

For a Belgian child growing up
in suburban New Jersey,
there were three words for home.

Living in Tongues

By Luc Sante

The first thing you have to understand about my childhood is that it mostly took place in another language. I was raised speaking French, and did not begin learning English until I was nearly 7 years old. Even after that, French continued to be the language I spoke at home with my parents. (I still speak only French with them to this day.) This fact inevitably affects my recall and evocation of my childhood, since I am writing and primarily thinking in English. There are states of mind, even people and events, that seem inaccessible in English, since they are defined by the character of the language through which I perceived them. My second language has turned out to be my principal tool, my means for making a living, and it lies close to the core of my self-definition. My first language, however, is coiled underneath, governing a more primal realm.

French is a pipeline to my infant self, to its unguarded emotions and even to its preserved sensory impressions. I can, for example, use language as a measure of pain. If I stub my toe, I may profanely exclaim, in English, "Jesus!" But in agony, like when I am passing a kidney stone, I become uncharacteristically reverent, which is only possible for me in French. "*Petit Jésus!*" I will cry, in the tones of nursery religion. When I babble in the delirium of fever or talk aloud in my sleep, I have been told by others, I do so in

French. But French is also capable of summoning up a world of lost pleasures. The same idea, expressed in different languages, can have vastly different psychological meanings. If, for example, someone says in English, "Let's go visit Mr. and Mrs. X," the concept is neutral, my reaction determined by what I think of Mr. and Mrs. X. On the other hand, if the suggestion is broached in French, "*Allons dire bonjour*," the phrasing affects me more powerfully than the specifics. "*Dire bonjour*" calls up a train of associations: for some reason I see my great-uncle Jules Stelmes, dead at least 30 years, with his fedora and his enormous white mustache and his soft dark eyes. I smell coffee and the raisin bread called *cramique*, hear the muffled bong of a parlor clock and the repetitive commonplaces of chitchat in the drawling accent of the Ardennes, people rolling their R's and leaning hard on their initial H's. I feel a rush-caned chair under me, see white curtains and starched tablecloths, can almost tap my feet on the cold ceramic tiles, perhaps the trompe-l'oeil pattern that covered the entire floor surface of my great-uncle Albert Remacle's farmhouse in Viville. I am sated, sleepy, bored out of my mind.

A large number of French words and turns of phrase come similarly equipped with dense associative catalogues, which may contain a ghostly impression of the first time I understood their use in speech. On the other hand, nearly all English words and phrases have a



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definite point of origin, which I can usually recall despite the overlaying patina acquired through years of use. Take that word "patina," for example. I don't remember how old I was when I first encountered it, but I know that I immediately linked it to the French *patiner*, meaning "to skate," so that its use calls up an image of a crosshatched pond surface.

Other English words have even more specific histories. There is "coffee," which I spotted on a can of Chock Full o'Nuts in our kitchen in Westfield, N.J., in 1960, when I was 6. I learned to spell it right away because I was impressed by its insistent doubling of F's and E's. The creative spellings reveled in by commerce in the early 1960's tended to be unhelpful. I didn't know what to make of "kleen" or "Sta-Prest," and it took me some time to appreciate the penguin's invitation on the glass door of the pharmacy: "Come in, it's KOOL inside." Then there was the local dry-cleaning establishment whose signs promised "one-hour Martinizing." I struggled for years to try and plumb that one, coming up with increasingly baroque scenarios.

When I started first grade, my first year of American schooling — I had begun school in Belgium at 3½, in a prekindergarten program that taught basic reading, writing and arithmetic — I knew various words in

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English, but not how to construct a sentence. My first day remains vivid in its discomfort; I didn't know how to ask to go to the toilet. In addition, my mother had dressed me in a yellow pullover over a white shirt-collar dickey. It was a warm day, and the nun in charge suggested I take off my sweater. Since I didn't understand, she came over and yanked it off me, revealing my sleeveless undershirt.

As the weeks and months went on, I gradually learned how to speak and comprehend the new language, but between home and school, and school and home, I would pass through a sort of fugue state lasting an hour or two during which I could not use either language. For a while, my mother tackled this problem by tutoring me in French grammar and vocabulary as soon as I got home. It never crossed my parents' minds that we should begin employing English as the household tongue. For one thing, my parents' command of it was then rudimentary — I was rapidly outpacing them — and for another, they were never certain that our American sojourn was to be permanent. We were economic refugees, to use the current expression, victims of the collapse of the centuries-old textile industry centered in my native city of Verviers, but my parents' loyalty to their own country was unquestioned.

For several years our family kept up a sort of double role. We were immigrants whose income bobbed just above the poverty line, thanks to my father's capacity for working swing shifts and double shifts in factories (and thanks to the existence of factory jobs); but we were also tourists. As soon as we could afford a used car we began methodically visiting every state park, historical site and roadside attraction within a reasonable radius, taking hundreds of snapshots — some to send to my grandparents, but many more that were intended for our delectation later on, when we were safely back in Belgium, recalling our fascinating hiatus in the land of large claims and vast distances. This was not to be, owing to family deaths and diverse obligations and uneasily shifting finances, but my parents kept up their faith in an eventual return, and a concomitant relative detachment from the American way of life.

Our household was a European outpost. My parents made earnest attempts to replicate Belgian food, a pursuit that involved long car trips to the then-rural middle of Staten Island to purchase leeks from Italian farmers, and expeditions to German butcher shops in Union and Irvington, N.J., to find a version of *sirop* — a dense concentrate of pears and apples that is the color and texture of heavy-gauge motor oil and is spread on bread — and various unsatisfactory substitutions. Neither cottage cheese nor ricotta could really pass for the farmer cheese called *makée* (*sirop* and *makée* together make *caca de poule*), but we had little choice in the matter, just as club soda had to stand in for *eau gazeuse*, since we lived in suburbs far from the seltzer belt, and parsley could only ever be a distant cousin to chervil. Desires for gooseberries and red currants, for familiar varieties of apricots and strawberries and potatoes and lettuce, for "real" bread and "real" cheese and "real" beer, simply had to be suppressed.

It wasn't easy constructing a version of Belgium in an apartment in a wooden house, with wood floors and Salvation Army furniture and sash windows and no cellar — not that the situation didn't present certain advantages, like central heating, hot running water and numerous appliances, none of which my parents could afford in Belgium, where we had actually been more prosperous. "Belgium" became a mental construct, its principal constituent material being language. We spoke French, thought in French, prayed in French, dreamed in French. Relatives kept us supplied with a steady stream of books and periodicals, my father with his Marabout paperbacks, my mother with the magazine *Femme d'Aujourd'hui* (Woman of Today), and me with



Uprooted from his native soil, Sante has created an identity that is completely "other." Photograph by Nan Goldin for The New York Times.

from the Dosquet family, whose children became his closest friends. The second daughter, Lucy, married an American G.I. after the war and they went to live in his native northern New Jersey. In 1953, her younger brother, Léopold (known as Pol), who was the same age as my father, followed suit with his wife, Jeanne. They were enthusiastic about the States and wrote rapturous letters. In 1957, when the prospects of my father's employer, an iron foundry that manufactured wool-carding machinery, were beginning to look grim, Jeanne Dosquet returned on a visit, and we all spent a week at the seaside resort of De Panne, at a socialist hostelry called

history books for kids and comic magazines, in particular Spirou, which I received every week. Comics occupy a place in Belgian popular culture roughly comparable to that held in America by rock-and-roll, and like every other Belgian child, I first aspired to become a cartoonist. The comics I produced were always in French and clearly set in Belgium. (I couldn't abide American superhero adventures, although I did love Mad and the Sunday funnies, which were more commensurate with a Belgian turn of mind.) Somehow, though, I decided I wanted to become a writer when I was 10, and having made that decision never thought of writing in any language but English. Even so I continued to conduct my internal monologues in French until late adolescence. For me the French language long corresponded to the soul, while English was the world.

My parents learned the language of their adopted country not without some difficulty. My father could draw on what remained of his high-school English, complete with pronunciation rules that wavered between Rhenish German and the BBC, but otherwise my parents had arrived equipped only with the 1945 edition of a conversation manual entitled "L'Anglais sans peine" (English Without Toil). This volume, published by the Assimil firm of Paris and Brussels, is sufficiently embedded in Francophone consciousness that you can still raise a snicker by quoting its opening phrase, "My tailor is rich." (English speakers, of course, will have no idea what you are talking about.) The book could not have been much help, especially since its vocabulary and references were attuned not to 1960's America but to Britain in the 1930's: "The Smiths had wired ahead the time of their arrival, and were expected for lunch at Fairview." This was also true of their other textbook, a reader called "Short Narratives" published in Ghent: "The proprietor of an eating-house ordered some bills to be printed for his window, with the words, 'Try our mutton pies!'" There were also some evening classes at the Y.M.C.A. in Summit, N.J., where we eventually settled, but I don't recall their lasting very long.

My parents' circle of acquaintances was almost entirely Belgian. My father had grown up in a tenement apartment in Verviers downstairs

the Hôtel Germinal, where plans were made for our own emigration.

After our arrival, we briefly shared an apartment with the Dosquets, a tight and uncomfortable situation. They introduced my parents to such Belgians as they had met by chance, in particular the three Van Hemmelrijk sisters and their mother, bourgeois French-speaking Antwerpers who had somehow ended up in America in straitened circumstances. There were others, too: a couple from Dolhain, near Verviers, who worked as caretakers of an estate in Tuxedo Park, N.Y., and another French-speaking Fleming, whom I only ever knew as Marie-Louise "*du facteur*," because she had once been married to a mailman. She contributed another item to my burgeoning English vocabulary. One evening, while we were all watching television, Cesar Romero appeared on the screen: "Such a handsome man!" Marie-Louise exclaimed in English. To this day any appearance of the word "handsome" calls up the faint but unmistakable impression of Cesar Romero, in my mind's eye.

Even non-Belgian acquaintances tended to be foreigners whose grasp of the local tongue was as limited as ours. In Summit, our downstairs neighbors for a while were Hungarians named Szivros, who had fled their country after the doomed Budapest uprising of '56. Since we did not yet own a television, Mrs. Szivros would stand at the foot of the stairs of an evening and call up, "Missis, missis! 'Million Dollar Movie!'" Given the landscape, then, it is not surprising that my parents were somewhat at sea, knocked about among languages.

Sometimes, especially under pressure, my parents would reach for one tongue or the other and find themselves instead speaking Walloon, the native patois of southern Belgium. Walloon, now moribund, is usually identified as a dialect of French, whereas it is actually as old as the patois of Île-de-France, which became the official language — the 11th edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica in fact describes it as the northernmost Romance language. Like English, Walloon incorporates a substantial body of words that derives from Old Low German, so that it could, if unconsciously, seem like the middle ground between English and French. An often-

told story in my family related how Lucy Dosquet, when her G.I. suitor arrived looking like a slob, angrily ordered him in Walloon, "*Louke-tu el mireu!*" He understood perfectly, and studied his reflection.

Walloon was the household tongue of all the relatives of my grandparents' generation. Their parents in turn might have spoken nothing else; that no one bothered to establish rules for the writing of Walloon until the very beginning of this century, just in time for its decline in currency, partly accounts for the fact that nearly everyone in the family tree before my grandparents' time was illiterate. Walloon enjoyed a brief literary flowering that started in the 1890's but was largely killed off by World War I. My paternal grandfather acted in the Walloon theater in Verviers during its heyday, and my father followed in his footsteps after World War II, but by then it had largely become an exercise in nostalgia. Today, only old people still speak Walloon, and poor ones at that, since its use is considered rude by merchants, businessmen and the middle class in general, and young people simply don't care. Young Walloons nowadays have been formed by television, movies and pop music, much of it emanating from France, and they have seemingly acquired the Parisian accent *en bloc*.

I was raised in a Belgian bubble, though, which means, among other things, that my speech is marked by the old Verviers Walloon accent, which causes observant Belgians some confusion. They can't reconcile that accent with the American flavor that has inevitably crept in, nor with my age and apparent class status. My French speech is also peppered with archaisms; I find myself unconsciously saying, for example, "*auto*" instead of "*voiture*" to mean "car," or "*illustré*" instead of "*revue*" to mean "magazine," expressions redolent of the 30's and 40's, if not earlier.

The sound of Walloon, on those rare occasions when I hear it, affects me emotionally with even more force than French does. Hearing, as I did a few months ago, an old man simply greeting his friend by saying, "*Bôdjou, Djôsef,*" can move me nearly to tears. But, of course, I hear much more than just "Hiya, Joe" — I hear a ghostly echo of my maternal grandfather greeting his older brother, Joseph

Nandrin, for one thing, and I also hear the table talk of countless generations of workers and farmers and their wives, not that I particularly wish to subscribe to notions of collective ethnic memory. Walloon is a good-humored, long-suffering language of the poor, naturally epigrammatic, ideal for both choleric fervor and calm reflection, wry and often psychologically acute — reminiscent in some ways of Scottish and in some ways of Yiddish. Walloon is often my language of choice when, for instance, I am sizing up people at a party, but I have no one to speak it with at home. (My wife hails from Akron, Ohio.) I sometimes boast that, among the seven million people in New York City, I am the only Walloon speaker, which may or may not be true.

My three languages revolve around and inform one another. I live in an English-speaking world, of course, and for months on end I may speak nothing else. I do talk with my parents once a week by phone, but over the years we have developed a family dialect that is so motley it amounts to a Creole. I cannot snap back and forth between languages with ease, but need to be surrounded by French for several days before I can properly recover its rhythm, and so recover my idiomatic vocabulary — a way of thinking rather than just a set of words — and not merely translate English idioms. This means that I am never completely present at any given moment, since different aspects of my self are contained in different rooms of language, and a complicated apparatus of air locks prevents the doors from being flung open all at once. Still, there are subterranean correspondences between the linguistic domains that keep them from stagnating. The classical order of French, the Latin-Germanic dialectic of English and the onomatopoeic-peasant lucidity of Walloon work on one another critically, help enhance precision and reduce cant.

I like to think that this system helps fortify me in areas beyond the merely linguistic. I am not rootless but multiply rooted. This makes it impossible for me to fence off a plot of the world and decide that everyone dwelling outside those boundaries is "other." I am grateful to the accidents of my displaced upbringing, which taught me several kinds of irony. Ethnically, I am about as homogenous as it is possible to be: aside from one great-grandmother who came from Luxem-

bourg, my gene pool derives entirely from an area smaller than the five boroughs of New York City. I was born in the same town as every one of my Sante forebears at least as far back as the mid-16th century, which is as far back as the records go. Having been transplanted from my native soil, though, and having had to construct an identity in response to a double set of demands, one from my background and one from my environment, I have become permanently "other." The choice I am faced with is simple: either I am at home everywhere or I am nowhere at all; either I realize my ties to human beings of every race and nationality or I will die, asphyxiated by the vacuum. Mere tolerance is idle and useless — if I can't recognize myself in others, no matter how remote in origin or behavior they might appear, I might as well declare war upon myself. ■

Sante with his parents as they boarded the S. S. United States in Le Havre, France, in 1960. Photograph from the Sante family.

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