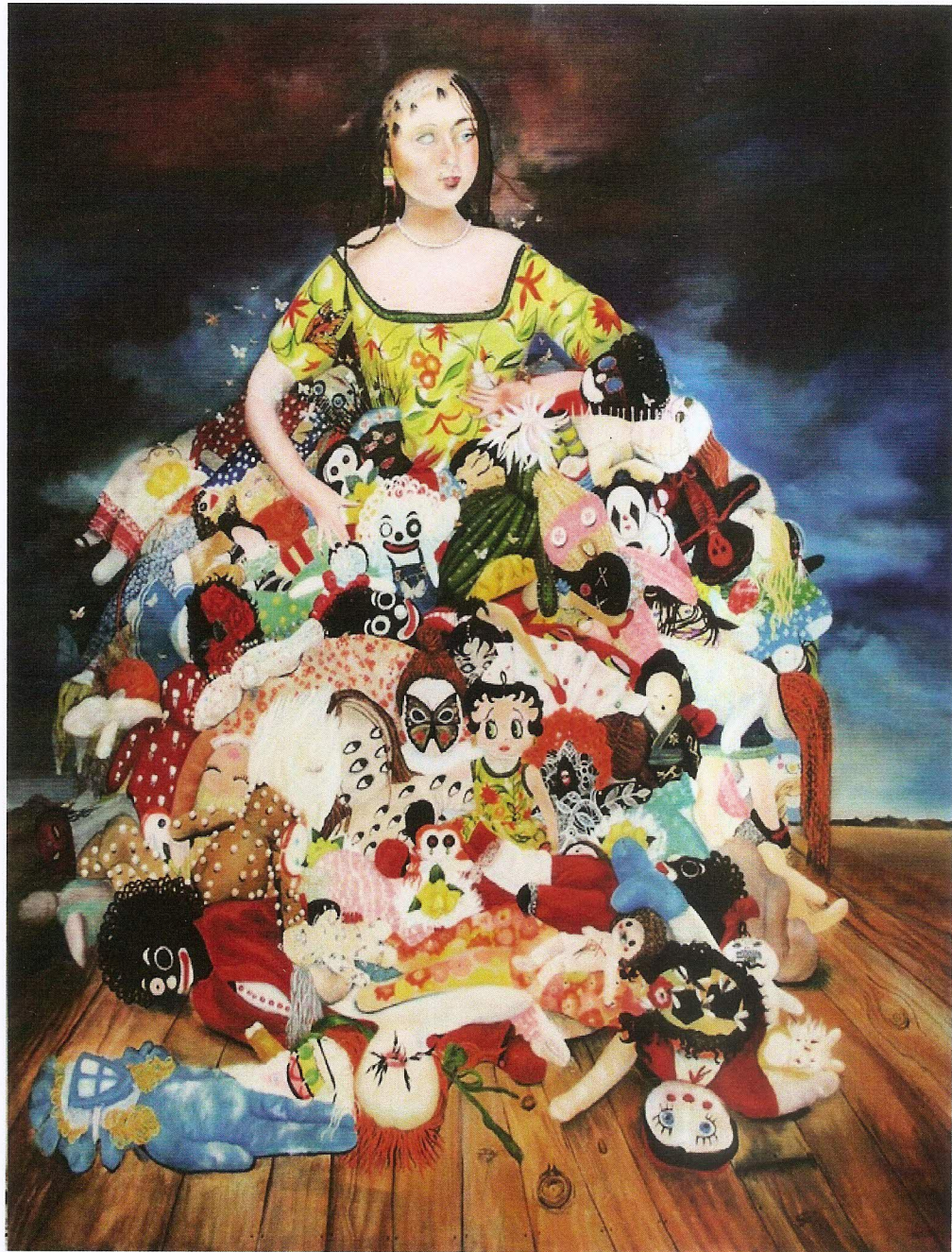
65 In many modern cases, the mother tongue that is supplanted by a learned language
for higher-level activities remains only ‘mother’s tongue’, used exclusively for
interaction with the older generation. Yiddish and Hungarian remained for my two
relatives the way they spoke with their mothers and served almost no other purpose in
adult life. That is fairly typical of first-generation immigrants in countries like France,
70 Britain and the USA, many of whom possess a mother tongue that is stuck at the state of
sophistication achieved around the age of five. But that was certainly not true of
Descartes or Newton, who also wrote in French and English respectively; it may well not
be true of many millions of other bilingual speakers in the world today.

Throughout our lives we retain more or less strong emotions about the language in
75 which we first learned songs, nursery rhymes, games and playgroup or family rituals.
These are foundational experiences, and the language in which they were experienced
must surely be forever lit by the warm glow of our earliest reminiscences. But it does not
automatically follow that the language of our earliest memories has any special
importance as a language for what we may go on to become, or for what we take to be
80 our personal identity.

David Bellos, *Is That a Fish in Your Ear?*, 2011, Faber and Faber, New York, pp 57-60

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Document C



Sharon Singer, *Mother Tongue* 2014, oil on canvas, 70" x 63"
www.saatchiart.com/art/Painting-mother-tongue/386198/197021