

Words & Translations from Zdenka Becker

A DOG'S BARK

A story in black and white

Yet there are people more dog-like than dogs...
(L. Borne)

Felix is black and white, has long fur and amber-brown eyes. He is more black than white, which really is not typical for a Husky, but Felix is a mongrel, and mongrels of all races often show unusual color combinations of fur as well as eyes. Had he been a purebred Husky, his eyes would have been sky-blue and his hair shorter. But what really gives away his bastard status are his ears. The left one stands up straight, as behooves the listening organ of a guard dog; but the right one hangs down half-bent to the side and only stands up halfway when Felix hears suspicious sounds. When he was younger, he made quite a bit of use of his right ear. Now that he is more mature he knows to distinguish true danger from ordinary noise. Some people in the village believe he has gotten more indifferent and comfortable, but this is not the case. He is simply more experienced and thoughtful.

His realm is a big garden, with a main entrance at the front and a garden gate at the back of the lot. Just about all his attention is devoted to these two gates, since it is behind these that things happen which make a dog's heart beat faster. Sometimes a rattling motorcycle drives by there, or laughing children run by with their school bags, that is where the stray Bello marks his turf. But all that is nothing in comparison with the man dropping off the ad sheets in the mailbox. Felix can't bear these men who wander from mailbox to mailbox. Their faces and hair are so black that they blend together, forming a dark screen with gleaming white teeth which makes Felix so aggressive. And the way they smell! Their smell is so completely different from that of other people that it scares Felix. He fights back against their strangeness with the full power of his deepest instincts. Fortunately no one among those whom his mistress lets in smells like that.

When the ad sheet men are doing their job, all dogs on the street bark. Their bark comes closer, house by house. They bellow from the depth of their throats, run against the gates' locks, scratch, growl, push their threatening muzzles between the fences' bars and let everyone know they are in charge of the safety of their housemates. Felix does too.

He knows all the visitors to “his” house, and is known by them as a sweet and friendly dog who lets everyone pet him. Thanks especially to his half-bent ear people take him to be needy, and secretly slip him delicacies from the dinner table. These men and women may each smell a bit differently, but in the same general way he is accustomed to. Therefore he trusts them. He tolerates them in “his” house, and allows them to spoil him.

His mistress’ name is Ajša. Her hair is blonde and her eyes blue. Her smell is the best of all.

Ajša isn’t always there. Sometimes she is gone the whole day. At these times Felix is cared for by the neighbor on the left. Felix knows him because of the fence. Since many years. He also knows the neighbor on the right. That one always goes by without a word when Ajša is in the garden. Sometimes he whispers words like “Jewish bitch” or “kike”. Ajša doesn’t speak to him, and he doesn’t speak to Ajša. Felix barks at him, and the neighbor curses him. Then Felix barks and growls even more. This is the way communication takes place at the right fence.

The neighbor on the left is uncomplicated. He likes to talk, and does it a lot, something from which Felix benefits especially when Ajša is away. The neighbor shows up twice a day, fills up Felix’s bowl, puts fresh water in front of his kennel and tells Felix all kinds of stories which the latter may not understand but which feel soothing.

He has a key to Ajša’s house. Tony, that is his name, waters the flowers, and makes sure everything is all right. Then he settles down in the living room, fetches a beer from the fridge, drinks it with satisfaction and has a chat with Felix. Sometimes they watch a game of soccer together. Together may be a bit of an overstatement, as Toni watches and cheers at every score, waking up Felix who then falls asleep at his feet again. Still, Felix enjoys these moments of togetherness. For a long time now it has been entirely clear to him that Tony is his second most favorite person, right after Ajša. Second most favorite.

The time without his mistress seems endless to Felix.

When Ajša returns from her travels, she smells of the faraway and, much worse, of strange animals. He simply can’t see how she could betray him with some other creatures. Fortunately for Felix, these alien odors blow away soon, and she smells like always, of herself. Then they are together again.

The suitcases which she had brought back from her travels are emptied and stacked up in the basement. This is the time Felix loves most of all, when there are no suitcases in the hall. It means that Ajša will be staying at home for a while. She still works in her workroom, every day, sitting hours upon hours in front of her computer; still, she is here. Afterward they go to the forest or take a walk along the river. They are one heart and one soul. For Felix, this way of being could last forever.

One day, though, Ajša brings along a guest from her travels. Felix is not at all happy about this. The visitor has dark skin. He has tied his long black hair into a ponytail. He smells unbearably foreign. Felix barks, growls, bares his teeth and jumps up at the visitor right by the front door. He bites his lower arm, and leaves bluish imprints. There is no blood, but the

warning has been understood. Ajša is angry. She locks up Felix in another room. Felix barks and scratches the door. He is afraid for Ajša. He is afraid for himself....

The impostor's name is Vijay. He is an Indian cameraman and director and is planning a TV documentary about the Himalayas with Ajša and her Austrian team. It will be shot in Ladakh, in northern India.

Felix feels betrayed. He doesn't understand the world any more.

She talks to this person the whole evening, cooks for him, gives him her best wine and even drives him to his hotel in the middle of the night. She doesn't care for Felix. She just looks at him angrily and makes him sleep in his kennel. That hasn't happened to him in a long time. Usually he sleeps in the living room on "his" Persian rug which smells so wonderfully of sheep and silk worms. And he owes this social decline to this horrible man, different in the same way the others are.

A few weeks later the suitcases are in the hallway again. Now they are full. Oh how Felix loathes these suitcases! If at least his leash were on top of them...but like this, with no leash, they can only mean one thing. She is on her way again, leaving him to watch the house.

Ajša is gone again.

All that is left to Felix is the garden with the left and the right fence, with the gate in front and in the back and a few obese village cats who race their circulation by letting themselves be chased by the big dog. The neighbor on the left feeds him, the one on the right curses. Always the same.

Ajša is in India.

Before flying to Ladakh, she visits Vijay in New Delhi. He lives in the north part of the city, in a modern neighborhood. Vijay is married to Chitra, a business correspondent. They have a little daughter, Eshna. The family also includes Gio. Gio is white-and-black, or rather white with black spots. His eyes are black and shiny, just like the spots on his fur. Gio is a Dalmatian mix, on whom you can barely see that he isn't a purebred.

A single look at Ajša makes Gio's blood boil. He has never seen blonde hair and blue eyes before, and what a strange smell! Gio barks, growls, bares his teeth. At some point he bites. There are blue marks on Ajša's hand. There is no blood, Gio has his rage and his obedience under control. Still. The hand hurts.

Yet Ajša laughs. Vijay laughs too.

Chitra looks from the one to the other and doesn't see what is so funny. Eshra is crying. Chitra consoles her.

Ajša is home again. Out in the garden Felix nuzzles her legs. He is happy that she is here, and no longer worries about the strange smells which she has brought from her trip

They are playing Felix's favorite game. Ajša throws a piece of wood, Felix tries to catch it in mid-air and brings it back. He runs around madly, barking with joy. At the right fence a figure appears. It hides behind a bush. Felix doesn't fail to notice this. He runs to the spot and barks as loudly as he can. Ajša is watching.

The right side neighbor goes back to his house. He doesn't turn around, or say hello. Instead he mumbles something about "that Jewish bitch" and "since she's come here everything in the village is different." Ajša looks at the bite marks on her hand. They are almost gone.

Felix wants to play again. He fetches the wood and nudges her lightly with his nose. Ajša takes the wood and throws it in the air. She laughs.

Translated from the German by Nataša urovi ová

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From **GOOD-BYE GALIANA**

Stories

Sidonie, or, As Close as Skin

Skin is my most expensive dress, my shell, my protection, my appearance. It is sensitive; able to sense the smallest vibration from outside; riddled with pores and tiny hairs, furnished with the finest antennae. Experiences as close as skin touch, elate, injure. Skin, my most expensive dress between me and the outside world; protecting and warming me, letting joy and pain through.

In the language that was once my own, love is called "laska". I look for it here and everywhere. Untiringly. The breath of warmth, the tender tingle, the scent and touch, security... When it has experienced it once, the skin never forgets this feeling again... words... yes... one can forget the words but the skin remembers the touch and scent forever. It craves it. How would it otherwise be possible that we are always ready to hope for new scents, new touch, and new love?

Since I have been aware that it would always remain so that people immediately ask me where I am from as soon as they hear me speak, I realize that my profession is a foreigner. For always and evermore. I am alone here. No one speaks like me. No one thrusts the sounds so hard and short as I do. My pronunciation is the memory of my lost homeland; it is

the flight forwards, a brand, a tattoo from which I try to run. I live in a foreign world without country and people, using words that are not my own.

East and West. A fall I took. Into a vessel in which I bathe, in which I shed my skin, from which I emerge born anew. Naked. Another person. I touch the country with my new language. I let it dissolve on the tongue and taste the sweetness, the saltiness, the bitterness... I taste the country that will one day accept me. When I want it. Do I want it? The ears perceive the sounds. Charming and shrill. "Do you like it with us?" With you? Am I not also with us? The response...my language, a bird of paradise in the jungle of the big city, helplessly bats its wings. Where my words land, eyes turn around towards me.

Faded images of my childhood buried deep inside of me. German, the bark surrounding me, protects them. I keep silent in my foreign language that has become my second skin. It encases the first one, the fine one, the vulnerable one; it forms a protective wall; it holds me together like armor. When I go out, I protect my thin skin with an armor of bark. Then I feel secure.

Slovakian, my mother tongue conceals itself under this bark. It is soft and cuddlesome; it reminds me of the warmth in mother's bed. Of my cuddling to her body smelling of bread, of my longing for her breast even though I was already three or four. That the world outside of this bed was raw and icy, I first discovered many years later.

I am foreign here because my tongue does not bend so correctly to the vowels; foreign there because I turn my back to my own. Fallen in the ditches between two cultures that would like to come closer.

"How good your German is," people say again and again. "No, you are not a foreigner when you speak our language so well." With such words I consider whether I should be happy or ashamed. My German, my bark around my skin has apparently become so thick that no one senses my true self. Well then. I admit everything. I scuffled with your language and fought and played with it; reversed its polarity from an enemy to a friend; made it into a tool.

I write in my foreign language that has become my second skin. It encases the first one, the fine one, the vulnerable one; it forms a protective wall, it holds me together like the bark of a tree. I would like to write about the feeling of living, writing in an unknown land and write about myself. With borrowed words that I refused to accept for a long time. Out of fear of hitting my boundaries, to have to recognize my own inability.

An old saying says: as many languages you speak, so many times are you a person. I speak four languages and am only one person. Not four. I am a person with four skins that surround my body like rings of years that are a part of it.

Russian for me means the golden casing of an olive leaf from Hawaii. A piece of jewelry given to me as a gift from a Russian I didn't know in Las Vegas as a memento of our meeting. I spoke to her in her native language. She cried when she told me about her emigration; of that which was lost and that which was discovered, of values that one cannot purchase. She had everything in America; only the words went astray. She felt that she was poor. That evening she dove into her past; she talked, she laughed, she cried. Upon farewell,

she gave me a present and embraced me. Then she disappeared and I held the golden leaf in my hand aware that we had not even exchanged addresses. I don't know her name and I don't know where she lives. I cannot even remember her appearance. Still, I have not lost the woman. I wear her in me in the gilded olive leaf.

English is my rain skin. It can pour as much as it wants; I won't get wet with this skin. I stride along the streets encased in it and feel I am unrecognized. Thousands of shades, thousands of nuances, thousands of possibilities in pronouncing this language made it resistant to questions. I am glad that I can make myself understood. I do not need more than that. No one in New York asks me where I come from.

I write in a foreign language that has become a second skin for me. I gladly play with new words, borrow their characteristics, elicit feelings. I take a walk through the language and live stories, serious and funny stories that sometimes take me in. And then I sometimes wonder how I arrive at this or that story; how it could happen that someone thinks I am foreign here.

I write in a foreign language, Sarah, a black beauty from Jamaica likes to go skiing with us; Jason, our Australian friend, admires Meister Hundertwasser; Georgia from Rome cooks spaghetti for us; how is Joeana, she hasn't written for so long; didn't Lubo want to come for Christmas...? My time is filled with people, languages, and stories that touch my thin, sensitive skin under the tree bark. I feel as though I were at home. Maybe I am at home here.

Translated from the German by Adam Rosenbaum
